The Constellation Orion Study Guide

The Constellation Orion by Ted Kooser

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Introduction

The Constellation Orion" was originally publishedin 1975 in *Three Rivers Poetry Journal,* and then reprinted in Kooser's 1980 collection, *Sure Signs:* ***19/5*** *New and Selected Poems.* The poem typifies Kooser's style: short, descriptive, and literal. Its brevity (only 14 lines) and "artless" manner make it easy to read and accessible to those who are not regular readers of poetry. It also addresses a favorite Kooser subject: the relationship between the natural and the human worlds.

Written in 1970, the poem literally describes an experience Kooser had while driving his son, then about three years old, back to Lincoln, Nebraska from just outside Ames, Iowa. Kooser would make the trek on weekends to pick up his son from his ex-wife, who lived in Marshalltown, Iowa. He would then sometimes visit his parents in Cedar Rapids before returning to Lincoln. The highway, the car, and the night sky made up their world at this time.

The poem relates a brief address by the speaker to the constellation Orion. In the address the speaker imagines his son waking up (he's napping on his father's lap) and mispronouncing the constellation's name, calling him "Old Ryan." We have all been guilty of mispronouncing words; it is frequently part of the process of learning new vocabulary. Therefore, we can smile at the mistake the father imagines his son would make and, indeed, probably has made before. The fact that a child makes the mistake is endearing. Kooser writes only occasionally about other people. Most of his poems are descriptions of things or animals, or of the rituals of daily life in the Midwest.

Author Biography

Like Wallace Stevens, Ted Kooser made his living as an insurance company executive, retiring from Lincoln Benefit Life only recently. Unlike Stevens, Kooser writes for everyman in an accessible and non-literary manner. Considered one of Nebraska's leading poets, Kooser was born to merchant Ted, Sr. and Vera Moser Kooser in 1939 in Ames, Iowa, and educated in the Ames public school system. AtIowa State University in Ames he took his BS in English Education in 1962. Six years later he received an MA in English from the University ofNebraska at Lincoln. Both Iowa and Nebraska are Great Plains states, and with their flat expanse, and relatively small populations, they provides stargazers with a view of the heavens unob-scured by city lights and smog. Light, particularly starlight and moonlight, is a recurring image in many of Kooser's poems.

Kooser married Diana Tressler, a teacher, and had a son, Jeffrey Charles, in 1967, the son in "The Constellation Orion." In 1969 Tressler and Kooser divorced, and Kooser remarried afterward. He writes about both of his marriages in his 1978 collection of poems, *Old Marriage and New.*

Kooser has authored many volumes of poems including *Sure Signs: New and Selected Poems* (1980), *One World at a Time* (1985), and *Weather Central* (1994), all from the University ofPittsburgh Press, and has published pamphlets and books of his own with Windflower Press, a small press started by Kooser which specializes in contemporary Midwestern poetry. The recipient of many national awards including two National Endowment of the Arts fellowships, Kooser's poetry has been featured on National Public Radio and has been reprinted in a number of textbooks and anthologies. Ted Kooser lives in Garland, Nebraska, just outside of Lincoln.

Poem Text

The Constellation Orion

I'm delighted to see you.

old friend.

lying there in your hammock

over the next town.

You were the first person

my son was to meet in the heavens.

He's sleeping now.

his head like a small sun in my lap.

Our car whizzes along in the night.

If he were awake, he'd say.

"Look, Daddy, there's Old Ryan!"

but I won't wake him.

He's mine for the weekend,

Old Ryan, not yours.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4:

Stargazing is an ancient activity. Greeks practiced it widely, often assigning names to groups of stars and telling stories about those stars. These stories, myths, were an attempt to explain natural phenomena. By the 5th century BC, Eratosthenes compiled the *Catasterismi*which contained a number of these myths, most of which were connected to one another in some way. There are a few myths about the Constellation Orion. One of them names the sea-god Neptune as Orion's father and the great huntress Queen Euryale of the Amazons as his mother. Taking after his mother, Orion became the world's greatest hunter. But in his arrogance he bragged that he could catch any animal in the world. A scorpion eventually stung and killed him in response to his boasting. A second story holds that Orion was motherless, and was given as a gift to a peasant by Jupiter, Neptune, and Mercury, and grew up to be a great hunter. After failing to win the permission of King Oenopion to marry his daughter, Merion, Orion tried to take her by force. Oenopion tricked Orion and blinded him, casting him out on the seashore, where his sight was eventually restored by the sun-god. After many adventures, Orion dwelt with Diana, whom he wanted to marry. However, her brother, Apollo, did not want her to marry Orion and one day tricked her into shooting him with her bow and arrow. When Diana discovered what she had done she wept, then placed Orion among the stars, where he remains today.

