At the Bomb Testing Site Study Guide

At the Bomb Testing Site by William Stafford

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"At the Bomb Testing Site" is an unusual work: it is an antiwar poem that never directly mentions war. In a review in *Field,* Charles Simic called the poem "A political poem in which not a single political statement is made."

The poem appeared in *West of Your City,* William Stafford's first collection of poetry, which was published by a small press in 1960. One of Stafford's best known and most widely anthologized poems, "At the Bomb Testing Site" deals with the conflict between the natural environment and the artificial world that man has imposed upon it.

The title refers to the atomic bomb testing in the New Mexico and Nevada deserts that began in 1945. Although the poem implicitly refers to the horrors of war and the ravages of radiation fallout, it is anything but a "no-nukes" polemic. Instead, it focuses on the behavior of a lizard that is about to be destroyed in a test explosion, and it implies that humans will be destroyed as well by their obsession with technological progress and political domination. Like most of Stafford's work, this understated poem employs everyday, colloquial language and is steeped in a western landscape.

A conscientious objector to World War II, Stafford was forced to spend four years in a labor camp, and his antiwar stance was reinforced by this experience□but he published no poems that speak about it directly. Stafford often said that he didn't see himself as "a very political person"; there were just some issues on which one simply *had* to take a stand. In an interview about "At the Bomb Testing Site," he revealed one of the main impulses of his writing: "Every poem I have ever written is a quiet protest poem."

Author Biography

William Stafford was born on January 17, 1914 in Hutchinson, Kansas, where he lived until his mid-teens. Hit hard by the Depression, Stafford's family moved many times as his father searched for work. Stafford earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Kansas, and had nearly completed a master's degree when World War II began in 1942. Registered as a conscientious objector, Stafford was incarcerated in public service camps, and spent the four years of the war cutting trails, fighting forest fires, and terracing eroding land in Arkansas, California, and Illinois. As a pacifist in a country that saw so many of its young men killed, he faced public scorn, suspicion, and enmity.

In the camps, Stafford began a routine of rising early to write every morning, a habit that lasted throughout his life and informed his style and philosophy of writing. In 1944, he married Dorothy Hope Frantz, with whom he had four children. As his master's thesis, Stafford wrote *Down in My Heart,* an engaging account of life in the CO camps. The book was published in 1947.

In 1948, Stafford and his family moved to Portland, Oregon. Stafford taught at Lewis and Clark University until his retirement in 1980, with brief absences to earn a Ph.D. in creative writing at the University of Iowa (1950-52) and to teach at a number of colleges and universities across the United States. He was named the Oregon Poet Laureate in 1975.

Although his poems appeared in many literary magazines, Stafford didn't publish his first collection of poetry, *West of Your City,* until 1960, when he was 46. *Traveling through the Dark,* published in 1962, won the National Book Award for Poetry, and he was awarded National Endowment for the Arts and Guggenheim Foundation grants in 1966. His many volumes of poetry include *The Rescued Year* (1966), *Allegiances* (1970), *Stories That Could Be True* (1977), *A Glass Face in the Rain* (1982), and *An Oregon Message* (1987). He wrote several books about the art and craft of poetry, including *Writing the Australian Crawl* (1978) and *You Must Revise Your Life* (1986).

Since the 1970s, Stafford has been recognized as a major poet. Because of his poems' strong sense of place, Stafford is often referred to as a "Midwest" or a "Pacific Northwest" poet, and his work is included in a number of regional anthologies. However, Stafford resisted the label of regional poet, claiming that it was only natural for a poet to write about where he was, wherever that happened to be.

Stafford was also well known for his open, uncritical (and some say nonacademic) approach to writing. Because he wrote so often and so much, he hardly ever revised. "Poems to me are nothing special," he wrote in *You Must Revise Your Life.* "They are just the language without mistakes." Before his death in 1993, Stafford published an astonishing 400 poems - and doubtless wrote thousands that never made it to the printed page.

Poem Text

At noon in the desert a panting lizard waited for history, its elbows tense, watching the curve of a particular road as if something might happen.

It was looking for something farther off than people could see, an important scene acted in stone for little selves at the flute end of consequences.

There was just a continent without much on it under a sky that never cared less. Ready for a change, the elbows waited The hands gripped hard on the desert.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2:

These lines introduce the subject of the poem: a desert lizard. With just a few words, these lines convey great heat (the sun is highest in the sky at noon), great solitude (the desert is thought of as a desolate place in which creatures and plants must struggle for survival) and great urgency (the lizard is "panting" and "tense," implying exertion or a fight-or-flight reaction). From the poem's title, we know that the lizard lives in an area upon which a bomb is about to be dropped. Use of the word "elbows" instead of "legs" attributes human qualities to the lizard, inviting the reader to identify with this creature, and implying that the lizard's fate might be ours as well.

This tiny lizard in the midst of the vast desert is made to seem yet smaller by the use of the abstract word "history." Given the context, "history" can refer to the lizard's individual life in the desert, which is about to come to a close; human history, including the development of technology and weapons such as the atom bomb in the title; and collective human history, how mankind is destroying itself and its environment. This sort of multiple meaning recurs in many lines in this short poem, which makes the most of each word.

Lines 3-4:

Here we learn that the lizard is tense because "something might happen," which we already know involves history. The word "road" implies mankind's presence and intervention in this desert landscape, as the only roads in the desert are man-made. The lizard literally looks at the road, but, in a larger sense, is also watching what humanity is doing. If "something" happens, it will be brought about by man. The "particular road" can also be interpreted figuratively as the course of events of the lizard's life, which is about to be brought to an end by the actions of people. The word "curve" reinforces that what is about to happen can't be seen yet; it's just around the corner.

The quiet, casual, ordinary language of these lines□especially using the nondescript word "something" to refer to the enormity and violence of a bomb explosion□create a tension that strengthens the poem's emotional effect.

Lines 5-8:

This stanza attributes to the lizard an ability to perceive truths that human beings, in their myopic and self-important quest for power, cannot grasp. These lines express the paradox that the closer one is to the ground (i.e. to nature), the farther one can see. Line 4's "something might happen," which refers to the explosion, is now expanded to "something farther off," the larger consequences of nuclear weapons in particular and of war in general. The use of the word "selves" personifies the lizard (and other animals

that are implied), giving it a consciousness. The word "little" is ironic, as this tiny creature has greater prescience and compassion than beings two hundred times its size, who are in reality the small-minded ones. "Little" also implies humble, in contrast to human greed. So the lizard, one of the "little selves" connected to the earth as part of nature, can see the backdrop of natural history, which existed before man imposed his own history by building cities and roads, dividing up the land into political territories, and fighting to defend them.

