The Continuous Life Study Guide

The Continuous Life by Mark Strand

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Contents

Introduction

Mark Strand's poem "The Continuous Life" originally appeared in *The New Yorker* and is the title poem of his 1990 poetry collection by the same name. The volume contains poems written between 1980 and 1990, some humorous, some serious, some whose tone is in between. Critics have called "The Continuous Life" a perfect poem, and other readers seem to agree. New York City, for example, thought so highly of the poem they had it inscribed on a park bench in Hudson River Park. Appearing roughly in the middle of the collection, sandwiched between "Life in the Valley" and "From a Lost Diary," the poem resonates with images of absence and death, Strand's trademark subjects.

The poem's speaker addresses parents, offering them advice on what to tell their children to expect from life, and he implicitly addresses himself as well. In twenty-eight lines, Strand plumbs the human consciousness, alluding to the bustle of perceptions, thoughts, and behavior that make up a person's life. The speaker is as intrigued by the chaos and emptiness of human life as he is by the ways that human beings stave them off, finding meaning in the mundane and strength in love. Though the language in "The Continuous Life," like that in most of his poems, is abstract, the poem is relatively accessible, even for readers unfamiliar with Strand's work.

Author Biography

Mark Strand has developed a reputation as a poet of absence and darkness, whose verse attempts to articulate the uncertainties of human existence. Born in 1934 in Summerside on Prince Edward Island, Canada, to salesman Robert Joseph and Sonia (Apter) Strand, Strand was raised in cities throughout the United States because of his father's work. Although his childhood ambition was to paint, he found himself writing poems while attending Antioch College, encouraged by author Nolan Miller who was his teacher. Strand received his bachelor of arts degree in 1957 and subsequently took a bachelor of fine arts degree in painting from Yale in 1959 and a master's degree from the University of Iowa in 1962.

In 1964, Strand published his first collection of poems, *Sleeping with One Eye Open*, which introduced the eerie, disembodied voice that would become his signature style. Although critics sometimes categorized his work with that of neosurrealists and deep imagists, Strand's poetry stood out for its sparseness and its obsession with death, otherness, and negation. One of his poems from that collection, "Keeping Things Whole," remains a favorite of anthologists and is often cited by critics to illustrate Strand's poetics of absence. Strand's subsequent volumes, such as *Reasons for Moving* (1968), *Darker* (1970), *The Story of Our Lives* (1973), *The Late Hour* (1978), and *Selected Poems* (1980), solidified his reputation as one of America's leading poets and won him admirers, including influential critics such as Harold Bloom. In 1990, when Strand published *The Continuous Life*□ whose title poem remains one of the strongest Strand has ever written□he was named Poet Laureate of the United States.

In addition to writing poems, Strand has written children's books, story collections, and art criticism and has edited and translated numerous other books. Some of these include the children's book *The Planet of Lost Things* (1982); an examination of American painter Edward Hopper's art, *Hopper* (1994); a short story collection, *Mr. and Mrs. Baby* (1985); and, a translation of Rafael Alberti's poems, *The Owl's Insomnia* (1973). Strand's recent work includes a poetry collection, *Blizzard of One: Poems* (1998), which received the Pulitzer Prize, and an anthology that he co-edited with Eavan Boland, *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* (2000). He has also published a well-received collection of essays on poetry, *The Weather of Words* (2000). Strand's awards include a Fulbright scholarship, an Ingram Merrill Foundation grant, three National Endowment for the Arts grants, a Rockefeller Foundation grant, a Guggenheim fellowship, and a MacArthur Foundation fellowship. A former Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets, Strand currently teaches at the University of Chicago.