The poem begins with the speaker addressing the constellation Orion, sometimes called Orion the Hunter. Orion is located on the celestial equator and can be seen from every part of the Earth. The Belt of Orion, consisting of a short straight row of three bright stars, is the most noticeable part of the constellation. When you look at them, you're looking in the direction opposite the center of our Milky Way galaxy. These stars are what the speaker refers to when he says "hammock." The speaker obviously takes joy in stargazing as he says that he is "delighted" to see Orion. The neighborliness of the speaker's greeting also underscores that the speaker sees the constellations as a dependable and everyday part of his universe. Many people are so consumed with the daily activities of their lives, particularly indoor activities, that they are not always aware of the world outside, especially the heavenly bodies. This is often true of city dwellers, who have to fight not only the distractions of incessant human activity but light and smog pollution as well to view the stars.

Lines 5-8:

The speaker continues to address Orion, now calling him a "person." His tone is intimate, as if he is addressing a close friend, a godparent, maybe. He tells the constellation that it is the first constellation that his son "was to meet." This makes sense when we understand that Orion is one of the most visible constellations in the sky. This is especially true during January and February for those of us who live in the

northern hemisphere. One needs only to look toward the southeast for the three bright stars that make up Orion's belt. Foreshadowing his son's own (unintentional) pun, the speaker refers to his son's head as a "small sun." This simile underscores the boy's importance to his father, and draws attention to the idea that his son himself is a constellation of sorts, a heavenly body on earth. Life on earth depends on the sun for sustenance, just as the father depends on his son for emotional sustenance.

Lines 9-11:

The speaker locates himself and his son in a car, "whizz[ing] along in the night." Such a scene is typical for the Midwest, as long drives are common because towns are often few and far between. Continuing his address to the constellation, the speaker uses the conditional "if" to guess at what his son would say were he awake. By having his

son mispronounce Orion's name, the speaker clues us into his son's probable age (3-4). Such a humorous and endearing response from the son only deepens the reader's sense of intimacy between father and son.

Lines 12-14:

The father's refusal to wake his son, stemming from an imaginary conversation with the constellation, also implies that he has competed in the past for his son's affection or attention. That he has his son "for the weekend" also suggests that the speaker is estranged or divorced from the son's mother, and that he has visitation rights for the weekend. This possibility makes the poem all the more endearing, while also bringing it closer to sentimentality.

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Themes

Language and its Meaning

The effect of Kooser's poem "The Constellation Orion" rests on two puns. The first one is intentional, the second one accidental. These puns focus our attention on the practice of naming, something that human beings do to make sense of their world, but also something that poets especially have been noted for doing. Foreshadowing his son's mistake, the father says that the boy's head is "like a sun." Such punning underscores the slippery nature of language itself, emphasizing the fact that there is no inherently natural relationship between the idea of the thing named (the signified) and the word (either speech sounds or marks on the page) used to name it (the signifier), but that meaning in language resides in how linguistic elements are different from one another in a given system. Such a view of language, first theorized by linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, suggests that reality, rather than being "out there" waiting to be seen and named, is in large part constructed by the act of naming itself. The son's mispronunciation can also be read as a malapropism, a term derived from the character Mrs. Malaprop in Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775). A malapropism occurs when a speaker misuses words, most often unintentionally, because they sound alike. Usually the malapropism is close enough to the correct word that the listener knows what the speaker intended. This is certainly the case with the speaker of Kooser's poem, who understands what his son means when he says "Old Ryan." Someone not close to the child and with no relationship to him might not understand the mistake, so in this case, the malapropism and the speaker's recognition of it serve as evidence of the father and son's closeness.

Imagination

"The Constellation Orion" is an act of imagination. It also describes an imaginative act: that is, the speaker having a conversation with the stars, as well as with his sleeping son. Although some critics consider Kooser to be a realist, he is, in fact, a romantic. Before the Romantics, poetry was considered an art designed to mirror human activity. Good poetry also mirrored, or modeled itself after great poetry of the past, specifically poetry of ancient Greece and Rome. William Wordsworth, however, helped initiate a change in how people began to think of poetry. In his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* he claimed that poetry's primary material was a poet's *feelings,* and that poems arose out of "a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Samuel Taylor Coleridge elaborated on this, claiming that the poems grew organically, much like a plant, rather than being plotted according to rules of past works. The imagination, Coleridge argued, had laws which developed along the lines of its own internal principles. Nature, as well, became a favored subject of poetry, meditation on which often prompted the poet to think about other common human experiences or problems. Kooser's poem, then, can be seen as a quintessentially romantic poem. Like much romantic poetry, it employs the lyric "I," and uses inspiration from nature, in the form of the stars, to meditate on the love of a parent

for his child, a universal human experience. The organic nature of Kooser's poem is embodied in its loose conversational style and, as if to underscore the primacy of the imagination itself, the speaker, rather than talking directly to his son who is right next to him, engages in a fantasized dialogue with the youngster.

Style

Though it is told in the present tense, "The Constellation Orion" functions as a humorous anecdote. Anecdotes are short stories, often conversational, told about a particular event. The use of dialogue in this poem also underscores that conversational quality, and its use of non-literary language. This anecdote also includes puns, in the form of the father's calling his son's head "a small sun" and the son's mispronunciation of the "constellation Orion." Puns work when words have identical or similar sounds, but are very different in meaning. The effect of Kooser's puns is to render the child "cute" for readers, and to highlight the intimacy among the father, son, and constellation.