The "important scene" that these humble creatures witness is the slow, inevitable unfolding of natural history. This history is acted or performed by the stone of the earth itself, billions of years old. The creatures also watch the supposedly important (i.e. to humans) scene of the atomic age and the cold war, the human drama that may end up extinguishing all life on the planet. They know the plain truth that we destroy ourselves physically and spiritually by ignoring the essential unity of all things, and by mistreating our environment and each other.

We often hear the expressions "carved in stone" or "set in stone," which imply permanence, but Stafford chooses the word "acted" instead to convey the idea of history as a play or film. Human history is only an act put on for a short while made even shorter by our destructive impulses. This idea echoes the well-known passage from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (Act 2, Scene 7) that "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players: / They have their exits and their entrances; / And one man in his time plays many parts, / His acts being seven ages," as well as his depiction *in Macbeth* (Act 5, Scene 5) of life as a brief play: "Out, out, brief candle! / Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more."

The last line of this stanza is a striking combination of the abstract and concrete, comparing the narrow opening of a wine glass or flower (as in "fluted") or the end of a slender musical instrument (a flute) with the end result of momentous actions. The line works in an impressionistic way: "flute" is a light and delicate word, as set against the weight of "consequences." Little selves like the lizard may seem to be unimportant and far away, at the narrow end of the spectrum, but are really a part of the big picture, and when changes are brought about in or by nature, they are affected too. They are harmed when the environment is harmed. Small creatures don't possess the power (or will) to destroy their own environment, but they do have the ability to perceive when the end is at hand.

Lines 9-10:

This sentence reinforces the statement in the previous stanza that a fundamental lack of harmony exists between man and nature. To many humans, nature is "not much." And to the natural world, in the larger sense humans are "not much" either. Although stated in the same simple declarative manner as the rest of the poem, these lines take a more extreme stance, reducing North America to "just a continent" of no interest to the sky. Saying that the sky does not care is an example of the poetic technique *of pathetic*

fallacy, or attributing human traits or feelings to inanimate nature. The use of this technique enlarges a particular feeling ("The person who will detonate the bomb doesn't care about the lizard"), making it seem universal ("The sky doesn't care about any of us"). It also suggests that the sky and the earth have their own existence apart from human ambition and folly.

Humans who would explode a bomb just as a test, killing many lizards and other forms of life, clearly do not respect the environment from which they gain their very sustenance. And it seems that humans also think little of destroying the hundreds of thousands of human lives in the crowded cities upon which bombs will be dropped. Yet here there is also an intimation that works against the poem's pessimistic message: the sky may never care, but people□including the author of the poem□do at least have that capacity, whether they use it or not.

Lines 11-12:

The poem returns to the lizard, further describing its preparation for the blast. The repetition of the words "elbows" and "waited" from line 2 bring us back to the beginning of the poem, creating a sort of cycle. But here, the lizard that was an "it" in lines 2 and 5 is now referred to only in terms of its body parts: "the elbows," "the hands." This use of the undefined article "the" depersonalizes the lizard, making it a wider symbol of the natural world. Because these lines do not specify who or what these elbows and hands belong to, they also suggest that the hands and elbows might be numerous□that many creatures are facing annihilation□and that they could belong to humans as well (since lizards have feet, not hands). A third, figurative, sense of the poem's last line is that mankind has the desert in its grip, and one can imagine the huge hands of the bomb tearing up the sand and soil. This careful word choice again prompts the reader to identify with the lizard, and to experience the horror of the impending explosion. Using the words "a change" to describe a violent death continues the poem's understated style.

The last line changes the tone of the poem with its emphatic one-syllable words and its repetition of consonant sounds□"h" and "d" in "hands," "gripped," "hard," and "desert." These harsh, clipped sounds reinforce that something unimaginably violent and devastating is about to occur.

The lizard is not resting or lying on the desert surface, allowing itself to be blown into the air but braces itself by "gripping" the earth. This little life meets its own death head-on, with total awareness of what is about to happen. Though the lizard is apparently "ready," the poem fully conveys the terror and fear of facing an unnatural death, implying that no form of violence is acceptable□not toward the soil, not toward animals, and not toward humans.

Themes

Death

"At the Bomb Testing Site" makes a big point by focusing on something very small: a solitary desert lizard facing destruction. By describing something concrete, the poem addresses the unimaginable. It works by subtly enlarging our perceptions of nature, violence, and death. The poem is written in a quiet, casual tone that increases in intensity in the third stanza but never mentions the words "death" or "war." Instead we get that information from the title and infer the rest from the unfolding description of the lizard. The closest the poem comes to a direct comment is in line 11 's "a change," which is a euphemism for "annihilation." In this context, the word "change" is chilling - how can we think of death this way? If we follow this reasoning, we must wonder how we can read the casualties of a bombing as just numbers on a page, or how a soldier can turn a key that will end up killing thousands.

Another sense of "a change" is scientific: the conversion of matter into another form, part of the natural process of death. But the lizard fixes upon natural history - "something farther off / than people could see" - while it faces a death that is anything *but* natural. The poem presents two conflicting messages about death: death is ordinary, a constant element of nature, and death is a horror both perpetrated and feared by humans. Thus, the poem reinforces death as a part of the natural order at the same time it depicts the tragic disorder of human violence.

Although this poem offers no graphic descriptions of radiation burns, the rubble of leveled buildings, or the ravages of cancer, it conveys the enormity of nuclear testing and nuclear war. The very absence of such graphic images allows each reader to fill in the blanks, tapping into the fears and premonitions of death that we all have. The poem conveys the vulnerability and helplessness of an individual against a power much larger than itself. It is dreamlike in its force: the reader is trapped by having a sense of wanting to stop the lizard's (our) death from happening, but also knowing that the bomb will drop (has already dropped) and that the lizard (we) will die. Specifically, the poem pulls forth associations with the fatal effects of nuclear weapons, such as the loss of life in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the threat of total annihilation if World War III were to begin.