Poem Text

What of the neighborhood homes awash
In a silver light, of children hunched in the bushes,
Watching the grown-ups for signs of surrender,
Signs that the irregular pleasures of moving
From day to day, of being adrift on the swell of duty,
Have run their course? Oh parents, confess
To your little ones the night is a long way off
And your taste for the mundane grows, tell them
Your worship of household chores has barely
begun;
Describe the beauty of shovels and rakes, brooms
and mops;
Say there will always be cooking and cleaning to do,
That one thing leads to another, which leads to
another;
Explain that you live between two great darks, the
first
With an ending, the second without one, that the
luckiest
Thing is having been born, that you live in a blur
Of hours and days, months and years, and believe
It has meaning, despite the occasional fear
You are slipping away with nothing completed,
nothing
To prove you existed. Tell the children to come
inside,
hat your search goes on for something you lost□
a name,
A family album that fell from its own small matter
Into another, a piece of the dark that might have
been yours,
You don't really know. Say that each of you tries
To keep busy, learning to lean down close and hear
The careless breathing of earth and feel its
available
Languor come over you, wave after wave, sending
Small tremors of love through your brief,
Undeniable selves, into your days, and beyond.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-5

The first five and a half lines of "The Continuous Life" consist of a rhetorical question. Rhetorical questions do not require answers. Rather, writers use them for special effect, often when they want to convince someone of a truth without making an argument. In these lines, Strand describes a relationship between parents and children in which the children look for signs that their parents have grown tired of their child-rearing obligations. He asks the question only so that he may answer it. The images of "children hunched in bushes" and "neighborhood homes" are general enough to apply to a wide range of people, places, and times. Likewise, figuring parenting obligations as "the swell of duty" allows Strand to steer clear of depicting his characters in any realistic manner, which he might do if providing examples of these duties. They are types, which means that Strand uses them to represent all parents and all children. The phrase "being adrift on a swell of duty" is an implicit metaphor in which the speaker uses imagery associated with water to describe how parents feel about their responsibilities to their children.

Lines 6-9

The poem's narrator has access to both the thoughts of the children and the parents, and he speaks from a place seemingly outside history. In these lines, he answers his own question about how parents should respond to their children, who are watching them grow old and tired. By exhorting them to "confess," he suggests that they have been less than honest or forthcoming with them so far. "Night" refers to death, and the speaker advises parents to reassure their children that they have plenty of life left in them, that they love doing "household chores."

Lines 10-14

In these lines, the speaker urges parents to "describe" the meaning that can be found in everyday work tools such as "shovels and rakes" and the events that constitute daily life such as "cooking and cleaning." There is no end to these things, the speaker suggests. Life is a series of such events, most of them small and seemingly insignificant. The narrator tells parents to "explain" life and death to their children, calling them "two great darks, the first / With an ending, the second without one."

Lines 15-18

The tone of the poem, already mixed, becomes more complicated. In these lines, the speaker proffers the upbeat observation, "The luckiest / Thing is having been born," but follows it with the recognition that "you live in a blur." He encourages parents to tell their

children that it is important to believe that this "blur" has meaning, in the face of feelings and evidence to the contrary.

Lines 19-22

In these lines, the speaker makes another command: "Tell the children to come inside." This marks the end of playtime for the children and the end of the workday for adults. The speaker insists that parents now admit to their children their own uncertainty about life, their own attempts at un- derstanding their existence. Searching for a name or "a family album" mark attempts to understand one's self in relation to others. By telling children that such a search is a lifelong activity, parents highlight the idea that life is a journey, and that the "getting there" is merely an illusion that keeps one trying.

Lines 23-28

In these lines, the speaker finally urges parents to admit that, in the end, they know nothing. He makes virtues out of "business" and "languor," investing them with the power to create "small tremors of love." As in many of his poems, Strand presents the idea that human beings have multiple selves, both across time (e.g., as a child, a parent, a grandparent, etc.), and in the present. This poem encourages parents to share with their children that fact, as well as the fact that, as they grow older, they too will experience the fears, anxieties, and desires that come with change.

