At the Cancer Clinic Study Guide

At the Cancer Clinic by Ted Kooser

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Ted Kooser's poem “At the Cancer Clinic” is told from the point of view of a patient in a waiting room observing another patient. The woman the narrator describes is frail and too weak to walk on her own; she is being helped into the examining area by two women, who accompany her on either side. The patients in the waiting room, including the poem's narrator, marvel at the ill woman's determination and inner strength, as the poem tries to capture the feeling of awe that people often get when they realize that someone who is battling against unimaginable physical weakness is struggling to persevere with the little strength they have.

This poem is included in Kooser's 2004 collection *Delights & Shadows*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry that year. Its plain style and clear, simple language are typical of Kooser, who has served two terms as the poet laureate of the United States. Avoiding the obvious stereotypes about infirmity that another poem might lament, “At the Cancer Clinic” invites readers to reflect on the strength of the woman and not to dwell on the illness that has ravaged her; as a result, the poem is actually a much more uplifting experience than its title might at first suggest.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1939

Ted Kooser was born in Ames, Iowa, in April 1939. His father was a storekeeper and his mother was a teacher. He attended Iowa State University in Ames, receiving his bachelor's degree in 1962, the same year that he married his first wife, Diana Tressler. The couple had one son but later divorced. Kooser taught high school briefly and then enrolled in the graduate writing program at the University of Nebraska. By his own admission, he did not have the discipline to be an academic, and so his postgraduate career ended after only a year.

In 1964, Kooser took an entry-level position at Bankers Life, an insurance company in Lincoln, Nebraska; this was the start of a thirty-five-year career in the insurance industry. During the years that he worked in insurance, Kooser wrote poetry, usually in the morning, before going to the office. He also taught at the University of Nebraska as an adjunct professor of writing from 1975 to 1990.

His first collection of poetry, *Official Entry Blank*, was published in 1969. Over the next few decades, he continued to write and publish, winning several major awards, including two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships in poetry, the Pushcart Prize, the Stanley Kunitz Prize, the James Boatwright Prize, and two Society of Midland Authors prizes. He also ascended in his business life, rising to the position of vice president for public relations at Lincoln Benefit Life. In 1977, he married Kathleen Rutledge.

In the late 1990s, Kooser was diagnosed with cancer. The news forced him to change the priorities of his life. He quit the insurance industry and gave up teaching. While recuperating, he wrote poetry daily and sent it to his friend, the author Jim Harrison; these pieces were published in a book in 2001, titled *Winter Morning Walks: One Hundred Postcards to Jim Harrison*, which won the Nebraska Book Award for Poetry. As his health improved, he returned to teaching at the University of Nebraska.

Kooser was appointed Poet Laureate Consultant of the United States in 2004, a position that has brought him an international following. His reappointment for the following year came during the same week that he won the Pulitzer Prize for *Delights & Shadows*, the collection that contains □At the Cancer Clinic.□ In 2005, he was living on farmland in rural Garland, Nebraska.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-3

□At the Cancer Clinic□ begins with a character who is identified by no other designation than □she.□ The body of the poem does not identify the setting, which readers already know from the title. The woman being described moves across the waiting room of the cancer clinic with the help of two other women. She is young, or at least young enough to be taken for the sister of two young women. They are helping her through the waiting room toward the examination rooms.

Readers can infer a couple of things from this brief description. For one, the woman being observed is so weak that she needs help walking: not just the extra strength of one person but, indeed, a person on each side of her, to balance her. That she is walking at all and is not chair-bound or bedridden indicates a sense of pride and inner resolve. Finally, the fact that her sisters are willing to take time to attend her doctor appointments with her shows that she has a loving family and implies that she is a person who deserves their affection. Line 3 introduces an observer, the □I□ who is narrating the poem.

Lines 4-5

In the few words of these two lines, Kooser reveals much about the three sisters whom the narrator sees. The main one, the woman being helped, is apparently not too decayed from her illness: though she cannot walk without help, her body is still substantial enough to pull down on the arms that are supporting her, which bend under her weight. All three women are described as reflecting the same sort of attitude, which the poem describes with the words □straight□ and □tough.□ Although illness is clearly a burden on them, they face it with resolve and with a unity that makes the bearing of the helpers indistinguishable from that of the person who is actually ill; even though only one body is stricken, all three are struggling with the disease.