Individuals vs. Nature

"At the Bomb Testing Site" offers a complicated view of our relationship to the natural world. Through its personification of the lizard ("elbows" and "hands"), the poem firmly reminds us that we are animals. At the same time, it conveys that nature is unfeeling and "other" ("a sky that never cared less").

The bomb testing is performed in the desert precisely because it is looked upon as "deserted." But this sentient lizard - nature's animate serf - occupies this land, and destroying it (along with countless birds, plants, spiders...) with a man-made weapon shows that the natural and human worlds are out of alignment. At the base of this standoff is another great irony: humans belong to the earth - we arose from it - and now we are fashioning weapons from its raw materials in order to destroy ourselves. Even without direct human casualties, creation and testing of these weapons have poisoned the air, water, and earth, elements essential to sustaining life. These actions have moved us closer and closer to "a continent without much on it."

The lizard sees "acted in stone" that eventually the world will end, and possibly begin again, in the cycle of the universe. Nature will win out after the human "scene" has played out. In this lies the truth that humans came from nature and will return to it.

The lizard's fate is decidedly man-made - it is not the victim of a snake, or of thirst, or of the desert's great heat. In the political survival of the fittest, in the obsessive love of technology, human beings have upset the balance of nature. This poem makes clear that people lack the most important vision of all - how to live in harmony with each other and with their environment.

Choices and Consequences

This poem implicitly presents the reader with a choice: will humans continue to mistreat their environment and each other, moving along the "particular road" the lizard sees for us? Or will we be able to feel the weight of this poem, understand the consequences of our actions, and change our behavior?

That the poem is set before the bomb is dropped in the desert fills the reader with the horror of foreknowledge, giving and taking away the choice to stop what is about to happen. The phrase "as if something might happen" suggests that the violence about to take place may not *have* to happen; that there might be an alternative. The lizard readies himself and waits for death because it has no choice. But since humans willfully cause this destruction, they do have a choice.

America chose to develop, test, and employ the nuclear bomb - and to do these things secretly - which made an arms race among unfriendly countries inevitable. This poem, written in the midst of cold war hysteria, makes clear the irony of a country's building bombs to demonstrate its strength, just so it can prevent itself from being bombed.

By setting up a parallel between the death of the lizard and the death of the natural environment, including the death of human beings, this poem raises our consciousness that even seemingly little actions (killing one lizard) may have grand consequences (extinguishing the human race and perhaps all life on earth). By posing the question of how we will die, the poem asks us to consider and choose how we will live.

Style

"At the Bomb Testing Site" is a three-stanza poem written in free verse: the poet does not adhere to any particular pattern of rhyme or meter, as in a sonnet or villanelle. However, the poet pays very careful attention to patterns of imagery, figures of speech, line breaks, and the sounds of words. Stafford is well known for his "plain-style," or fairly straightforward, "talky" language, devoid of elaborate wordplay. (It has been said that in poetry readings, his audience often couldn't tell where his introduction left off and his poem began.) Yet even in his apparently simple language lie patterns that affect a reader intuitively and give the writing the quality of a legend or parable.

"At the Bomb Testing Site" begins and ends in a description of the lizard, a technique that entices the reader to reenter the poem after reading it. Abstractions such as "waited for history," "important scene," and "consequences" lend importance and a mythic quality to the poem, but the concrete images of the lizard's actions anchor them in the real world. The repetition of words□"waited," "elbows," and "something"□amplifies and slightly changes their meaning while unifying the poem.

One of the poem's subtle rhythmic techniques is the use of assonance, or repetition of vowel sounds within words. For example, the long "e" in "people could see, an important scene" implicitly links the people to what they cannot perceive. Similarly, the poem's last line "The hands gripped hard on the desert" repeats hard "h" and "d" sounds for an effect like a sharp jab. This intensifies the emotional force of the poem, leaving it to the reader to resolve the tension of the final line.

Of the five sentences that make up this poem, three appear in the last stanza. The longer sentences slow down reading and give a deliberate feel as the scene is being revealed bit by bit. With its short declarative sentences, the last stanza moves more quickly and ends with a hard impact, the way a falling object accelerates before it hits the ground.

Historical Context

In what some historians have called the single most important event of the twentieth century, the world's first atomic bomb was dropped in the desert near Alamogordo, New Mexico, in July of 1945. This bomb test, code-named "Trinity," ushered in the nuclear age. When the bomb exploded successfully, J. R. Oppenheimer, the theoretical physicist who directed the development of the bomb from its raw materials, said "I am become Death, shatterer of worlds," echoing a Hindu scripture. Kenneth Bainbridge, who was responsible for the bomb's detonation, exclaimed, "Now we are all sons of bitches." A War Department memo of July 18, 1945, describes the feelings of those who witnessed the blast: "The effects could well be called unprecedented, magnificent, beautiful, stupendous, and terrifying. No man-made phenomenon of such tremendous power had ever occurred before.... It was that beauty the great poets dream about but describe most poorly and inadequately.... [The] awesome roar ... warned of doomsday and made us feel that we puny things were blasphemous to dare tamper with the forces heretofore reserved to The Almighty."

In 1939 Hungarian scientists Leo Szilard and Eugene Wigner began to fear that the Germans would harness atomic technology and employ it in the impending war. They convinced Albert Einstein to write a letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt encouraging immediate research and development of nuclear technology. In 1941, the "Manhattan Project" began. Four years and $2 billion later, the United States had secretly developed three weapons: one uranium and two plutonium bombs. The first plutonium bomb, tested in New Mexico, surpassed all expectations: it had the power of 18,600 tons of TNT (or dynamite), ten times what was predicted, and an explosive force equal to all bombs dropped on London during the Blitz. According to the 1945 War Department memo, the blast destroyed all vegetation for 1,200 feet, melted the sand underneath into green glass, shattered windows for 120 miles, and blew radioactive material over an area of the same diameter. Even today, according to the *Seattle Times,* radioactivity at the Trinity site is ten times normal background levels. The government told local residents - some of whom lived only 20 miles from the test site - that an arsenal of ammunition had exploded.