The poem employs figurative language throughout. He uses personification and metaphor to describe the constellation's appearance, saying that he sees Orion "lying there in your hammock." In addressing the constellation directly, Kooser employs apostrophe. Apostrophe is a direct address to an abstract entity or to an absent person. Keats, for example, apostrophizes a Grecian urn in his well-known poem, "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

In comparing his son's head to "a small sun in my lap," Kooser uses a simile. Similes are "like" metaphors in that they compare two distinctly different things, but they are indicated by the word "like" or "as." This comparison also parallels his description of Orion in that both son and Orion are resting: Orion in his hammock, the son in his father's lap.

Historical Context

Kooser was a single parent when he wrote this poem in 1970, and the love that he expresses for his son elicits a warm feeling in readers. The United States in the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a dramatic rise in the divorce rate. In 1970 in the United States there were 709,000 divorces, or 3.5 for every 1,000 marriages, up from 393,000 in 1960, or 2.3 for every 1,000 marriages. Custody of children, though, was most often awarded to mothers, with father's granted visitation rights, often on weekends. As such, the image of the speaker in his car with his son, expressing the joy he feels at having him for the weekend, is a familiar one for Americans. A number of films dealing with the trauma of divorce and custody came out during the 1970's, the most notable one being 1979's *Kramer Vs. Kramer,* starring Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep. Kooser's most autobiographical work came out of his own experience with divorce. In 1978 he published *Old Marriage and New* with Cold Mountain Press. This collection of 13 "scenes" recounts the difficulty of that period in his life.

Kooser wrote "The Constellation Orion" in 1970, just three years after M. L. Rosenthal's study, *The New Poets* was published. In that book Rosen-thal coins the term "confessional poetry" to designate a kind of poetry which foregrounds open and honest communication between writers and their audience, and frequently eschews what they consider artifice in their craft. Confessionalism had been in vogue for some time before then, as evidenced in Beat writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell, whose *Life Studies* is widely considered to be a hallmark of confessional poetry. Confessionalism was a response to much of the formal poetry being written during the 1940s and 1950s, but it also embodied an air of possibility, and assumed that direct transcription of experience itself was a poetic act. The popularity of psychoanalysis during this period also helped the "cause" of confessional poetry, as poets frequently packed their work with personal details not traditionally included in poems. Kooser, though not a confessional poet in the traditional sense, does share the impulse to literally transcribe personal experience in his poems, though much of that experience rests on literal descriptions of the natural world, and not always or necessarily his emotional responses to that world.

Critical Overview

There has been no criticism written on "The Constellation Orion" and very little written on Kooser in general apart from reviews for book-length collections of poetry. Critic and poet Dana Gioia has written the most sustained piece of criticism on Kooser's career in his collection of essays, *Can Poetry Matter?.* In "The Anonymity of the Regional Poet," Gioia argues that Kooser is a popular poet because he writes for a nonliterary audience in accessible language, and deals with subjects from everyday life, albeit everyday life in the Midwest. Claiming that Kooser has not received much critical attention because his poetry "poses none of the verbal problems critical methodologies have been so skillfully designed to unravel," Gioia offers a paradox: "the simpler poetry is, the more difficult it becomes for a critic to discuss intelligently." For Kooser, however, it has not been a matter of whether or not critics discuss his poetry intelligently or not, but of whether they discuss it at all. Gioia examines Kooser's limitations *and* virtues as a poet, concluding that "while one would not claim that Kooser is a major poet, one could well make the case that he will be an enduring one."

Sure Signs: New and Selected Poems, the volume in which "The Constellation Orion" appears, received The Society of Midland Authors Prize for the best book of poetry by a Midwestern writer published in 1980 and also carries words from reviewers. Karl Shapiro, himself a Nebraskan poet, compares the collection to other regional poets and poetry, claiming that it is "a lasting work, comparable to the best of the*Spoon River*or Frost in his richest vein." Theodore Weiss seconds that opinion, saying "[Kooser] has, with his wit and his earthi-ness, his imagination and his lucidity, staked out as his own region□western as it is□somewhere poetically between Frost and Williams." Russell Ed-son calls the book "a wonderful collection."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Pamela Steed Hill

Pamela Steed Hill has had poems published in over 90 journals and magazines and is the author of In Praise of Motels, *her first full-length collection, published in 1999. She is an associate editor for* University Communications *at TheOhio State University. In the following essay, Hill notes how the speaker "talks to " the stars to demonstrate his love and affection for his son, as well as to reveal the reason for the sadness that underlies an otherwise tender moment.*

Born in Ames, Iowa, in 1939, Ted Kooser is one of America's and, in particular, one of the Midwest's most highly regarded poets, especially for the states of Nebraska and Iowa. What has primarily led to his popularity is his consistent ability to turn everyday language and everyday events into poetry. One doesn't need to have lived a fairly quiet, unremarkable life on a small midwestern farm to appreciate or understand Kooser's work. The poet does, however, have a special affinity for the pastoral, for all things natural and simple. And while the poems may reflect that ease and simplicity on the surface, many take the reader on a deeper journey, one in which we can honestly say, "Yes, I know exactly what he means."