Themes

Family

In "The Continuous Life," Strand seems to suggest that the idea of the nuclear family, in which each member has a specific role to play to support the unit and keep it intact, is rooted in fear, distrust, and dishonesty. In the opening lines, the speaker describes children waiting for their parents to give up, exhausted from their daily domestic duties. He presents parents as being beaten down and defeated, who have to force themselves to believe things about their lives and their futures merely to keep going. He also describes the relationship between the two as beset by miscommunication and concealment of information about how to survive in the world. In much of his poetry, Strand has sought to dismantle the myth of the family and to expose its more sinister qualities. Influenced by the writings of R. D. Laing, poems such as "The Dreadful Has Already Happened" and "My Life" show how the family acts to sap the life force from children, forcing them to conform to parental expectations. The children, in turn, become parents, who perpetuate the same acts on their offspring.

Death

Death is everywhere in "The Continuous Life," underwriting the claims the speaker makes about life. It is variously referred to as "the night" or one of "two great darks." Like Wallace Stevens, who wrote in his poem "Sunday Morning," "Death is the mother of beauty," Strand uses the idea of death as a way to talk about how to live in its presence. He finds beauty in the ordinary such as "shovels and rakes, brooms and mops," and advocates keeping busy and living close to the earth as ways to respond to the inevitability of death.

Meaning of Life

The advent of evolutionary theory and other scientific discoveries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, coupled with a waning belief in a benevolent God, forced many human beings to search elsewhere for the meaning of their lives. Strand's poem locates that meaning in the very search itself and in the small victories one can glean from the often deadening obligations of daily life, and the awareness that a coherent, stable individual identity is a fiction. These victories are embodied in the "small tremors of love" the speaker names in the last lines of the poem that shoot through "your brief / "Undeniable selves, into your days, and beyond." Since the nature of these "tremors" is never specified, readers can see them in whatever way their imaginations consider fit.

Style

Didactic Structure

"The Continuous Life" is a didactic poem. Didactic poems seek to teach the reader about a subject through explanation and examples. Examples of didactic poetry include Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Parson's Tale" and Alexander Pope's "Essay on Criticism." The purpose of Strand's poem is to teach parents how to interact with their children. The assumption behind the poem is that parents do not tell their children what life is really like. They ignore difficult to explain ideas such as the quest for meaning, the chaos of daily life, the doubts and fears that hound one's actions, and death because they are unsure of themselves and how to proceed. The speaker's tone is encouraging but urgent, underscoring the point that death can come any moment.

Imagery

Imagery refers to the language writers use to convey a picture or relay an experience. Strand uses both concrete and abstract imagery in his poem. Often his concrete images are illustrations of a generalization. For example, as illustrations of "household chores," an abstraction, he offers, "the beauty of shovels, rakes, brooms, and mops," concrete images. These images are also metonymic. Metonyms are a figure of speech in which one thing is represented by another with which it is conventionally associated. Household chores, in this case, are closely associated with the above items.

Speaker

The speaker of a poem is not the same as its author, but is the voice narrating the poem. The speaker is closely tied to the poem's point of view. Strand uses a third-person omniscient point of view, which means his speaker has access to the thoughts and desires of the characters in his poem, the parents and the children. In his stance towards his subject and his mode of address, the speaker can be described as detached, witty, weary, and confident.

Historical Context

In 1990, when *The Continuous Life* was published, George Bush Sr. was midway through his presidency. His son, George Bush Jr., would be elected president in 2001, providing continuity after an interruption of eight years for the Bush family. The 1990s, however, are perhaps best known for their contribution to smoothing over communicative discontinuity, as millions of people worldwide began using the Internet as their primary means of exchanging information. "Born" in 1990, the World Wide Web revolutionized communication and business, enabling people to e-mail one another rather than telephone or write letters. In 1994, three million people had online accounts and, by 1998, more than 100 million users were online. Recent estimates put current usership of the Internet at more than a half billion, with the United States accounting for almost 40 percent of those. Many of these users bought and sold stock via online brokers during the economic boom of the 1990s, amassing great wealth. By the end of the decade, the Dow Jones index topped 10,000 for the first time and the NASDAQ topped 5,000, and unemployment dipped as low as 4 percent. Supporters of free trade argued that the passage in 1994 of the North American Free Trade Agreement played a large part in America's booming economy, as it eliminated barriers to trade between neighboring countries, particularly Mexico and Canada.