At the time of the Trinity test, World War II had been raging for nearly six years, with more than 35 million people killed worldwide. While victory had been declared in Europe in May, the battle continued in Japan, and the Soviet Union pledged to enter the fight against the Japanese in August. At the end of July, the U.S. government issued an ultimatum that the Japanese homeland would face "prompt and utter destruction" unless it surrendered unconditionally - but this warning did not mention the bomb. On August 6, the warplane Enola Gay dropped a uranium atomic bomb on Hiroshima; three days later, the Soviet Union invaded Japan, and a plutonium atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. The Japanese surrendered unofficially on August 14, ending World War II. The two bombs killed more than 100,000 people instantly, injured as many, and it is estimated that an equal number have died - and are still dying - from the effects, including cancer, birth defects, and other radiation-related illnesses.

The bombing of Japan was - and still is - hotly contested: the Japanese power was weakening, and many feel that the war would have ended soon, without extensive U.S. casualties. The theory holds that the Americans dropped the bomb on Japan to keep the Soviets from entering the war and gaining power. Whatever the case, the secrecy surrounding the development of the atomic bomb created enmity that launched the cold war and nuclear arms race, forever changing the face of world politics and culture. Cold war paranoia and nuclear hysteria became a part of daily life for Americans, especially in the 1950s.

Many nuclear tests followed internationally: the Soviet Union in 1949, Great Britain in 1952, France in 1960, China in 1964, and India in 1974. Tests have been conducted in the air, underground and underwater. The United States carried out more than 1,000 bomb tests in Colorado, Alaska, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Nevada. In 1951, a test site the size of Rhode Island was established in the Nevada desert, even though prevailing winds blowing east would carry radioactivity across the country. By 1960, when "At the Bomb Testing Site" was published, nearly 90 tests had been carried out at the Nevada Test Site, and more than 900 by 1992, when a moratorium was established by President George Bush. Cumulatively, these test exposed troops and downwind residents to 148 times the radiation released in the 1986 Chernobyl meltdown.

Downwind of the Nevada tests, where before the danger of radio activity was common knowledge-children played in the fallout dust as if it were snow, there developed an alarming increase in the incidence of leukemia, cancer, and other illnesses. While the Atomic Energy Commission repeatedly assured the public, "There is no danger," nuclear contamination spread as far as New England, poisoning sheep, milk, wheat, fish, and soil. In 1980 a Congressional investigation team concluded, "The greatest irony of our atmospheric nuclear testing program is that the only victims of United States nuclear arms since World War II have been our own people.

In 1963, The Limited Test Ban Treaty was signed by representatives of the United States, United Kingdom, and Soviet Union, prohibiting tests of nuclear weapons above ground, under water, and in space. After 2,046 tests worldwide and decades of protest and legal action by environmental and activist groups, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty was signed in September of 1996 by all five declared nuclear powers - the United States, Great Britain, France, China, and Russia, prohibiting all testing. India refused to sign, and carried out a test in 1998.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission reported that as of 1967, nuclear testing killed between 35,000 and 85,000 people worldwide. The violent legacy of atomic testing continues today.

Critical Overview

In a 1961 review of *West of Your City* in the *Virginia Quarterly Review,* James Dickey called Stafford "a real poet, a born poet." At the same time, in the *Hudson Review,* Louis Simpson contended that "Stafford is one of the few poets who are able to use the landscape and to feel the mystery and imagination in American life." He cited "At the Bomb Testing Site" as an example of the strength and purpose of Stafford's voice, arguing that the poet deserved wider and more serious critical attention. Critic Peter Davison in the *Atlantic Monthly* compared the poem to Yeats's "The Second Coming," noting its prophetic power. Stafford's work has also been likened to that of Robert Frost and Walt Whitman.

Critics over the years have tended to disagree about Stafford's standing as a poet□some accuse his "plain-style" of being repetitive, dull, or preachy; others find truth and meaning in his depictions of midwestern life, Native American culture, and the natural environment. Many critics agree with Richard Hugo's assessment in the *Kansas Quarterly* that "Stafford's world may not be large, but his poems are big enough," while others like Richard Howard, that he is a minor poet because his work is limited, static: "The poems accumulate but they do not *grow;* they drift like snowflakes into a great and beautiful body of canceling work" *(Parnassus).* It has been said that Stafford's work did not change or develop significantly over his more than thirty-year poetic career. He has even been taken to task for simply publishing too much.

Despite this controversy, the critics seem to agree that at his best, Stafford is a poet of vision and substance. "At the Bomb Testing Site" is one of Stafford's most highly acclaimed poems and has helped to establish his place in the canon of twentieth-century American poetry. In the *New England Review,* Leonard Nathan praised this political poem for its understatement and lack of rhetoric and polemic, calling it "the poem about nuclear destruction I am most moved by." In an era that saw much grandiose, author-centered writing, he especially admired the poem's ability to "shift its subjectivity to another creature□a creature noted for its cold blood□and offer instinctual anticipation as a kind of measure for the unspeakable." Charles Simic *in Field* similarly lauded the poem's "extraordinary vision," exploring each line's layered meanings and intuitive associations and noted that "poems such as this one open the largest view of the earth, sky, mortals and their true and false gods."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

*Jonathan N. Barron is associate professor of English at the University of Southern Mississippi. He has written numerous articles and edited a number of books of essays on poetry, and is editor*o/The Robert Frost Review. *In this essay, Barron shows how Stafford uses the techniques of a poetic movement from the 1960s, Deep Image poetry, to meditate on the meaning of history.*

Ever since he published his first book in 1959, William Stafford has voiced the emotional commitment of a kind of poetic activism. More specifically, Stafford, a conscientious objector in World War II, regularly uses his poetry to reveal a deep animosity to militarism. But few of his poems before the publication of "At the Bomb Testing Site" (1966) join his anti-militaristic sentiments with the environmentalism one often associates with the Pacific Northwest. One of the best ways to approach Stafford's "At the Bomb Testing Site," then, is to read it as a particular expression of this twin political concern: pacifism and environmentalism.

Great themes, no matter how engaged or engaging, however, do not necessarily create great poetry. For that, craft and style must be taken into account. No matter how noble the twin themes in "At the Bomb Testing Site" may be, the poetry itself succeeds because of its skilled use of a poetic device, the Deep Image, that was new to American poetry in the 1960s. Born in the American Midwest, the Deep Image poetry movement rejected and revised conventional poetic approaches to description. Typically, poets render objects, gestures, and scenes as precisely as they can. The depiction of "the things of this world," to use the title of a famous poem by American poet Richard Wilbur, was standard practice for American poetry after World War Two. Such poetry asks readers to see clearly, almost as if each poem were an especially vivid photograph. The Deep Image, however, was a rebellion against such attention to the surface look of things. Poets sought the spiritual mystery at the heart of all matter through poetic images built out of nouns, that, when combined, reveal a surreal, surprising, and mystical truth.