Lines 6-8

Line 6 begins with the narrator's interpretation of the bearing of three sisters: it is courage. There are other things that it could be, other ways that readers could imagine this scene if Kooser did not describe it that way. Their □straight, tough bearing,□ described in line 5, might have been read as resolve, anger, resignation, numbness, or fear. Using the word □courage□ spares the poem all of the description that it would have taken to get this concept across through imagery. The statement that the sisters' stance against cancer is courageous affects how readers imagine all of the rest of the actions in the poem.

Lines 7 and 8 introduce a new character, a nurse who is holding the door for the sisters as they approach the entrance to the examination area. Kooser emphasizes the difficulty that the three sisters have in moving across the room by telling readers that the trek, which cannot really be that far, must seem like a long distance to them. He reiterates that idea by having the nurse □call□ to them across the distance.

The nurse is nothing but supportive: smiling, calling encouragement, and holding the door. In this poem, all of the people surrounding the cancer patient are selfless and supportive. While other poems might focus attention on the ways that hardship isolates individuals, □At the Cancer Clinic□ concerns itself with the ways that people pull together with support and kindness.

Lines 9-10

After being identified by her kindness, the nurse is described in a way that contrasts with her actions. Her clothes are called □crisp white sails□; literally, this image refers to the stiff, starched points of her uniform cap, but figuratively it implies rigidity, unyieldingness, sterility, and impatience. She is, in fact, quite patient, as Kooser makes a point of noting with a slight hint of surprise in line 9.

Line 10 refers to the woman being observed as □the sick woman.□ The word □sick□ is simple and direct: Kooser does not try to intellectualize her condition with a more complex description, nor does he try to wring pathos from it by using a word that is more graphic or disturbing.

Lines 11-13

In keeping with the tone of the rest of the poem, the narrator does not try to disguise the woman's condition. She is wearing a hat, probably because, like most people who take chemotherapy to combat cancer, she has lost her hair at the same time that her white blood cell count is diminished, making her vulnerable to disease. Chances are that if it is a □funny□ hat, the sick woman has not been expending much thought on her wardrobe or caring about how she looks. She might also be exhibiting a sense of humor in the face of duress.

Line 12 looks at the sick woman's movement from her point of view, as if she is an objective observer and not an active participant. This estrangement from her own body gives readers an idea of what it must be like for her to be ill with cancer. Her weakness is shown in the awkward motion of her feet: each foot swings forward, as if by chance and not by its own volition; when it lands, it has weight put on it, taking the weight off the other foot. In these few words, the poem captures the awkwardness of severe infirmity and the lack of coordination of a body that is no longer under control.

Lines 14-15

Having directly characterized as □courage□ the attitudes of the sick woman and the women who are helping her in line 6, the narrator makes sure that readers understand the situation by pointing out emotions that one might expect to be involved but that are strangely absent: restlessness, impatience, and anger. The lack of these feelings is extended to include the whole range of what the narrator can see: there are other patients in the clinic's waiting room, as is implied by the poem's final line, and the narrator is crediting them with having controlled emotions as well.

Lines 16-17

The moment of watching this brave woman walk, with help, toward her examination is called a □mold□ in line 16; it is an empty form, waiting to be filled with a meaning that will then take on its shape. Kooser says that this mold is filled with Grace, which he capitalizes.

This moment of Grace, with a capital □G,□ is not noticed just by the poet but is also palpable to all who see it. The magazines mentioned in line 17 are shuffled by people who are trying to wait their turns, impatient to see the doctor, to find out prognoses and get on with their own lives, but they fall silent as everyone there notices the sick woman accepting help. They all feel the Grace, and it takes them away from their small, ordinary concerns.

Themes

Illness

The woman described in □At the Cancer Clinic□ is clearly at odds with her body. She does not have the strength to walk on her own, struggling with each step. The narrator describes her as staring at her feet as she walks, as if they are independent of her and she is interested in what they are doing. Her body is not under her control.