To protect Americans' standard of living and its own geopolitical interests, the United States government sent troops into war-ravaged parts of the globe throughout the decade. In 1990, America came to Kuwait's defense after Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces invaded that country. Casualties from the war include between 20,000-100,000 Iraqis dead and more than 200 Americans. America's victory in the Gulf War assured it that the steady flow of oil it was accustomed to would continue. The Untied States continued to intervene in foreign conflicts, in 1992 sending marines to Somalia, an African country torn apart by a civil war. They failed in their mission to capture Mohammad Farah Aidid, a Somali warlord who had taken control of the country, losing a few dozen soldiers in the process. In 1994, some 20,000 American troops were deployed to Haiti to help reinstall President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who won Haiti's first free presidential elections on December 16, 1990, but was ousted in a military coup the next year. The mission was successful and Aristide returned to Haiti in 1994. In the second half of the decade, tens of thousands of American troops participated in a NATO-led peacekeeping force in Bosnia, attempting to stop Serbian atrocities against Muslims in Kosovo.

While the United States was attempting to save lives overseas, domestically, American life expectancy continued to increase during the 1990s. The life span for Americans in 1997 was 73.6 for men, and 79.4 for women, up from 66.9 for men and 77.6 for women during the 1980s. Auto accidents helped cut short the lives of many Americans, as more than 49,772 died as a result of them in 1997.

Critical Overview

By 1990, Strand had established a reputation as one of America's preeminent poets. A review of *The Continuous Life* in *People Weekly*, a magazine not known for its poetry reviews, says about Strand's collection: "His melancholy evocations of the landscape are joined here by hilarious mini-narratives, reflections on mortality" and on "the small tremors of love that resonate beyond death." Writing for *Raritan*, Charles Berger praises the volume, noting, "The title poem of the volume gives the most vivid picture of the sublime familiarized into 'a worship of household chores.'" Berger describes Strand's lifelong project of charting the infinitesimal and nuanced shifts of the self, noting that the poem marks an attempt of a later self to make sense of an earlier one. Berger writes: "Hanging over the poem is the question of whether the *continuous life* is also the *completed life*, or merely the life built up from fallen time, the hours and days, the months and years." Sven Birkerts compares Strand's darkness to that of Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka, noting those writers' fascination with the void. Birkerts says that although many of the poems in the collection "fall flat," there are a few that make reading it worthwhile. Of the poems, he writes: "While the void has by no means receded or become less void-like, the poet's own angle of regard seems to have altered." In an interview with Grace Cavalieri appearing in *American Poetry Review*, Strand says about "The Continuous Life": "I like it because it seems so normal and so accessible. My guess is that people wouldn't have much difficulty in understanding what's going on in this poem."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of literature whose writing appears regularly in literary journals. In this essay, Semansky explores ideas of continuity and life in Strand's poem.

As an allegory of sorts for the story of human existence, Strand's poem "The Continuous Life" asks readers to rethink their notions of both continuity and life. These are familiar subjects for Strand, which he has addressed in numerous poems including the title poem from his 1973 collection, *The Story of Our Lives*.

An allegory is an extended metaphor in which a series of actions or images stands in for other actions and things. Using a series of symbolic images and abstract statements, Strand's poem seeks to describe the nuances of how a human being experiences being alive. In this sense, his poem universalizes experience but because the descriptions are so general, many readers can see the shape of their own lives in Strand's depictions. That "shape" is informed by the idea of continuity, the notion of how someone retains a sense of him- or herself over time. Conventional, humanistic notions of selfhood most often describe identity as unified and coherent. People know who they are even outside of the material circumstances in which they live. They have an essence, a core to their being that remains the same through time. Strand's poem challenges this idea, suggesting that human identity is a fragile thing, discontinuous, and not at all the anchor of meaning it has been made out to be. In this way, the title of the poem is ironic.