"The Constellation Orion" is one of those poems. It is rather brief and seemingly to the point: while a child sleeps, his father drives and takes note of one of the constellations above, fondly recalling the boy's mispronunciation of "Orion" as "Old Ryan." But if we back up and take a slower look at the lines, we find a carefully crafted use of a literary device that is both uncomplicated and powerful at the same time.

Anthropomorphism is an attribution of human characteristics to things not human, such as animals, inanimate objects, or natural phenomena. When we say the couch beckoned us to lie down and take a nap or when we call a tree a weeping willow, we are being anthropomorphic. Ted Kooser gives human characteristics to a collection of stars in the night sky throughout the entire poem, starting with the first two lines: "I'm delighted to see you, / old friend,...." From beginning to end, the speaker addresses the Orion constellation, also known as the "hunter" constellation because the group of stars it contains appears to form the shape of a man holding a bow and arrow, about to shoot. In Greek mythology, Orion was a very handsome, virile giant and an expert at hunting. Tales vary, but most relate that the hunter fell in love with Merope, the "wrong woman," and he was eventually blinded by her outraged father. Orion's sight was later restored but he would ultimately fall victim to yet another disgruntled family member. When Artemis, goddess of the hunt and not a bad shot herself, showed great affection for him, her jealous brother, Apollo, tricked her into killing Orion when she fired an arrow into his head, thinking that a distant object was a sea creature. Realizing her mistake, she grieved for the giant hunter and placed his image in the sky as a constellation along with his faithful dog, Sirius. One can read, comprehend, and enjoy Ted Kooser's "The Constellation Orion" without knowing any of that. But it is interesting to speculate on what subtle significance this set of stars and its mythological allusions may play in the

poem. The speaker seems to have a very pleasant relationship with Orion, noting that it's good to see the old friend "lying there in your hammock / over the next town." Although we typically visualize the constellation's form in an "upright" position, from the perspective of someone gazing through the windshield of a car at the night sky ahead, Orion may appear to be lounging on his back with an arm carelessly slung out to the side. This viewpoint gives the stars a direct connection to the child who is also "sleeping now" and who apparently had his first experience with astronomy when he was shown this very constellation at some point earlier, probably by his father. Orion was "the first person" the son "was to meet in the heavens," and the poet injects an apt simile in saying the boy's head is "like a small sun" in his lap.

We do not actually realize that this poem takes place in a car until the ninth line in which the speaker says, "Our car whizzes along in the night." The word "whizzes" is appropriate here in that it too links the man and his son on earth to events in space occurring all around them. Stars, planets, entire galaxies, and, it is now believed, entire universes also whiz along, and, with speeds incomprehensible to most, the descriptive word is as good as any.

Toward the end of the poem, the father thinks of how his son would react if he were awake and spotted the familiar constellation in the sky. The child would exclaim, "Look, Daddy, there's Old Ryan!" but he is not given the chance to see Orion tonight. For obvious reasons, a father prefers to let his child sleep when he's tired, but there is more going on in this father's mind than simply allowing the boy to rest. The last two lines tell us that the time the man has with his son is very limited and that this is a source of both sadness and pos-sessiveness on the part of the father: "He's mine for the weekend, / Old Ryan, not yours." Now we know that this is not just a casual drive back home after an outing between father and son, but rather a weekend trip to the father's house after he has retrieved his son from wherever the boy now lives, presumably with his mother. There is an understandable sense of proprietorship here as the speaker has lost the pleasure of seeing his child everyday and must resign himself to spending time with the boy only on weekends. In order to make every minute of those weekends count, the father doesn't want to share his son's attention with anyone or anything—not even the stars.

Perhaps Ted Kooser selected Orion as the constellation to appear in this poem because that's really the one he saw while driving home on a starlit night and was inspired to write about it. This is the most likely scenario, given that Kooser is known for capturing the things he actually sees, hears, and experiences and turning them into very lucid verse. We may also, however, consider the possibility that the mythological Orion is a good choice for a poem in which the speaker has apparently lost at love and is feeling exiled from those dear to him, in this case via divorce. The giant hunter of Greek legend may not have gone through any legal proceedings, but he most certainly had his share of problems with women. As well, this poem does not stand in isolation in its theme, for Kooser also wrote "At the End of the Weekend" (from *Sure Signs),* which contains the lines, "It is Sunday afternoon, / and I suddenly miss / my distant son ...," and he is the author of "The Witness" (from *One World at a Time),* which states, "The divorce judge has asked for a witness, / and you wait at the back of the courtroom / as still as a flag on

its stand." Whether the placement of Orion was by intent or by accident, the image and the allusion serve the poem well, both in literary device and in content.