Cancer is a state in which cells grow without control. As opposed to normal cells, which reproduce in an orderly fashion and limit themselves, cancer cells are inclined to keep growing, creating tumors and blockages that impede the body's normal functions. It is plain to see that the woman described in this poem is very ill. One of the ironies of treating cancer is that some of the most effective treatments, most notably chemotherapy and radiation therapy, weaken the body; they have to attack the cancer cells and kill them while trying to do as little harm to the good cells as possible. Someone like the woman in the poem might be more weakened by the treatment than by her disease, even though the treatment will eventually make her stronger. The point of the poem, though, is that she has surrendered neither to her illness nor to the suffering that she must go through to eradicate the illness.

Dignity

Despite the fact that she is weakened, there is no sign that the woman described here feels any loss of dignity; in fact, the case is quite to the contrary. Kooser gives the detail of the □funny knit cap□ to let readers know that this is a person who is not concerned with what people think of her weakened appearance. Although the narrator of the poem never talks to her or hears her talk, he can tell from her behavior that the illness that has weakened her body has not damaged her sense of pride.

The poem plays off of the common perception that a person in as diminished a physical condition as this woman is would be expected to feel a loss of dignity. The more that readers expect her to feel the indignity of her weakness, the more heartening it is to see that, regardless of her trouble, she can hold her head up. The other people in the room respond to the woman's sense of dignity by according her even more respect; her dignity creates respect for her.

Compassion

The narrator does not have any direct contact with the woman, so he cannot say whether the two women helping her walk are her sisters, but there is something in their interaction that makes this likely. Kooser uses the idea of familial relationship as an abbreviated way to express the patience and concern that they show toward her. They

walk slowly, bearing the weight of the sick woman between them and giving her the kind of compassionate care that an onlooker would assume comes from a family bond.

Having set the scene with the compassion of the two helpers, the poem goes on to show that this woman's dignified bearing elicits compassion from all who see her. The nurse holds the door for her and waits patiently, even though it is clear that the woman is taking a long time to cross the room. A person with a physical infirmity could bring out the worst in some people, but the people at this particular cancer clinic have nothing but compassion as they watch this woman. Kooser makes a point of going beyond describing a few compassionate people to make the blanket statement that □there is no restlessness or impatience / or anger anywhere in sight.□ There may be people in the world who could face this woman's problems coldly, but not at the cancer clinic.

Grace

There are many different understandings of the word □grace,□ which holds a special relevance at the end of □At the Cancer Clinic.□ In the Catholic religion, there are two distinct types of grace, both of them pertaining to this poem. □Sanctifying grace□ is the supernatural life that exists in a person, the soul. The sick woman in this poem behaves with dignity, showing herself to be full of sanctifying grace. □Actual grace,□ on the other hand, exists outside a person: it is God's recognition of a good life. This is the kind of grace that fills the room of the poem□a recognition that the situation, and not just any one person, has achieved unity with the Almighty. By using such a word, Kooser elevates the situation described in the poem from one that is extremely moving in a common way to one that is transcendent and supernatural.

Style

First-Person Narrator

Although the focus of this poem is on the sick woman, the women helping her walk, and the nurse, there is another important character who is neither discussed nor described: the person referred to, just once in the third line, as □I.□ Readers who know that Kooser, the author, went through a bout with cancer around the time that he wrote this poem will be tempted to assume that Kooser is talking about himself, probably even relating an experience that he once had. It is, however, very possible that the incident described was entirely formed within his imagination. It is also possible that the □I□ speaking to the reader could be any type of person: young or old, male or female. The first-person narrator is a persona that the author wears, a mask, and not necessarily the author himself. By using a first-person narrator, Kooser reaches a level of intimacy that would not come out if the poem were entirely descriptive. Readers are asked not only to experience the event itself but also to experience what it would be like to be there and see it unfold.

Imagery

In some places, this poem conveys its ideas with abstract terms, as when the narrator describes the sick woman and her helpers as having □the straight, tough bearing of courage.□ Words like these do not represent the physical world with objects that readers can understand experiencing with their five senses. More often, □At the Cancer Clinic□ conveys its ideas by presenting concrete images. A concrete image is one that appeals to the reader's sense of smell, taste, touch, sight, or sound.