According to the creators of the Deep Image movement - poets Robert Bly and James Wright - if ever there was a time for spiritual renewal, for the healing work of poetry, then it was in the traumatized period of the 1960s. Bly, in particular, through the vehicle of his own magazine (initially called *The Fifties* when it began publication in the late 1950s and then changed to *The Sixties* with the decade's change), urged American poets to make poetry function as such a healing force by turning their attention away from the surface concerns of the material world and looking instead at the spiritual, emotional world below. He famously made this case in an essay provocatively titled, "A Wrong Turning in American Poetry," where he lashed out at the early 20th-century Modernists for ignoring the deeper truths that were supposed to be the very life-blood of poetry. Bly argued that if poets would use Deep rather than literal or surface images then their poems would at last truly speak out of the depths of the unconscious mind, out of the profound emotions one usually associates with the soul, or the deepest psychological feelings. The Deep Image movement soon gained much prominence as such poets as

Louis Simpson, Galway Kinnell, Mark Strand, and W. S. Merwin began to make use of its techniques in their work. By the mid-1970s, however, this sort of poetry no longer dominated the literary magazines as it once had, and, it is now a rare thing indeed. Nonetheless, the movement's demand that poetry not be so obsessed with surface pictures, and social events to the exclusion of deeper spiritual concerns continues to influence poets.

William Stafford is one of the many poets who, although not formally associated with him or his circle, found Bly's ideas compelling. And of the many poems in which Stafford makes use of the Deep Image technique, "At the Bomb Testing Site," is, perhaps, the most successful. This poem singles out a number of images: the desert, a lizard, and an empty road. What quickly becomes apparent is that these images are more than just literal references to "the things of this world." They are, as well, Deep Images conjuring up primordial feelings and beliefs.

The first such image is the desert, long a landscape familiar to the poetic imagination. To the poetic mind, wilderness of the sort one finds in the American west typically conjures up images of danger and fear but also of freedom and limitless expansion. In this poem - thanks to the prominent role of two other images, lizard and road - the desert is not a typically poetic metaphor for these things. Instead, it belongs to the military imagination, where the vast stretches of uninhabited land refer only to ideal sites for target practice. By playing the conventionally poetic association of the desert (limitless if risky possibility) against the contemporary militaristic use of that desert (target practice), Stafford, in three quatrains, gives voice to what would soon be a fully formed environmental movement. "At the Bomb Testing Site" couples Stafford's own morally based stance against combat with a love for and concern for the natural landscape. Simply by playing three images - desert, road, and lizard - against one another Stafford is able to make them tell a far deeper story than the more conventional anti-militaristic poem might have told.

Rather than reducing opposition in the poem to simple cliches - saying how marvelous and pretty and free nature is, and how evil and sinister the bomb-loving military is, Stafford, instead, chooses a profoundly ugly, frightening, hardly lovable creature, the lizard, and his dangerous and equally frightening home, the desert, as his Deep Images or metaphors for nature's glory. By focusing on a lizard in the desert, Stafford refuses to traffic in cliches about the beauties, mysteries, and wonders of nature that need to be preserved. Instead, he returns his readers to the palpable fear of imminent warfare, of potential nuclear holocaust, by making that threat clear even to a lizard. The fear of nuclear war felt by so many Americans during the Cold War emerges in this poem through the image of a lizard staring at a distant road.

This first stanza is surprising, then, because of its focus on an animal that has no conventional poetic qualities. Typically, lizards do not evoke human sympathy; instead, they tend to be vessels of fear, loathing, disgust. What might it mean that this animal, so off-putting to humans, carries the focus of the poem? It means that this poem wishes to place the reader in the condition of the primeval, natural, non-human world: a world that cannot be made human and that is not subject to human ideals. When the desert and

the road are viewed from the lizard's perspective they reverse their meaning. The road, a sign of life and escape to a human in the desert, is, to the lizard, an intrusive frightening mechanism that sends dangerous vehicles racing at enormous speed towards him. In other words, Stafford's environmentalism is not at all naive or simple. If we are to claim to love nature, then, he suggests here, we had better be willing to love lizards and deserts not just kittens and daffodils. The lizard, after all, knows the desert as his home. Humans, the real threat, as represented by the road are particularly dangerous because on that road one finds "history." When Stafford uses the word, "history," he is reminding us that this concept of time - history as the inevitable "road to progress," as a march towards some better goal, is an entirely human idea.

Stafford uses the fear of this road, of this human idea of history evoked by the lizard to wonderful effect here. After all, most readers are most likely afraid of lizards or, at least, repelled by them. While most people cannot be sympathetic to this creature, then, the poem asks them, nonetheless, to understand its fear of us, of our history. History, here, is more than just an empty cliche, it is more than just the "road to progress." It is also quite specifically a bomb, an entirely human act of willful, deliberate change, an active intervention in the landscape, and, above all else, a process of destruction.

What does the lizard see? What is just down the road? Certainly, it must be the bomb test site, the place for explosions. But is this just any bomb? In 1960, the conjunction of the words desert, history, and bomb would refer to nuclear weaponry. Notice that rather than say that the lizard awaits the mushroom cloud of an exploding nuclear device, Stafford tells us instead that it awaits "history." In the context of this poem, "history" is also a metaphor for "the Bomb," a nuclear weapon. In other words, no other bomb but a nuclear one would invoke so grand a term as "history." Bombs, even in the 19th-century, were old news; but to readers in 1960, one bomb was continual news. It even had managed to colonize an entire noun. Merely by adding a capital "B" to the word (from "bomb" to "Bomb") one could invoke the specter of nuclear annihilation. After all, in 1960, nuclear weaponry was recent enough to have changed the very meaning of history. For the first time ever, humanity had found a way not only to destroy itself but other species as well. Who better then this ancient replica of pre-history, the lizard, to witness the end-result of human history, the nuclear bomb?

