

SAN FRANCISCO. APRIL 18, 1906

Ina Coolbrith

Analysis by Marzia Dati

Elegy, Lyric

Ina Coolbrith’s *San Francisco – April 18, 1906* is a lyric-elegiac poem published in 1906 in response to the devastating San Francisco earthquake. The poem transforms personal and collective trauma into a meditation on loss and resilience. Through vivid imagery and personification, San Francisco becomes a living symbol of endurance. The poem reflects Coolbrith’s belief in the healing power of poetry and stands as an early example of Californian lyrical Modernism.

Year of Publication	1929
Publication Place	Boston
Editor	Houghton Mifflin Company
Entity	San Francisco earthquake 1906
Collection	Wing of Sunset

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake San Francisco earthquake 1906

REAL EVENT

Time	18 April 1906, 5:12 am local time
Location	California United States
Coordinates	37.775505, -122.434715
Impacted Areas	San Francisco, San Jose and Santa Rosa
Seismic Fault	St. Andreas Fault
Magnitude	7.9 Richter magnitude

Typology

Tectonic Earthquake

Anthropization Level	Public Buildings
Ecological Impacts	Other
Social Impacts	Destruction Of Dwellings

Earthquake 1906 San Francisco Earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Time	1906
Location	USA
Impacted Areas	San Francisco
Emphasis Phase	Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Without reference
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Cities
Ecological Impacts	Physical Landscape ChangesAtmospheric ChangesSoil Changes
Social Impacts	DeathsInjuriesDestruction Of Goods/CommoditiesResource DepletionDestruction Of DwellingsDestruction Of Public BuildingsDestruction Of FacilitiesDestruction Of Cultural Heritage (Materials And Sites)Trauma

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Reactions

Name	The City Of St Francisco
Reactions	SadnessFight For SurvivalTraumaInterventionSurvival InstinctDiscomfortDistressUnease

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	Common people
Reactions	SadnessFight For SurvivalSurvival InstinctDiscomfortDistressTraumaUnease

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords

"Wind-Blown Ashes" (Coolbrith, Line 17); "Broken, Toppling Wall" (Line 17)

Similes

"Black desolation covering as a pall" (Coolbrith, line 19)

Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes

Locus Amoenus

Fire

Ruins

The End Of The World

Syntax

Simple Sentences

Punctuation

High Frequency Punctuation Marks

Morphology

Preference For Nouns Adjectives

Phonetics/Prosody

Sound-related word choice (onomatopoeia, rhyme, alliteration)

The poet Ina Coolbrith (1841-1928) - the first poet laureate of California - was an outstanding figure in North American literature. She was born Josephine Donna Smith in 1841 in Illinois, but she moved to California with her Mormon family in 1852. Coolbrith began her writing career in 1854, publishing poetry in the prominent review *The Los Angeles Times*, and later gained national recognition with her collections *A Perfect Day and Other Poems* (1881) and *Songs from the Golden Gate* (1895). She was also a librarian, and she greatly influenced emerging writers such as Isadora Duncan and Jack London.

Later in her life, Coolbrith moved to New York City where she wrote some of her finest poetry. She returned to California in 1923 and spent the last five years of her life in Berkeley, where she died on February 29, 1928. Coolbrith is buried at Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland. In 1932 the United States Geographic Board named a mountain in the Sierra Nevada range: Mt. Ina Coolbrith, in her honour. In San Francisco, a small park near Coolbrith's home on Russian Hill was named Ina Coolbrith Park. In 2016 a walking path in Berkeley was renamed Ina Coolbrith Path. Additionally, every year the best unpublished poem by an undergraduate student at any college of the University of California is awarded the Ina Coolbrith Memorial Poetry Prize. While Coolbrith was still living, the Ina Coolbrith Circle was founded to honour the poetry and history of California.

Her life was severely affected by the earthquake and by the following fire that hit San Francisco on April 18, 1906. Coolbrith's home at 1604 Taylor Street was burned, along with all her possessions including a manuscript of a memoir relative to her supposed love affairs with the poet and frontiersman Joaquin Miller (1837-1913) and the short-story writer and poet Bret Harte (1835-1902). During the fire, she also lost three thousand books, including signed editions from her friends, as well as correspondence with Mark Twain and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Coolbrith's popularity in the California literary scene motivated her friends to assist her financially. In this regard, it is worth recording that Mark Twain, offered autographed photographs of himself to sell, and that social clubs sponsored dinners or book sales in her honour. Some of her most influential friends even tried to push the California state legislature to offer Coolbrith a pension. Her friend's support is described in the article "When the City Turned Out for Ina Coolbrith": "On Thanksgiving Eve November 27 1907 – a year and a half after the great earthquake and fire- an event advertised as San Francisco's Author Reading was held. [...] the reading was a benefit for Ina Coolbrith, later to be Poet Laureate of California who lost home and possession in 1906 fire". (Leider 26) Years later, the disaster somehow motivated Coolbrith to write more poetry than ever. Among her lines from this period, the most relevant poem is "San Francisco — April 18, 1906", inspired by the earthquake and fire.

The high intensity earthquake, with an estimated magnitude of 7.9, lasted between 45 and 60 seconds and included several aftershocks; its range was massive and it triggered a huge fire that devastated San

Francisco and its surrounding territory. It damaged gas lines and water supplies, causing widespread fires that were difficult to control due to the lack of water. The fires lasted for three days and destroyed a vast area of the city, including the downtown area.