Concrete imagery is often visual: human beings experience the world visually, for the most part, and so poems present the world visually. In this poem, there are visual images in □the crisp, white sails□ of the nurse's uniform, the patient's knit cap, and the swing of the foot, which the patient experiences as a visual event rather than a feeling. The poem also has the audible image of the sound of shuffling magazines, and the tactile, or touch, image of the two women feeling the sick woman's weight. Concrete images like these help readers feel that they are in the scene, experiencing the event the narrator is talking about, and also help communicate the poem's main themes.

Historical Context

When Kooser's poetry is discussed, reference is usually made to the fact that he has spent his entire career in Nebraska. He is characterized as being a midwestern poet. Midwestern poetry is thought of as poetry that uses plain language and simple structure. To some extent, such a generalization is excessively broad, as most generalizations are. The Midwest is a wide range, encompassing the Great Plains, the areas around the Great Lakes, and the eastern fringes of the Rocky Mountains. It would be highly improbable that the same sensibilities exist in all writers in that geographic terrain, from Detroit, Michigan, to Bismarck, South Dakota, from the Germans who founded Milwaukee to the relatively new Vietnamese population of the Quad Cities at the Illinois-Iowa border. Even if there are differences within the region, though, the basic characteristics are still thought of when talking about midwestern writing.

The tendency toward directness and simplicity in literature is often linked to the physical environment of the area. The northern United States is known for difficult, freezing winters and blistering summers. Unlike other northern areas, the Midwest has the additional drawback of being mostly flat. The area has fertile farmland□soil enriched by the glaciers that drained toward the center as they created the Mississippi River□but the temperature extremes make farming a struggle. It is the constant battle with nature and the bleakness of the mostly flat landscape that is said to make up the character of the Midwest, and literary critics often see these influences in the writing of the region's authors, who tend to produce works that cling tenaciously to difficult subjects without much stylistic embellishment. Sherwood Anderson, one of America's great short-story writers and a son of Indiana and Illinois, noted in his essay □An Apology for Crudity□: □The awakening to the reality of 'the life we have' has been responsible in great measure for the strength of midwestern poetry as well as prose.□

□At the Cancer Clinic□ has the serious, no-frills style of midwestern poetry. While southern literature is often associated with the faded antebellum tradition, northeastern writing with the cultural refinement that America has developed since its inception, and West Coast writing with the optimism of a people who traveled as far as they could to seek the promise of something more, midwestern writing generally refers to a steadily modulated style without any social pretenses. It is a culture that speaks plainly and determinedly, much as this poem does.

Critical Overview

Kooser built his poetry career quietly over the course of thirty years, from the 1960s through the 1990s, with little recognition beyond the small inner circle of poets and poetry teachers from whom he earned universal respect. That changed in 2004, when he was appointed to the position of poet laureate of the United States: almost overnight, his name was elevated to international attention.

Most reviews of his work make a point of mentioning Kooser's Nebraska upbringing, placing his poetry into a larger context of midwestern poetry. As Ray Olson puts it in his review of *Delights & Shadows* (Kooser's first collection after the announcement of his appointment as poet laureate), □Kooser is a poet of place.□ In part, he attributes this label to the fact that Kooser's poetry is more concerned with immediate, at-hand issues than with trying to cope with political or social trends. Olson explains, □Kooser is less big-C culturally concerned, less anxious about the destiny of nation and world,□ than other poets.

Brian Phillips, reviewing the collection for *Poetry*, notes that the Nebraska connection sometimes has led reviewers to use words like □heartland□ and □homespun□ derogatorily in their reviews. This, he theorizes, has less to do with Kooser's writing than with those critics' preconceptions. □There is some quaintness in Kooser's new book,□ he says of *Delights & Shadows*, but □it comes more from Kooser's outlook than from any particular flaw in his use of rural Nebraska settings or his plainspoken register.□ Phillips goes on to point out that Kooser's □poems are written from the perspective of a man who has resolved his life's pressing conflicts, who now moves familiarly among the larger, lasting uncertainties.□ What reviewers take to be regional traits are actually aspects of the poet's personality.