In the second stanza, the poem develops its condemnation of human history further. So far Stafford has established the lizard as an image of eternal, timeless, pre-historical nature. Then he has it become witness to history in the form of a nuclear weapon to be exploded just down the road. As the poem says, the lizard "was looking for something farther off / than people could see, an important scene / acted in stone for little selves / at the flute end of consequences." What is this scene? Who are these "little selves?" And what is "the flute end of consequences?" Each of these images is also "Deep." To ask these questions is to reveal their uncertain, mysterious status. (Stafford's metaphorical language, however, also suggests that this lizard is expecting something). "The flute end" as a narrow funnel reducing itself to a point not only describes the apex of a nuclear explosion but also, in geometric terms, the final point of vision. There, on the end of the horizon, this "little self," this lizard, will be made witness to a bizarre

scene, a weird drama in stone: the explosion. The horror of this passage is that nature (the lizard), will learn from human history (the Bomb) the truth of total destruction.

The final stanza returns to the image of the lizard in order to prepare it and readers for the inevitable lesson: all life, all nature is expendable and the only stewards of history, humans, seem to care very little about it. It is significant to note here that the first two stanzas are each one sentence while the final stanza consists of three sentences. This final stanza already represents a fracturing of the atom of poetic form. Also, each four line stanza (or quatrain) contains a kind of split rhyme, an exploded couplet that still - albeit barely - works. In any four line stanza, readers inevitably look for some kind of rhyme scheme. In the first stanza of "At the Bomb Testing Site," "lizard" (line 1) might be said to (barely) rhyme with "road" (line 3) through the "d" sound, since even one end consonant is a connection. In the second stanza, similarly, "selves" rhymes with "consequences" insofar as they share the same two last letters. And in the third stanza, "it" (line 9) rhymes with "desert" (line 12). The point is that each stanza has, at least, the suggestion of a rhyme, of a couplet. But in the last stanza such rhymes vanish. All of this play with form underlines the destructive power of human craft, of human artfulness, of human history. If nature gave us rhymes, patterns, and music, we, as humans, have seen to it to destroy each and every one of those gifts.

In a final bizarre, even surreal image, the lizard, in the last two lines, metamorphoses into a human: it is now said to have elbows and hands. This metaphor, comparing the lizard to a human, brings the two worlds, human and natural, together. We are, says Stafford through this surreal Deep Image of the grasping lizard, all animals. When Stafford associates the primal and prehistoric reptile with the cultured and contemporary human, he tells us that, when it comes to the Bomb, both will have to grip hard and wait. By focusing on the lizard's perspective and invoking the strategies of the Deep Image movement, the poem quietly makes its pacifist case against warfare. It asks readers to consider the meaning of history itself and of the still common assumption that history always marches progressively forward towards a better future. In this poem, evolution from a lizard to a human with hands takes us only to one result: fear.

Source: Jonathan Barron, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Chris Semansky's most recent collection of poems, Blindsided, *published by 26 Books of Portland, Oregon, has been nominated for an Oregon Book Award. In the following essay Semansky examines William Stafford's "At the Bomb Testing Site " as a political poem.*

At a time when literally thousands of love poems are written every day, and the poem of personal loss is the dominant flavor of lyric, William Stafford's poem, "At the Bomb Testing Site," asks us to reconsider the relationship of the personal to the political and to enlarge our sense of the public serf to include the interests of creatures as well as human beings, to consider the consequences of universal loss, not just personal. However, he does not do this by clobbering us over the head with his ideology or by belaboring the obvious or ranting about the cause du jour; he does it indirectly and quietly by asking readers to bear witness to an unbearable event while in the skin of another. He does not employ the imperial "I" of so much political pronouncement poetry; he does not base his "position" on identity politics; he does not batter down open doors. He sketches the outline of fear, and he lets readers, with their knowledge of history, fill in the rest.

The poem begins with a reptile's eye view of a nuclear bomb testing site:

At noon in the desert a panting lizard waited for history, its elbows tense, watching the curve of a particular road as if something might happen.

Stafford manages to create a sense of anxiety by attributing to the lizard a consciousness capable of "wait[ing] for history." Lizards are cold-blooded creatures and, Stafford implies, it takes cold blood to endure what history has to offer. The curve in the road parallels the curve of the lizard's elbows, suggesting something coiled, ready to spring, more snake than lizard-like. The lizard's "panting" and the fact that it is noon underscore the idea of imminence as well, and the image of a road as the animal's visual focus further prepares us for the "accident" looming just ahead, around the curve. The second stanza turns cryptic.

It was looking at something farther off than people could see, an important scene acted in stone for little selves at the flute end of consequences.

The reptile, all instinctual knowing and geared for survival, has eyes for the future. The "important scene" here could be, as Charles Simic speculates in his *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things,* "the matchstick figure of the Indian humpbacked flute player ... surrounded by other matchstick figures ... enacting a scene, a sacred dance." Simic refers to Kokopelli, a Native American deity who has appeared as a petroglyph all over the American Southwest since A.D. 200. He is often shown with a hunched back and playing a flute. Historians theorize that his name may derive from the Hopi or Zuni name for a god, "Koko," and the word "pelli," an indian name for the Desert Robber Fly (his antennae give him a bug-like appearance). In Native American lore he

is variously described as a trickster or a minor god who is also a harbinger of fertility, traveling the desert impregnating young women and bringing good fortune to farmers' crops. The music of his flute warns the villagers of his approach, and his hunched back may actually represent a trader's pack filled with beads and shells, ready to be traded for chunks of turquoise or other valuable stones. Kokopelli, then, can be seen as a trickster figure for human and non-human life. His music is leading the lizard, and all other living creatures, into a future of certain doom, impregnating the earth with death. Or, conversely, he can be seen as a symbol of fertility and life which are about to be lost to the ravages of a nuclear explosion.

This image suggests the ominous nature of Nature's, and humanity's, inability to stop its own potential destruction. Instead, the lizard, and humanity by extension, can only watch as the scene is enacted. Stafford's poem relies not on a moral but rather on the idea that evoking such a sense of dread will move readers to action. Morals are for survivors, this poem says. They require civilization. This bomb test site could be any one of the various sites which have been used throughout the world to test nuclear devices. However, the images depicted most closely resemble the Trinity site in the desert in central New Mexico. It was there that the Manhattan Project culminated with the detonation of the first nuclear device on July 16, 1945.

