

Discussion Questions

1. Many of the poems in *Leprosarium* are ekphrastic poems. The cover image is taken from John Singer Sargent's *Smoke of Ambergris*, a painting that forms part of the collection of The Clark Art Institute located in Williamstown, Massachusetts, located a few miles away from the headquarters of Tupelo Press. Steven Kern discusses the painting's sociological underpinnings (excerpted here from *The Clark: Selections from the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute*):

The painting depicts a heavily draped woman inhaling the smoke of ambergris—a resinous substance found in tropical seawater and believed to come from whales. It was thought in the Near East to be an aphrodisiac, as well as a safeguard from evil spirits. The model, of whom Sargent made several sketches, probably lived in cosmopolitan Tangier. In a society that forced women to be intensely private, working as a model would have relegated her to its outer fringes. Her robes and mantle are of a type worn by both men and women throughout North Africa, but the details of the costume and setting come from different regions and social classes. The painting is a *mélange* of Moroccan objects and customs that Sargent encountered in Tangier and Tétouan. Therefore, the scene must be viewed as an imaginary one.

Other paintings Goett uses as springboards for poems include Whistler's "Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl," Sargent's "*Madame X*," Da Vinci's *La Gioconda*, Fragonard's *A Young Girl Reading*, as well as the photograph by AP photographer Nick Ut of Phan Thi Kim Phuc, the naked girl who flees a napalm bombing in *The Girl in the Picture*. All of these depictions of women might be taken together as Goett's critique of feminine existence under the aegis of patriarchy. Why do you think Goett chose a painting for the cover art?

Write an ekphrastic poem of your choosing.

2. According to Goett, the premise underlying the title for collection *Leprosarium* derives from a story in which St. Francis of Assisi confronts his aversion to lepers and says that his own heart is where prejudice resides and therefore the real leprosarium. Of concern is the contemplation of how different societies choose to house, steward, or murder the wild and passionate at the core of existence. Beneath the allure of traditional surfaces and forms, the operations of patriarchy, materialism, racism, and ignorance continue to perpetuate suffering. The collection examines how certain belief systems and practices, including religion, perpetuate the creation of this earthly leprosarium. How and where do you see this leprosy of the human heart played out in the poems contained in the collection. Discuss.

Questions and Exercises for Developing Language Awareness

Goett's word hoard or lexicon in *Leprosarium* reflects what Wallace Stevens called "the intelligence of one's soil." Looking at her word choices, what might you guess is her soil, background? Examine the levels of diction in her work. Does she mix levels? Are her choices Latinate? Anglo-Saxon? High, low? A combination of several levels?

Now make your own favorite word list. Arrange your words on a page. Some of you may want to alphabetize your list; some of you may want to arrange your words in associational clusters. Remember that the verb is the workhorse of the sentence. Please include ten verbs. A few of Goett's favorite verbs are: brood, curdle, douse, firik, quench, slough, scald, skim, swindle, tamp. Here are her A's: *archipelago, archangel, apostle, ablution, adamantine, alphabet, abacus, aquifer, aqueduct, abyss, agape, acrostic, abyss, advent, almanac, akimbo, astrolabe, atlas*. Here are a few words from Greek Nobel Laureate, Odysseas Elytis's list: *agape, Alexandra, All Soul's Day, anchor, anemone, Anna, ant, arch, arm in arm, armoire, aspen, astringent, August, bait, barbette, barrel, basil, basket, bay leaf, beach, beam-reach, beeswax, bell, bergamot, birdsong, bitter sea, blanket, bluing, bluefish, bluefly, boat, bolt, bougainvillea, boulder, braided rug, bride, brine, butterfly*. As writers, we are often unaware of the forces that are shaping our work. Sometimes we are the last to know. Goett's lexicon draws heavily upon the Roman Catholic liturgy and its accoutrements and Elytis's from his Greek background. A poet with a Native American descent, Pat McCabe, compiled a list that included: "Above Nation," "cradleboard," "squash blossom," "Holy People," "Canyon de Chelly," "Aneshnabi." Your list will be equally telling. Do you find that there are certain sounds that you enjoy putting together? Before coming to class, study your list for these elements: levels of diction, assonance, consonance. What words chime well together? For example, do you like the way "beluga" sounds with the word "bellwether," "milk" with "highway"? Do you have an abundance of words that begin with "s" on your list, a dearth of "k" words? Like comfort food, do certain sounds evoke certain feelings in you? Now studying your list for subject matter, do you find that words cluster around certain subjects, occupations or cultural influences? Could one tell that you are a nature poet just by reading your list?