Writers also have drawn attention to Kooser's visual sense, as displayed in this collection. In a 2005 review in *Midwest Quarterly*, Kathleen De Grave notes that □opening Ted Kooser's collection of poetry, *Delights & Shadows*, is like walking into an art gallery, each poem a painting or photograph, sometimes a sculpture.□ After describing the book's four distinct sections, De Grave says in summary that □the common threads are the bright image, the compassionate tone, and the insight into human nature.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

David Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature. In this essay, he makes the case that a poem as plain and direct as this one can be read for a richer meaning by paying attention to the line endings.

Kooser's poetry is clearly an example of midwestern folk art; like all folk art, it sometimes seems simple, the kind of work that could be accomplished by earnest but underskilled people who are guided by what their hearts tell them is right. In poem after poem, Kooser's work focuses readers' attention on the subject he is talking about and away from the poet or the poet's style.

Poets use the techniques that critics identify and explain, such as rhyme and rhythm, for emphasis: to polish the meanings embedded in their words and to make the situations described in their works clearer. Technique and poetic style are tools for taking their poems to a level of meaning beyond that which the words can reach on their own. There is another school of thought, though, that treats such structural elements as distractions or even as useless decorations, which call too much attention to themselves and away from the central points they are supposed to be assisting in making.

An example of one extreme of this view is prose poetry, which uses none of the physical elements that are usually associated with poems; prose poems focus on the meanings and sounds of words, but they do not make use of their arrangement on the page. Kooser's poetry is not as unadorned as prose poetry, but it comes close. A typical piece from his 2004 collection *Delights & Shadows* tends to run down the middle of the page in a large, blocky rectangle, each line approximately the same length, often in one continuous piece with no stanza breaks.

With so little going on in the way of technique, critics have characterized Kooser's style as □plain.□ There is still an undeniable structural element to Kooser's poems. The very fact that the poems do run down the center of the page means that they are products of design. Unlike prose or prose poetry, in which the ends of the lines are determined by the size of the paper and the size of the type, it is clear, in even the plainest of poems written in Kooser's style, that care has been put into determining where each line should end (and, conversely, where each following line should begin).

Assuming that the poet has chosen his line endings, an examination of the end words should reveal something about the poem's priorities. As with any critical examination of structural elements, this is not meant to reveal a secret code embedded by the poet only for those who hold the answer; rather, it is a way of appreciating the dynamics that already exist in the piece. For example, the main idea in a poem like Kooser's □At the Cancer Clinic□ is not difficult for the average reader to understand. The poem depicts a scene in the waiting room of a medical facility, describing, with awe and admiration, the progress of a woman weakened by disease, while, with the help of two women the narrator takes to be her sisters, she crosses the room. The action in the poem is this: the woman and her aides walk tentatively; a nurse holds the door to the examination

area and waits, patient and smiling, for the sick woman; sensing the miracle of her struggle against affliction, the onlookers bring an end to the small distractions that characterize life in a waiting room. Kooser does nothing to obscure or hide these actions.

The scene itself has enough inherent power to earn its readers' attention, and there is a very good possibility that any more stylistic technique would have done harm, drawing attention to the poem and the poet and away from the touching humanity of the situation. The plain style works, but, as mentioned earlier, a plain poem is certainly not one that is free of style. What little Kooser has done to shape the material on the page does have some, if only the most subtle, effect on what the poem has to say.

□At the Cancer Clinic□ contains seventeen lines. Without a rhythm or a structure, the poet is left to make the decision about where each of those lines should end. In five of the seventeen, the answer is simple: they end at the natural break in the language, with punctuation, either a period or comma (any other punctuation marks, such as the dash, semicolon, colon, or ellipsis, would be a bit flamboyant amid such plain language). The seventeen lines end with these words: □door,□ □rooms,□ □sisters,□ □arms,□ □bearing,□ □be,□ □door,□ □encouragement,□ □sails,□ □woman,□ □cap,□ □forward,□ □weight,□ □impatience,□ □Grace,□ □moment,□ and □still.□ Each of these words is significant: collectively, they reveal some telling patterns.