"The Constellation Orion" first appeared in *Sure Signs,* Kooser's collection of new and selected poems published in 1980. It is one of several in the collection that makes reference to various types of signsastrological, street, "No Hunting," and signs from nature, such as in the title poem which tells us that "Crickets and cobwebs" are sure signs of "A long hard winter ahead." Whether Orion is intended as a "sign" of something in the poem bad relationships, heartbreak, loss, etc. is just as nebulous as its selection in the first place. We do know, however, that it has been a much studied and much romanticized constellation with many earth-sky links proposed over the years. Recent speculation even connects this group of stars to the ancient pyramids of Egypt. In *The Orion Mystery,* Robert Bauval suggests that these remarkable structures are actually mirror images of the "belt stars" of Orion and that the air shafts built into the pyramids point toward the constellation so that the soul's of the dead kings can be projected directly there!

Regardless of how much historical or astrological reference went into the making of "The Constellation Orion," Ted Kooser effected a strong and sensitive poem that makes us feel both warm and sad at once. After reaching the end, we have to question whether the speaker is really as "delighted" to see his "old friend" as he claims to be in the beginning. Second thought seems to be at work here, for "old friend" eventually becomes "Old Ryan," and delight appears to turn to jealousy and possessiveness. Throughout this poem and many others in the collection, a subtle turn of events or a striking juxtaposition of emotions keeps the poetry alive and keeps us considering underlying meanings.

Sure Signs was awarded The Society of Midland Authors Prize for the best book of poetry by a midwestern writer during 1980. While not many of the poems have been singled out for lengthy criticism, the book as a whole has met very favorably with critics nationwide. According to a World Wide Web site sponsored by the Nebraska Center for Writers, Dana Gioia, author of the controversial book *Can Poetry Matter?* had this to say about *Sure Signs:* "I found it impossible to put down until I had finished the entire book. It was like sitting next to a box of chocolates before dinner ... a collection alternately delightful and mysterious."

We cannot know whether Gioia had "The Constellation Orion" in particular in mind when he wrote this description, but we do know that this poem certainly does contain elements of both delight and mystery. And it is clearly in keeping with Kooser's knack for turning a single, simple moment into a thoughtful and provocative piece of work.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Cliff Sounders teaches writing and literature in the Myrtle Beach, South Carolina area and has published six chapbooks of verse. In the following essay, Saunders explores the symbolic nature of Orion the Hunter and how the constellation figures into the father-son relationship portrayed in the poem.

Many times over the past 15 years, I have exposed college students in my Composition and Literature classes to Ted Kooser's "The Constellation Orion," and not once has the poem failed to spark a spirited class discussion on the cost and consequences of parental separation and divorce. This is not surprising, considering that many of today's young adults have experienced firsthand the trauma of family dissolution. What is surprising about students' reactions to "The Constellation Orion" (and I've seen it time and time again) is the impassioned depth to which they respond to what is essentially an ordinary poem that captures a meaningful but not-so-rare moment between a father and estranged son he can be with only "for the weekend." The poem is unquestionably tapping into some resonant chord deep within the souls of these students and doing so in a way no essay or article on the subject has been able to touch. How can this be? How can such an unassuming and plainspoken poem have such a powerful, soul-stirring impact on young readers?

One key ingredient in the poem's success is the speaker's upbeat attitude in the face of a situation that can't help but be painful for him. Perhaps the time for recrimination and remorse has passed for this father, and by accepting the situation, he has moved beyond such negative feelings and can treasure what limited time he is allowed to spend with his son. Whatever the reason, the speaker reveals right away that he is overjoyed to be in the presence again of his son, even though his son is fast asleep in the front seat as his father "whizzes along in the night." Unable to convey this joy to his sleeping son, the speaker directs it at a human-shaped constellation in the night sky, that of Orion the Hunter. Notice how Orion, like the speaker's son, is asleep□or at least peacefully at rest□in his "hammock / over the next town." But why *this* constellation? Why Orion?

It may have something to do with the Orion legend. According to Greek myth, Orion was cast into a deep sleep by Dionysus after insulting a maiden, and he was blinded by the maiden's enraged father. Although Orion regained his eyesight by allowing the rays of the rising sun to grace his eyes, he was eventually killed by the goddess Artemis and placed in heaven as a constellation. Could Kooser have seen a little of himself in the Orion myth at the time of the poem's writing? Had he, in a sense, been cast into a "deep sleep" by the divorce from his first wife, been blinded for a time by his own rage, and at some point regained his sight by allowing the rays of the sun (son?) to "grace his eyes"? We can only speculate, but even if the myth of Orion has no direct bearing on the poem, the constellation itself does, and in a highly symbolic way.

From the poem, the reader can infer that the speaker and his son have talked previously about Orion, one of the brightest and most visible constellations in the night sky. One can imagine a happier time when Kooser, who has touched on things celestial elsewhere in his poetry, may have taken his son out to the backyard and pointed him in the direction of some of the night sky's high points, with Orion surely being one of them. That night□ or a later one, perhaps□Kooser's son may have first spoken aloud his endearing mispronunciation of the constellation's name ("Old Ryan," which, when you think about it, sounds like just the name a Midwestern family would give their pet hound□ "Ol' Ryan! Come here, boy!"), thus creating a private family joke that Kooser puts to memorable effect in his poem. Clearly, therefore, the constellation serves as a

touchstone for the two, an icon of a time when Kooser and son enjoyed a special bond that seemed eternal and inviolable. Later, of course, this special bond would be torn asunder by the divorce, but whenever father and son were allowed to see each other, Orion could, on certain nights, remind them of what they once had and what they could still have, if only for a day or two.