The 1906 earthquake caused widespread trauma, fear, shock, confusion, and panic among the city's residents. According to the report of U.S. Army *Special Report of Maj. Gen. Adolphus W. Greely, U.S.A., Commanding the Pacific Division, on the Relief Operations Conducted by the Military Authorities of the United States at San Francisco and other Points* (1906), the earthquake and subsequent fires resulted in over 3,000 deaths, homelessness for over half of the city's population, and widespread destruction. The immediate aftermath was marked by a breakdown of order, prompting the army to take control to maintain order. The 1906 earthquake, along with other major events in the early 20th century, contributed to the growing recognition of the psychological impact of trauma. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake had also a profound and lasting impact on Trauma Studies since it resulted in widespread destruction, displacement, and psychological trauma. The scale of the disaster, coupled with the lack of modern disaster response systems, highlighted the need for better understanding and management of trauma in the aftermath of such large-scale events.

Ina Coolbrith represents an exceptional case, because the disaster somehow motivated her to write more poetry. As Southwick and others state:

Trauma exposure and the ensuing response poses major challenges to the psychological and physiological homeostasis of an individual. Trauma exposure triggers a host of behavioural and biological responses that interact with the individual's biology and genetics. This neurobehavioral response leads to pathophysiologic consequences that can protect against or precipitate the development of psychiatric symptoms. Broadly, factors that protect against the development of such psychiatric symptoms are referred to as "resilience". More specifically, the term resilience signifies a non-pathologic or adaptive behavioural and neurobiological response to traumatic stress". In the light of this, we can safely say that poetry may have acted as a means of resilience and have triggered her survival instinct. (2)

This statement is fully shared by the authors of *Ina Coolbrith: Librarian and poet laureate of California* (1975), where they state that "This biography is the startling record of a resilient woman who suffered a series of traumatic shocks, but in each instance an inner resource, her poet's heart, enabled her to rebound and to carry on. Her balm and release were to write verses that were as beautiful as their maker. They helped her recover her composure and to face existence anew" (Gordon 88).

In *San Francisco — April 18, 1906* Coolbrith recounts her memories of the city both before and after the cataclysm. The poem's tone shifts from nostalgia for the city's past glory, to despair and sorrow for the devastation caused by the earthquake, ending on a note of hope for its future rebirth. Unlike Coolbrith's earlier works, which celebrate California's natural beauty, this poem focuses on the human tragedy unfolding in the city. The poem is marked by vivid imagery and emotional intensity, conveying the personal and collective trauma experienced during this transformative chapter in San Francisco's history. It stands as a powerful testament to the city's resilience and the enduring bonds between its people and its landscape.

On a structural level, the poem is divided into four line eight stanzas with a regular rhyme scheme ABAB. The first three stanzas are related to her memories of San Francisco as a child: Coolbrith describes it as a young city, a city under construction, where "myriad mansions rise" (line 7). The city welcomes different ethnic groups, as is highlighted by the presence of "minaret and spire" (line 6). A city full of hopes that parallels the adolescence as a stage of life full of dreams and hopes, as clearly emerges from the closing line of the first stanza: "Young city of my love and my desire!" (line 4). In her memories, San Francisco takes shape as a promise land: "Queen of the fairest land of all the lands, /Our Sunset-Glory, proud and strong and sweet!" (lines 7–8).

The impact that the earthquake had on San Francisco and on the poet is described in the two central stanzas: here the nostalgic tone pervading the first three stanzas is replaced by a sense of despair, as is highlighted by the use of "anguish" "tortured", "prone" (line 13). San Francisco is personified as "thy breast" (line 15); by means of a synecdoche the poet herself becomes a part of the whole as it emerges

in “each wound upon thy breast upon my own” (line 15). In the following stanza, Coolbrith describes the devastating effect of the earthquake and fire: “a black desolation” (line 19) pervades the city now, “wind-blown ashes, broken toppling wall” (line 17) replaces the idyllic vision of San Francisco as described in the first stanzas. The phrase “and ruined hearth” (line 18) rises as a powerful symbolic image that conveys the idea of the impact that the earthquake had on life. The image of “thy funeral pyre?” (line 18) also implies a personification of the city, however the question mark poses the question: is the city destined to a fatal death or to a rebirth? The poet’s answer lies in the sixth stanza: “Nay, strong, undaunted, thoughtless/The Will that builded thee shall build again, / And all thy broken promise spring more fair, /Thou mighty mother of as mighty men!” (lines 20–24).

The closing stanza expresses her hope to see San Francisco arising from the ashes and becomes again the “Gate of Gold” (line 31). Finally, both San Francisco and Coolbrith rise again: she eventually builds new house on top of Russian Hill, and in 1915, when San Francisco shows the world its renewal at the Panama Pacific Exposition, she is crowned California’s first poet laureate, becoming the first female poet laureate in the United States. The idea of “rebirth” emerges clearly in *California* (1918), a lyrical homage to the beauty of California, which captures the essence of its landscapes, flora, and spirit. This collection of poems was written in 1918, twelve years after the earthquake: as in the poem *San Francisco*, Coolbrith personifies California as a living entity, rich with natural beauty and a sense of yearning for recognition. The poem explores the state’s lush valleys, majestic mountains, and vibrant flora while expressing a deep connection to nature. Through vivid imagery and emotive language, Coolbrith captures the contrast between California’s serene landscapes and the tumult of distant histories, ultimately celebrating the promise and purity found within her borders. In conclusion, Ina Coolbrith shows how poetry can provide a voice for trauma becoming a powerful tool for resilience after a cataclysm, offering a path towards recovery and a renewed sense of hope.

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