When these words are listed on a page, it is hard not to notice some basic similarities. For one thing, there is the preponderance of nouns, thirteen in all. This makes the poem even more plainspoken than Kooser's basic rhetorical style, even though it might seem that such a thing would not be possible. Along with verbs, nouns are the basic building blocks of the English language. They could be considered even more basic than verbs because of what they stand for. Nouns represent tangible things, often things that one can wrap hands around and hold, while verbs represent actions, which have no physical presence. Verbs are, by their nature, more ephemeral, more intangible, more conceptual. A reader might have trouble imagining an action that is described, but a noun speaks for itself. Speaking for themselves is especially true of the nouns on this list. Most of them are simple, direct, one- or two-syllable words describing concrete objects: □door□ (twice), □cap,□ □women,□ and □sails.□ This is *very* plain language.

A few of the nouns that the poem uses are slightly more complex. □Sisters,□ for example, describes the same basic object as □women□ but includes within it a reference to a specific social relationship. □Bearing□ is used as a gerund here, a noun derived from a verb form: in itself, this transformation is not very complicated, but it is complicated by comparison to the other nouns. □Encouragement□ is completely abstract: it is a thing, but not a tangible thing. The same holds true for □impatience.□

Near the end of the poem, there are two lines that end with words that, taken together, capture the sense of what □At the Cancer Clinic□ has to say, in a sort of summary. □Grace□ is certainly the most important single word in the poem: it is a metaphysical, spiritual concept, an intangible thing that becomes tangible in one clear, lucid *moment*. This □moment□ happens to be the word ending the following line. These stand out

because they are so appropriate to the overall point, which is to take readers into a moment of Grace (capitalized by Kooser). It is such a sacred idea that using language any more complex than that which Kooser uses here would be almost blasphemous, but there is certainly nothing wrong with his giving emphasis to the very words that convey his meaning.

If the words that end the individual lines are assumed to carry special weight in a poem, then the words that end the entire poem must resonate that much more. □Grace,□ important as it is, is not the final word. That honor goes to □still.□ It is a word with multiple meanings, at least two of which are relevant here. The concept of immobility is one of them, as the poem says that people, sensing the room fill with Grace, fall still. There is, however, no denying the sense of □still□ as a situation that is continuing, as something that has existed before and remains so moment by moment. Each of these dual meanings works with the word that precedes it in the poem, the verb: □growing still□ means slowing to a condition of immobility, and □growing still□ means continuing to grow. Again, both meanings fit the people in the waiting room, who are just starting to apprehend the presence of Grace in the room as the poem reaches its conclusion.

A poem like □At the Cancer Clinic□ is accessible to most readers. Using simple language and few poetic techniques, Kooser makes poetry look easy, taking readers into the heart of emotional situations without making them feel the presence of the poem. Even after examining the words that end his poem's lines and seeing just how *right* they all are, it still is not too clear whether Kooser arranged these end words with much deliberation. It would not take much of a stretch of the imagination to believe that they just rolled off his pen and landed in the right places, a result of divine inspiration. Keeping alive the belief that such might be the case is what good writing is always about.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on □At the Cancer Clinic,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Lisa Trow is a published poet and journalist and has been an instructor of creative writing. In this essay, she discusses the use of free verse in allowing careful word choice to express meaning.

Kooser's poetry is so easy to read and understand that readers might assume that anyone could have written it. But its simplicity is really an aid to the reader in reaching for the poem's deeper meanings. By refraining from using complicated and formal poetic devices that might have driven away the average reader, Kooser has cleared the way for readers, allowing them easier access to the poem. There is no rhyme scheme, no singsong cadence, and no flowery language that many of us associate with the poets we have been assigned to read in literature classes. Kooser's simple poetry, like the work of many contemporary poets, relies on its ability to create an image. It depends on carefully chosen words to give us the key to the poem's meaning.

Formal style, with prescribed line endings, line length, and rhythm, creates poetry that is part literature and part engineering. Rhyme and form work together to support the poem's main idea. The poet should not, however, allow form to intrude jarringly on the reader's appreciation of the poem. Formal poetry offers the poet one traditional way to integrate all the tools at his or her disposal□the sound of the words spoken together and the shape they form on the page□using universal poetic principles. The artistry in using such formal devices in this way is apparent in its subtlety.

Some modern poets, such as Theodore Roethke and Anthony Hecht, have used form successfully. Although some modern and contemporary poets have continued to employ formal verse forms, many contemporary poets have avoided form for the freedom to write without constraints. The reader who is drawn to poetry but challenged by the conventions of more formal types of verse may enjoy reading Kooser's uncomplicated free verse for that reason.