The poem sets up a fascinating dichotomy between the eternal (as represented by Orion) and the temporal (as represented by the father and his sleeping son speeding together down a highway in the night). At times of great pain (as would be the case when a beloved son is taken away from a father), a person often looks to the heavens for guidance. Great comfort can be found there when life on earth and its personal "injustices" become too unbearable to face. Kooser may have felt this way at the time of the poem's genesis, and so Orion gives him no small measure of solace. Kooser even calls him "old friend," and perhaps that is what Orion truly is to him: a reliable friend with whom he can commiserate at a time of personal turmoil in his life. Orion, moreover, likely represents stability to Kooser; after all, the constellation is a fixture in the night sky□an emblem of permanence, so to speak□and Kooser may have been in great need of this reminder at a time when much else in his life that he had considered "permanent" (i.e., his marriage, his family, a stable domestic life) seemed anything but lasting.

Orion may indeed be an "old friend" of sorts for the poem's speaker, but the constellation, as Kooser points out in the poem's final two lines ("He's mine for the weekend, / Old Ryan, not yours"), constitutes a threat as well. On one level, Kooser may be merely expressing some well-deserved selfishness in those lines, given that he can have his son only "for the weekend" and is on guard against anything that might intrude and divert his son's attention from "Daddy." Of course, in such a situation, every moment spent with an estranged son would seem fleeting and precious. There may be more to the story, however. What if the speaker's ex-wife has remarried or is seeing another man?

What if the speaker is engaged with another man in a battle for the boy's affections? Certainly not an uncommon scenario in this day and age. And though Orion would certainly be innocent of any charge of undue influence, the constellation is nevertheless a representational *male* figure and thus could be construed, in the eyes of a jealous father, as a competitor for the boy's affections and need for a mentor. Logic, of course, would dictate that Orion poses no direct threat to Kooser in this regard, but oftentimes in such situations, men are anything *but* logical. In fact, a loss of control over family can lead men to perform some desperate acts. The poem's speaker does not appear to be such a man, since he acknowledges that he will have to surrender his son at the end of the weekend, but the situation portrayed in the poem serves as a reminder of how fragile the human condition is.

Indeed, it could be argued that this fragility extends even beyond the confines of a tenuous father-son relationship, though this argument would be difficult to prove because of a certain ambiguity within the poem. I call your attention to lines 5 and 6: "You were the first person / my son was to meet in the heavens." These two lines are the only ambiguous ones in the entire poem, and although it is impossible to know for

certain what Kooser means by them, they could refer to the possibility that the boy was gravely ill at one time and may have come close to dying. If Kooser had said "You were the first person / my son ever saw in the heavens," I would dismiss this interpretation outright, but by saying "were to meet" rather than "ever saw," he may be implying that there was a time when his son could have met Orion on his way to heaven. Seen in this light, no wonder Kooser seems so protective of his son in the poem, for perhaps the possibility once arose that his son might have been whisked away from him in a more permanent sense. And nothing, of course, makes life seem more fragile than the spectre of death hovering nearby.

Then again, perhaps I am reading too much into this ambiguity, for the poem seems to end on a more joyous note (though the joy looks to be temporary) than a despairing one. Kooser may only be suggesting that in the grand scheme of things (as represented by Orion), all we humans truly have are a few precious moments together as we whiz along in the great darkness that surrounds us. Perhaps Kooser sees Orion not as a threat but as a cosmic mirror image of himself. Perhaps, like the small "sun" Kooser has in his lap, Orion has a much bigger sun in his own lap as he relaxes in his giant hammock in the sky, and if Orion can have his own sun, why can't Kooser have his?

Source: Cliff Saunders, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Chris Semansky's most recent collection of poems, Blindsided, *has been published by 26 Books of Portland, Oregon and nominated for an Oregon book award. In the following essay Semansky examines Ted Kooser's poem "The Constellation Orion" in light of his ideas on truth-telling and poetry.*

"The Constellation Orion" is a typical Ted Kooser poem. Not only because it is short and accessible to the unschooled reader of modern or contemporary poetry, but because it embodies Kooser's idea of truth-telling in poems. Kooser was born in Iowa and has lived in Iowa and Nebraska for his entire life. His poems exhibit what we might expect of a (stereotypical) Midwestern sensibility: they are direct, descriptive, and very often, literal.