As a writer, one is always attempting to evoke the five senses. If you have a difficult time accessing the sensory, try making a list of words describing sound—"susurrus," "rifle report," "thump," "ping," for example—it doesn't take long to become more acutely aware of the world: the susurrus of truck tires on loose gravel, the thump of a retriever's tail against the bed of a pickup truck and to be able to access the kind of language you want to have at the ready when writing a poem.

Make a list of words describing sound: "ping," "thud," "susurrus," "twack," "rattle," and so on. What associations come to mind?

Then go through the other senses. What words describing touch evoke a strong sense memory?

What nouns, adjectives, and verbs evoke strong sense memories of smell and taste? “Lemony,” “pungent,” “putrid,” “fetid,” “heady”? Are specific names of objects or nouns more evocative than adjectives? Does naming an object do the work of evoking smell? Tobacco? Your mother’s bathrobe? Talcum powder? The fish market?

Are some senses harder to conjure for you than others?

Mot clefs: The search for key words in a text can surprise even the most astute writer. The word “white” appeared over thirty times in Goett’s first manuscript. A poet, childless himself, was completely unconscious of the fact that he had so many poems in which a daughter appeared, and yet the arc of a story had been expressing itself in his work for years. Love of language calls us to the things of this world, and in our lists we find our constellation of meaning, our obsessive images. What are yours?

Is English your first language? What is your primal language? Do you need to know a language in order to have a sense of what someone else is saying in it or do you have a sense of it just from the sounds? How do you connect with the language of your forebears? Do you speak it? if not, do you feel this as a loss? Do you feel a connection with your own mother tongue or does it feel foreign to you? Is poetry a primal or foreign language for you?

One can also reverse this process of consciousness by introducing the cliché. “The now moment,” “the axis of evil,” “thinking outside the box” have become a shorthand for the real work of evocation. This is what Heidigger means when he says “the misuse of language in idle talk and slogans and language destroys our authentic relation to things.” Write a list of clichés. Discuss the ways in which clichéd expressions stop thought and freeze perception. Working with a partner, can you spot the cliché in your work or the work of another? How would you say it differently?

Prosody Questions

Goett uses a long line in many of her poems, “Symphony in Titanic Gray and Red Moiré: The End of the World,” and “Dean of Instruction” among them in the tradition of Whitman, the Bible, Ginsburg, and others. What is the effect? Oracular, rhapsodic, prosaic? Where else have you encountered a long line in literature?

In “At the Amphitheatrum Flavium,” Goett indents every other line. If the indented lines are read alone, they create a poem within a poem that can be read by itself and might serve as a condensed commentary upon the poem as a whole. Play with indentation and creating two poems in one.

The poem “Spoilage” is a sestina. Choose six end-words as a class. Discuss what kinds of words make the most versatile end-words for a sestina. Words that might double as verbs and nouns, words within words, names. How to write a sestina without running out of steam in the fourth sextet is tricky. Narrative poems lend themselves to sestinas because they have the drive of a story to tell. Make a grid. Write your first sextet using the words that the class group has selected, then plot out the end-word scheme accordingly. Fill in the grid. You needn’t write linearly. You might fill in a part of the grid and then skip to another.

“Molest the Dead” is written in a loose iambic pentameter in fourteeners of 9 to 11 syllables using a Shakespearean sonnet rhyme scheme. How does writing a poem in fourteen lines contain a poem? Is there force to be gathered by a poem’s formal containment?

“Symphony in Red” is written in rhymed couplets, many of them using slant, normative rhymes. Here is a catalog of some of the different kinds of normative rhyme. Write a poem using several kinds of rhyme. Here are the names of different kinds of slant rhyme: eye rhyme, internal rhyme, light rhyme, back rhyme, assonance, consonance, two-consonant rhyme, homophonic rhyme, and half-double rhyme are the names of a few. Write a poem employing several types of rhyme. For explication of various kind of rhyme, consult a good handbook on prosody such as Alfred Corn’s *The Poem’s Heartbeat*, “Phonic Echo,” chapter 4.