Formal verse typically requires the poet to write to fulfill the rules of the chosen poetic form. For example, in an English sonnet the poet must write exactly fourteen lines of poetry. Each line of a sonnet contains a certain number of unstressed and stressed syllables, which gives the poem a singsong quality when it is read aloud. In the sonnet form, the poet must rhyme the words ending every other line until the closing couplet, made up of two rhyming lines. Poets attempting a sonnet may feel as though they must □fill in the blanks□ to meet the requirements of the form and must choose words that work with the set rhyme scheme. With free verse, poets can select whatever words they wish. The artistry in free verse often lies in the ability of the poet to choose words that most powerfully convey the poem's meaning. In contrast to that of formal poetry, the effect of free verse is sensual rather than intellectual.

Critics have called Kooser's poetry homespun and plainspoken and likened it to the work of such other American poets as William Carlos Williams and Edgar Lee Masters, and they have praised his ability to choose exactly the right words to create powerful

images. Kooser's conscious and deliberate use of specific nouns, adjectives, and verbs in describing the simple scene in □At the Cancer Clinic□ give clues to its meaning.

In the seventeen lines of □At the Cancer Clinic,□ Kooser describes the slow, arduous procession of a gravely ill woman and two companions to an examining room, where a smiling nurse is waiting for the patient. There is no discussion of the sick woman's history, no clue about what she was like before she became ill with cancer, and no epilogue to let the reader know what became of her. The language of the poem, however, is suggestive of death. This feeling begins with the first line: □She is being helped toward the open door.□ In the passive voice, Kooser is telling us that the sick woman in the poem is past activity; she must be acted upon. Two young women, who the narrator assumes are the sick woman's sisters, are each bearing □the weight of an arm□ as they help her down the hall. □Weight□ is used again in association with the sick woman in line 13, emphasizing the dead weight her body has become.

There are four women in the poem□the sick woman, her two sisters, and the nurse waiting at the door of the examining room. Kooser devotes many adjectives to describing them, to contrast their stations in life. The young women are comparatively vital and strong, bearing up under the weight of their sister's ravaged body with toughness and courage. The nurse is good-natured and patient, and Kooser's comparison of her white, crisp aspect to □sails□ suggests that she has a stately, ceremonial role in this important procession.

In contrast, Kooser uses no personal adjectives to describe his cancer victim, mentioning only a □funny knit cap□ that she is wearing, presumably to cover a head denuded by chemotherapy. In fact, the sick woman is barely more of a personal presence than the unnamed onlookers watching her. She is even divorced from the functioning of her own body, watching her feet □scuffing forward□ down the hall as though she had nothing to do with motivating them. Instead, the sick woman's role seems to be to function as a symbol of death and to elicit reactions from those touched by it. In this way, her courage is skillfully implied.

The lack of any mention of what the sick woman feels helps to create the transcendent mood of the experience that so impresses the poet: □There is no restlessness or impatience / or anger anywhere in sight.□ Then the poem pivots on its most important word, □Grace,□ which Kooser emphasizes by ending the line there, in mid-phrase. In this way, Kooser makes us feel the awe of the moment and gives us the very word we need to describe it. Formal poetry might not have allowed him to make such a fluid choice.

Because of the poem's lack of artifice, anyone will find □At the Cancer Clinic□ accessible and its meaning clear. It would be a mistake for the reader to dismiss this free-verse poem as simple because of its lack of formal structure, however. Many poets have used traditional poetic forms to create powerful works of poetry, enhanced rather than inhibited by the requirements of the form. Still, free verse opens up the craft to a wider audience of readers who may not have the literary sophistication to appreciate the flourishes of rhyme and meter. Kooser's use of free verse shows his respect for the

average reader and implies his respect for their deeper emotional sensibilities. Free verse also allows Kooser a varied palette of nouns, verb forms, and adjectives in painting this indelible portrait of bravery. The economy of language he uses in □At the Cancer Clinic□ perhaps best suits the nature of the poem.