In "Lying for the Sake of Making Poems," an essay which appeared in *Prairie Schooner,* Kooser outlines his ideas on truth-telling and poetry. Admitting that he may be"hopelessly old-fashioned," Kooser says that he "grew up believing a lyric poet was a person who wrote down his or her observations." After detailing obvious exceptions to the use of the "I" which might twist the truth in the name of imagination (e.g. persona poems), Kooser bemoans what he considers to be the increasing deception in contemporary poetry by poets who do not tell the literal truth about their lives. Since he never names such poets, readers are left to wonder about whom he is writing. At the root of Kooser's lament is his suspicion that "lying" in contemporary poetry might be tied to the proliferation of academic poets (Kooser himself made his living as an insurance executive) who need to publish in order to advance their careers, and who spice up their lyric poems with racy or provocative events or descriptions which have no basis in reality. Or worse, Kooser writes, this propensity for "lying" in contemporary poetry might be "indicative of some bigger ethical or moral problem."

Kooser's attitude towards what he believes lyric poetry's function should be is rooted in assumptions about language and experience which themselves have changed considerably in the last century. Kooser assumes that language itself is a transparent medium through which experience can be accurately described, whereas much recent critical theory (in which many practicing contemporary poets have been steeped) shuns such an equation. Twentieth-century theories of language and literature from the New Criticism to poststruc-turalism do not posit a necessary relationship between the "I" of a poem (or a story or an essay or any other collection of words) and its writer's literal experience. The words themselves carry a kind of subjectivity quite apart from the writer. Indeed, the intentionality of the writer is rarely a question for those who read without the expectations Kooser brings to a poem. In "The Anonymity of the Regional Poet" poet and critic Dana Gioia claims that Kooser's poetry has attracted so little critical attention because his work is *so simple.* "Critics," Gioia says, "who have been trained to celebrate complexity, consider him an amiable simpleton." I certainly have not made this judgement, but I admit it is difficult to say much about Kooser's poetry. Even Gioia, whose essay is ostensibly a critical appraisal of Kooser's work, has little of substance to say about it, apart from repeating the obvious. An examination of a typical

Kooser poem underscores this point. "The Constellation Orion" appears in *Sure Signs: New and Selected Poems,* published by the University ofPittsburgh Press:

I'm delighted to see you,

old friend,

lying there in your hammock

over the next town.

You were the first person

my son was to meet in the heavens.

He's sleeping now,

his head like a small sun in my lap.

Our car whizzes along in the night.

If he were awake, he'd say,

"Look, Daddy, there's Old Ryan!"

but I won't wake him.

He's mine for the weekend,

Old Ryan, not yours.

What's to know here? This poem, a straightforward and simple anecdote about an experience the speaker had with his son, leaves little to the imagination. Consisting of figurative language which is unsurprising at best, the "point" of the poem turns on the son's mispronunciation, or at least what the father imagines his mispronunciation would be were he awake, and allows the speaker to express his love for his son. The poem is cute, almost goofily sentimental, but what more can be said about it? A phone call to the poet unearthed that his son's name is Jeffrey Charles, his only child, who was about three years old when the poem was written in 1970. The poet, who is one and the same with the speaker, had just picked him up from his ex-wife (as we might infer from the fact that the father has him for the weekend) and was taking him home for the weekend; the two of them made regular road trips between Nebraska and Iowa. He was not aware that stars and starlight appear regularly in his poems. It was just as I had feared: the poem was a literal transcription of an experience of the poet. Transcribing personal experience is a staple for confessional poets, but often the experience transcribed has some inherent interest—especially with poets such as Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath—or the language used is interesting or provocative, but with Kooser's poetry it is just the opposite. Many of his poems deal with subject matter so mundane, they almost dare the

reader to care, or to continue reading. That they are so brief, rarely more than thirty short lines, makes that task easier. Indeed, Kooser's allusion to the name of a constellation is rare for his poetry, as that might require the reader to refer to a source outside the poem for information.

Gioia describes Kooser as a "popular" poet, meaning that one does not need a graduate degree in modern poetry or linguistics to understand him. His "popular-arity" carries with it a regional quality as well. Gioia points out that although "His language, imagery, ideas, attitudes, even his characteristic range of emotion reflect the landscapes, climate, and culture in which he has spent his entire life .... In hundreds of precise vignettes Kooser has created a poignant mosaic ... no less relevant to Abidjan or Osaka than to Omaha or Des Moines." The fact is he has not. The slightness of Kooser's poems, and the fact that his vignettes often amount to little more than coffee house observations demean the very idea of the popular, which rests on more than simply the idea of accessibility. Perhaps Kooser and Gioia misjudge Kooser's readers because it is so hard to know who they are. Contemporary poetry has very few readers outside of the academy itself, and most of the much-celebrated poetry comes from those who publish with university presses, most of whom are academics. Kooser, however, conceives of his audience as those very people he writes about□farmers, barbers, old soldiers, salesmen, businessmen□rather than academics. It would be interesting to know if such an audience actually exists. My instincts tell me no. For such an audience, "unschooled" in reading poetry, a question like "Did this really happen to you?" is important. But for Kooser's actual audience, graduate students, other poets, academics, the people who actually read the literary journals and university presses in which Kooser publishes, this question, for the most part, is moot. When Kooser says "It is despicable to exploit the trust a reader has in the truth of lyric poetry in order to gather undeserved sympathy to one's self," he is addressing the audience he imagines reads his poems, or whom he wants to read his poems, not the actual audience. In lyric poetry especially, contemporary readers look for a truth beyond mere literal description; they look for emotional truths, whose vehicle may or may not be the literal experience of the writer. At root, Ted Kooser's idea about truth telling in lyric poetry says more about his identity as a regional Midwestern poet than anything else. What it says, however, is not good, for it merely reinforces stereotypes about the Midwest and Midwesterners that do not need to be reinforced.