The site in the desert is called the "Jornada del Muerto" or "Walk of the Dead." The shock wave resulting from the blast broke windows 120 miles away and was felt 160 miles away. A flash of bright light from the blast was seen over the entire state of New Mexico and in parts of Arizona, Texas, and Mexico, and a mushroom cloud rose to over 38,000 feet. Less than a month later, "Little Boy" and "Fat Man," names given to the nuclear bombs dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, exploded, wiping out hundreds of thousands of people. Since those explosions, there have been almost 2,000 more nuclear explosions around the world. But the lizard hadn't seen that yet. He waited, powerless.

There was just a continent without much on it under a sky that never cared less. Ready for a change, the elbows waited. The hands gripped hard on the desert.

In this last stanza, Stafford evokes Naturalism, only here it isn't nature's indifference to humanity being described, the staple theme of Naturalistic literature, but humanity's indifference to nature. The "continent" is the desert itself, and Stafford's description of it as largely barren can be forgiven as he is fusing the lizard's perspective with his human one. His focus on the lizard's parts, its elbows and hands, humanizes the creature and asks us to look closer at the description, to imaginatively participate in the apprehension, the anticipation of a change that itself cannot be imagined.

This is a poem of witness; it is also intensely personal in its depiction of the lizard, its attention to the nonhuman world, and its evocation of the dread that the possibility of nuclear annihilation engenders. *In Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness,* Carolyn Forche, has this to say about the increasingly blurred lines between the personal and the political:

Poetry of witness presents the reader with an interesting interpretive problem. We are accustomed to rather easy categories: we distinguish between "personal" and "political" poems□the former calling to mind lyrics of love and emotional loss, the latter indicating a public partisanship that is considered divisive, even when necessary. The distinction between the personal and the political gives the political realm too much and too little scope; at the same time, it renders the personal too important and not important enough.... The celebration of the personal, however, can indicate a myopia, an inability to see how larger structures of the economy and the state circumscribe, if not determine, the fragile realm of individuality.

Stafford's poem avoids the pitfall of "partisanship" by making no pronouncements, letting the work of description speak for him. Critic John Gery observes in *Nuclear Annihilation and Contemporary American Poetry: Ways of Nothingness* that the poem "speaks with an understated power, best evoked through obliquity, as it diminishes the global significance of atomic testing without trivializing it." Gery considers Stafford's poem an "apocalyptic lyric," a type of response to the nuclear age in which we live. Such lyrics embody a postmodern sensibility, Gery argues, which build on an acceptance of impending nuclear annihilation to imagine human continuity. Gery writes that apocalyptic lyrics "strive to shock us into recognizing the extreme violence of the nuclear threat (though not, in most cases, for gratuitous reasons), yet they do so in terms that by lyric conventions draw attention to our humanity.... these apocalyptic poets stretch (and sometimes strain) their metaphors so that, at their best, they deepen our sense of annihilation, particularly by the way they alter our sense of personal experience itself." The image of the desert is already an image of nothingness. Coupled with the "important scene / acted in stone" and an apathetic sky, Stafford's poem does indeed "deepen our sense of annihilation." But if all that we experience as readers is deeper dread, how is this a political poem? Leonard Nathan writes in *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things* that Stafford's poem, and other political poems of indirection, help us to "subtly shift the way we see ... reality, keeping our imagination alive to possibilities. And perhaps□though this may be wishful thinking□ spreading through a wider consciousness than that represented by the tiny audience for poetry." It may well be wishful thinking, but that, Stafford's poem suggests, is better than no thinking at all.

Source: Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Adaptations

You can listen to William Stafford reading "With Kit, Age 7, At the Beach" on the Academy of American Poets site http://www.poets.org/lit/ listen.htm#S. This is an audio sample from a 1970 tape containing readings from a number of Stafford's poems, introduced by Frederick Morgan. You may order the tape on the site.

William Stafford reads two poems on Volume Two of the CD *set In Their Own Voices: A Century of Recorded Poetry.*

The Poetry Center at San Francisco State University (www.sfsu.edu/~newlit/archives.htm) has an archive of videotapes of poetry readings that are rentable by mail. William Stafford reads nearly 50 poems.

William Stafford reads his children's poetry book *The Animal That Drank Up Sound,* accompanied by Matthew Smith's contemporary music, on an audio cassette published by Harcourt Brace & Company in 1993.

William Stafford and Robert Bly: A Literary Friendship (Reiss Films, 1994) is a lively documentary about the friendship of these two American poets.

Topics for Further Study

Investigate a scientific "advance" that has turned out to be harmful to humankind. What was the initial response to the scientific development? How was the truth discovered or revealed? What was the result?

Imagine a room (or a landscape, or a place you know) in which something important has just happened. Write a poem describing the room itself without telling what has happened there.

Compare and contrast the depictions of the threat of nuclear war in a recent movie and a film from the 1960s.

Describe what makes a poem "political," giving examples from the work of one or more poets.

Explore the controversy surrounding the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan in 1945. Who supported this action? Who opposed it? What were the forces that led to the use of the bomb?

Think of an abstract word□rage, ecstasy, loneliness, freedom, hope, etc.□and write down all of the concrete images that the word brings to mind. Then, write a poem using only concrete descriptions that convey or suggest the larger concept.

Compare and Contrast

1945: The United States has an arsenal of two bombs.

1961: *Life Magazine* offers tips on building bomb shelters, which has been urged by President Kennedy.

1962: Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring,* a book about how the use of DDT poisons the earth, is published. The resulting public outcry about pesticide use leads to changes in the laws affecting the air, land, and water, and launches the environmental movement as we know it today.

1963: Preaching nonviolence, Dr. Martin Luther King delivers his "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington, D.C.

1986: The Soviet nuclear reactor at Chernobyl melts down, releasing 10 times the radiation of the Hiroshima bombing. The Soviet Union's arsenal reaches 45,000.

1995: A Gallup poll shows that 60 percent of Americans surveyed cannot name the president who ordered the 1945 bombing of Japan. 22 percent don't know that bombs were dropped at all.

1997: A United Nations-sponsored conference on global warming is held in Kyoto, Japan to address the issue of how to reduce carbon dioxide emissions worldwide.

1998: India carries out a series of nuclear bomb tests.

What Do I Read Next?

More than 100 poets, including Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich, Sharon Olds, and Gary Snyder, offer their views of atomic politics in *Atomic Ghost: Poets Respond to the Nuclear Age,* published in 1995.