Source: Lisa Trow, Critical Essay on □At the Cancer Clinic,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

The Library of Congress's website at www.loc.gov/poetry/laureate-1990-2005.html discusses Kooser's background and his work as a poet laureate and provides several links to other websites about him.

The page that the Nebraska Center for Writers keeps on Kooser at mockingbird.creighton.edu/NCW/kooser.htm contains links to poetry, biography, and excerpts from book reviews.

Topics for Further Study

The narrator of this poem assumes that the people who are with the sick woman are her sisters. Read about people who care for terminally ill patients and make a chart to compare the characteristics that they have in common.

Kooser uses the phrase □crisp white sails□ to describe the nurse's uniform. Members of the medical profession have come to purposely shun the idea of wearing clothes that convey the ideas of severity and sterility. Look through catalogs of medical uniforms and present the best ones to your class in a discussion of why you think they would be effective.

Rewrite this scene as a poem or short story from the point of view of one of the women accompanying the sick woman. Be sure to focus on what she thinks of the poet who is watching them.

As the U.S. population ages, medical facilities, such as cancer clinics, have become viable commercial ventures. Write a song that could be used in a television or radio commercial for such a place, taking care to be tasteful as well as memorable. Perform it for your class.

What Do I Read Next?

Kooser's book *The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice for Beginning Poets* (2005) outlines his philosophy of poetry for students and the theories by which he lives.

Kooser has published his postcards to his friend Jim Harrison in *Winter Morning Walks: One Hundred Postcards to Jim Harrison* (2001), written while undergoing treatment for cancer.

Kooser cowrote with Jim Harrison *Braided Creek* (2003), about his diagnosis with cancer.

Jim Harrison's novella *Tracking* is a long, twisting, semi-autobiographical account of his own life. It is included in the collection *The Summer He Didn't Die* (2005).

Many of the poems in *The Cancer Poetry Project: Poems by Cancer Patients and Those Who Love Them* (2001), edited by Karin B. Miller, are by nonprofessional poets, people drawn together by a similar life experience, but they resemble Kooser's work in their emotional focus.

The fiction writer Ron Hansen has a prose style that is as controlled and yet plain as Kooser's is in poetry. Hansen's story □Wickedness,□ from his collection *Nebraska: Stories* (1995), is a fine, poetic work of haunting imagery.

Lisel Mueller is another midwestern writer whose style is often associated with that of Kooser. Her poetry is informed by personal history, such as immigrating to the United States at an early age and experiencing the death of her mother. Her poem □Curriculum Vitae,□ from the 1995 collection *Alive Together: New and Selected Poems*, is a wonderful introduction to her work.

Further Study

Kelvin, Joanne Frankel, and Leslie B. Tyson, *100 Questions and Answers about Cancer Symptoms and Cancer Treatment Side Effects*, Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2005.

This book is not meant for medical professionals but is easy for a person researching the topic to understand.

Kooser, Ted, □Lying for the Sake of Making Poems,□ in *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography*, edited by Kate Sontag and David Graham, Graywolf Press, 2001, pp. 158-61.

Kooser rejects the idea of making up events from one's life, finding life itself rich enough to sustain poetry□a position that is clearly evident in □At the Cancer Clinic.□

Solomon, Deborah, □The Way We Live Now: 9-12-04: Questions for Ted Kooser; Plains Verse,□ in the *New York Times Magazine*, September 12, 2004, p. 21.

This interview was conducted soon after Kooser became poet laureate. He gives his views on such diverse subjects as the value to writers of unhappy childhoods and his own unfamiliarity with European poetry.

Woessner, Warren, □Let Us Now Praise Rusty Tractors□Ted Kooser and the Midwest Poetry Renaissance,□ in *Midwest Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 4, Summer 2005, pp. 434-38.

The author describes a resurgence of quality literature coming out of the Midwest since the 1960s and details Kooser's place in the center of this literary growth.

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De Grave, Kathleen, Review of *Delights & Shadows*, in *Midwest Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 4, Summer 2005, pp. 439-40.

Olson, Ray, Review of *Delights & Shadows*, in *Booklist*, Vol. 100, No. 15, April 1, 2004, p. 1342.

Phillips, Brian, Review of *Delights & Shadows*, in *Poetry*, Vol. 185, No. 5, February 2005, p. 396.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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