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

Adaptations

TheNebraska Center for Writers has an informational website on Ted Kooser and his poetry: http://mockingbird.creighton.edu/NCW/kooser .htm

For a real-time look at Orion and other constellations on the World Wide Web, visit the following site: http://math1.uibk.ac.at/~werner/ light/stars/orion.html

Visit the following website which satirizes the use of malapropisms: http://www.execpc.com/ %7Ejab2/MainPage.htm

This World Wide Web site provides useful information on the myths behind the names of the constellations:http://www.dibonsmith.com/stars .htm

An online message board designed to help single fathers with day-to-day issues of child rearing can be accessed at http://www.angelfire .com/ks/singlefather/

The Fathering Magazine contains many useful articles on single fathers and the joys (and pitfalls) of fathering, http://www.fathermag.com/ SingleFather. shtml

Topics for Further Study

Research the Greek myths behind at least three other constellations and then construct an outline or a chart detailing the relationships among the characters in those myths. Now write a short essay explaining those relationships.

Write an essay comparing and contrasting how Kooser represents Orion and how Adrienne Rich represents Orion in her poem, "Orion."

Probe your earliest memories of how the stars were explained to you, by adults or other children, and write a narrative account of those memories.

Compare and Contrast

1971: Henry Kissinger secretly visits China to arrange visit for President Nixon, marking the beginning of an era of detente between the two countries. China is admitted into the United Nations.

Today: Although tensions remain, diplomatic relations between China and the United States have been largely normalized, and it appears likely that China will gain entry into the World Trade Organization.

1971: U.S. Apollo 14 and 15 crews become the third and fourth groups to explore the moon's surface. In the same year three Russian cosmonauts die when their Soyuz 11 capsule develops an air leak when reentering the earth's atmosphere.

1971: American astronomers discover two "new" galaxies adjacent to the earth's own galaxy, the Milky Way.

1972: The crew of Apollo 17 spends a record 75 hours on the moon's surface.

1998: The Lunar Prospector is launched. This is the first time in 25 years that NASA sent a probe to the Moon.

Today: The Mir Space Station floats above the earth, having completed to date over 77,300 trips around the Earth. In its thirteen years in orbit, cosmonauts and astronauts from dozens of nations have lived on the station and performed experiments of historical significance.

1971: Legalized off track betting is introduced in New York.

Today: The institution of gambling has become naturalized and legal in most states. Casinos, state-sponsored lotteries, video poker, and horse and dog track betting generate large sums of revenue for states.

What Do I Read Next?

Sandhills Press has put out a collection of essays on Nebraskan poets called *On Common Ground: The Poetry of William Kloefkorn, Ted Kooser, Greg Kuzma, and Don Welch,* which offers background and critical insight into a group of neglected writers.

Dana Gioia's *Can Poetry Matter?* is a collection of essays which offers critiques on the state of contemporary poetry in America as well as reviews of some modern poets such as Weldon Kees, Robinson Jeffers, and Ted Kooser. This is an uneven collection, but the title essay is well worth reading, as it tackles issues immediately relevant to today's poetry, as well as poetry of the past. Gioia's essay on Kooser is the most substantive evaluation of Kooser's work to date.

The Poetry of Business Life: An Anthology, contains poetry from seventy poets who also work in the business world. Poems by writers such as James Autry, Harry Newman, and Dana Gioia, are included, as well as work by Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Kipling.

Robert Graves's often reprinted *GreekMyths*remains the classic text for those wanting to learn more about the lives of the Olympian Gods. Graves's modern retelling of Greek myths and heroes is both scholarly and accessible.

Further Study

Bauval, Robert, *The Orion Mystery: Unlocking the Secrets*

of the Pyramids, New York: Crown, 1994.

This archaeological detective story argues that the great pyramids of Egypt's Fourth Dynasty (c. 2600-2400 b.c.) were vast astronomically sophisticated temples. Using astronomical data about stellar movement, the book argues that the Orion stars coincide exactly with the pyramids' positions in approximately 10,400 b.c.—a period the Egyptians called the First Time, when they believed the god Osiris ruled the Earth.

Kooser, Ted, *Sure Signs: New and Selected Poems,* Pittsburgh: University ofPittsburgh Press, 1980.

This collection includes "The Constellation Orion" and poems from a number of other Kooser titles, many of them out of print. Readers will get a full sense of Kooser's range from this collection.

Kooser, Ted, "Lying for the Sake of Making Poems," in *Prairie Schooner,* Vol. 72, No. 1, spring 1998, p. 5. This is a valuable essay for understanding how Kooser conceptualizes the writing of his poems. He discusses lyric poetry and what his own expectations for it are, as well as what he believes readers expect from it.

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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

BOOKRAGS

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 unnamedfor 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.

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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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