Learning to Live in the World: Earth Poems is a 1994 collection of 50 poems by William Stafford about the relationship between humans and the natural world. *Traveling through the Dark* is Stafford's 1963 National Book Award-winning collection. *The Way it Ls: New and Selected Poems* (1998), compiled by Robert Bly, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Kim Stafford, is a definitive collection of 400 poems, including more than 70 previously unpublished works - including a lyric the poet wrote on the day of his death. A *Library Journal* review says that the poems "reveal many of Stafford's themes - his affinity for Native Americans, love of nature, protest of war, and concern about the dangers of technology."

American Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War (1993), photographed by Carole Gallagher, is a moving and often shocking photo-essay book about the victims of radioactive fallout from bomb testing in Nevada. These "downwinders" tell their own stories, which reveal the American government's cover-up of the devastating effects of the tests.

Richard L. Miller's 1986 book *Under The Cloud: The Decades of Nuclear Testing* is a compelling and comprehensive depiction of the nuclear testing saga, from the political intrigue of the arms race to the deadly effects of radiation fallout.

Those who enjoy Stafford's casual, talky style and his deep sense of place may want to read Jo McDougall's 1991 poetry collection *Towns Facing Railroads,* which depicts small towns and ordinary lives with extraordinary eloquence and force.

Down in My Heart (1947), Stafford's memoir of his four years in conscientious objector camps during World War II, is a stirring depiction of the fellowship among COs and the public's enmity toward them.

Hiroshima: Three Witnesses, published in 1990, contains first-person accounts of the atomic holocaust by Japanese writers Hara Tamiki, Ota Yoko, and Toge Sankichi. In prose and poetry, these writers bear witness to the horrors of the 1945 bombing.

The Sleep of Grass (www.newsfromnowhere .com/home.html) is a tribute to William Stafford, with poems by David Ignatow, Robert Bly, Linda Pastan, Kathleen Norris, and others.

Intriguing War Department releases written by the generals involved in the 1945 Trinity bomb test are posted online on www.enviroweb.org/ issues/nuketesting/trinity and wwwdannencom/ decision.

Further Study

Andrews, Tom, ed., *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things,* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993.

The most comprehensive collection of Stafford criticism, this book contains excerpts or full texts of more than 50 book reviews, general essays, and essays about particular poems or articles. The lack of an index makes navigating the book somewhat difficult, but this is an excellent survey as well as a springboard for further research.

Gery, John, *Nuclear Annihilation and Contemporary American Poetry: Ways of Nothingness,* Tampa: University of Florida, 1995.

An in-depth study of nuclear theory and American poetry, this book examines four distinct poetic approaches to nuclear culture - protest poetry, apocalyptic lyric poetry, psycho-historical poetry, and the poetry of uncertainty - and discusses the work of a range of poets, from Gertrude Stein to John Ashbery.

Holden, Jonathan, *The Mark To Turn: A Reading of William Stafford's Poetry,* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1976.

In this review of Stafford's first five books, Holden suggests that Stafford's poetry is far more sophisticated than commonly held, and identifies a pattern of interlocking metaphors that bring depth and vision to the work. He sets forth that Stafford's depiction of Nature's "otherness" is a source of his poems' imaginative energy.

Stafford, William, *Writing the Australian Crawl: Views on the Writer's Vocation,* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1978.

In essays, poems, and interviews, Stafford provides insight into his poetic process and his views on the art of writing.

Bibliography

Andrews, Tom, ed., *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things,* Ann Arbor, MI: University ofMichigan Press, 1993.

Baker, Paul R., ed., *The Atomic Bomb: The Great Decision,* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968.

Carpenter, David A., *William Stafford,* Boise, ID:Boise State University, 1986.

Davison, Peter, "The New Poetry," *Atlantic Monthly* Vol. 210, November 1962, p. 88, excerpt reprinted in *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things,* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993.

Des Pres, Terrence, *Praises and Dispraises: Poetry andPol-itics, the 20th Century,* New York: Viking Penguin, 1988.

Dickey, James, "William Stafford," *Virginia Quarterly Review* Vol. 37, No. 4, autumn 1961, p. 640, reprinted in *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things,* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993.

Dietrich, Bill, "Fifty Years from Trinity," *The Seattle Times,* July 1995, online at WEBedition/Education: www. seattletimes.com/trinity.

Forche, Carolyn, ed., *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness,* New York: W.W. Norton, 1993.

Garrison, Steve, "William Stafford," *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Vol. 5: *American Poets Since WorldWarll,* Gale Research, 1980, pp. 292-99.

Gery, John, *Nuclear Annihilation and Contemporary American Poetry: Ways of Nothingness,* Tampa, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996.

Howard, Richard, "Someday, Maybe," *Parnassus* Vol. 2, No. 2, spring/summer 1974, p. 213-20.

Hugo, Richard, "Problems with Landscapes in Early Stafford Poems," *Kansas Quarterly* Vol. 2, No. 2, spring 1970, pp. 33-38.

Kitchen, Judith, *Understanding William Stafford,* Columbia: University ofSouth Carolina Press, 1989.

Nathan, Leonard, "One Vote," *New England Review and Breadloaf Quarterly,* Vol. 5, 1983, pp. 521-24, excerpt reprinted in *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things,* edited by Tom Andrews, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993.

Nordstrom, Lars, *Theodore Roethke, William Stafford, and Gary Snyder: The Ecological Metaphor as Transformed Regionalism,* Stockholm, Sweden: Uppsala, 1989.

Pinsker, Sanford, *Three Pacific Northwest Poets: William Stafford, Richard Hugo, and David Wagoner,* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987.

Simic, Charles, "At the Bomb Testing Site," *Field,* fall 1989, pp. 8-10, reprinted in *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things,* edited by Tom Andrews, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993.

Simpson, Louis, "Important and Unimportant Poems," *Hudson Review* Vol. 14, No. 3, autumn 1961, pp. 461-70, excerpt reprinted in *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things,* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993.

Stafford, William, *West of Your City,* Los Gatos, CA: The Talisman Press, 1960.

Stafford, William, *Writing the Australian Crawl: Views on the Writer's Vocation,* Ann Arbor: The University ofMichigan Press, 1978.

Stafford, William, *You Must Revise Your Life,* Ann Arbor: The University ofMichigan Press, 1986.

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Poetry for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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:

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535