The continuity depicted in the poem is associated with the sense that death is just around the corner. It is this awareness, rather than any feature of personality or uniqueness, the poem suggests, that marks human consciousness. In urging parents to share this awareness with their children, the narrator represents the "awareness" as a potentially damaging secret that mothers and fathers are nonetheless obligated to impart. Death is indispensable to understanding life, the speaker implies. To avoid acknowledging that is to shirk one's duty. He exhorts parents to "Say there will always be cooking and cleaning to do, / That one thing leads to another, which leads to another." Time's relentlessness is indistinguishable from the sense of existence, of being. Holding things together becomes the primary purpose of human activity. Strand's representation of how people experience their being evokes German philosopher Martin Heidegger's concept of *dasein*, or "being-in-the-world," which claims that people understand their existence in relation to how they perceive the actions and things of their everyday lives. This is the same ground of understanding that Strand's narrator speaks from when he urges parents to tell their kids, "[Their] worship of household chores has barely begun." It is the daily repetition of these chores that provides the glue for selfhood, that enables one to cultivate a sense of continuity. It is also the familiarity and security of these activities that enable human beings to continue living with the knowledge that they will die.

Strand's depiction of human life, like Heidegger's, is deeply existential. More of an attitude towards existence than a detailed philosophy, existentialism's primary tenet is that existence precedes essence. This means that one's physical being comes before

any development of self. Truth is not something already there to be discovered, but rather something that is constructed through a process. Other attitudes and ideas associated with existentialism include acute anxiety and dread, and a sense of absurdity towards one's existence. Both of these are responses to the belief that, at root, human life is meaningless.

In "The Story of Our Lives," Strand uses the metaphor of the book to describe the contours of human experience, drawing the reader and another self he addresses into a self-reflexive narrative. Though the speaker fights to get outside of his story, he cannot, as it anticipates his every action, his every desire. The book has the last words in the poem, describing the speaker and his double:

Whatever it was they would accept it.
The book would have to be written
and would have to be read.
They are the book and they are nothing else.

This kind of bleakness also informs "The Continuous Life," where the claustrophobia of self so prevalent in Strand's other representations of being is extended to include the idea of others. The only comfort, the only "salvation" from selfconsciousness and the idea that life is meaningless, is to acknowledge one's fears, to hand them down to others. Thus, the poem also explores the idea of inheritance, the duty one generation has to the next. In this way, Strand also plays with the idea that parents achieve "immortality" through their children. Children offer parents a sense of the continuity of their own lives and in telling parents to share the dark truths about life with them, the speaker highlights his own need for continuity. The speaker is a kind of parent addressing other parents, but one who also addresses the parent in himself. This is a familiar strategy of Strand's, who writes more poems to "you" perhaps than any American poet. When he writes, "You are slipping away with nothing completed, nothing / To prove you existed," the speaker addresses his own fears as much as the fears of others whose behavior he would change. The "you" in the following lines is not each parent.

Say that each of you tries
To keep busy, learning to lean down close and hear
The careless breathing of earth.

The "you" is the speaker, addressing his various selves. The audience for the poem, then, ostensibly parents, is a fiction, a rhetorical device the author uses to present his description of the human condition. Audiences, however, are always a fiction, as they represent an *image* the writer has about his or her prospective readers, rather than any group of real bodies out there.

The relationship between image and idea helps to structure the poem. Abstract words and phrases such as "surrender," "Adrift," "live in a blur," "slipping away," "something you lost," and "You don't really know" all highlight the uncertainty and unpredictability of human life. They are effects of living with the knowledge of the void, and they describe

the instability of a world in which change and death are the only certainties. However, there are stays against the confusion, ways to fill up the nothingness, to give it meaning, even if that meaning is temporal. Strand does this by peppering the poem with concrete images such as "bushes," "shovels and rakes, brooms and mops." These things of the physical world provide a measurable way to index one's place in the world, to locate the self in the blur of time. It is not a coincidence that the only end-stop lines in the poem come when the speaker describes these things. The rest of the poem consists of run-on lines, emphasizing the persistence of human consciousness, the continuing and unremitting activity of the brain.

What is unusual about "The Continuous Life," when compared with Strand's other poems, is that, despite its bleakness, it ends with a kind of hope. By surrendering to what is and accepting the inevitable chaos, change, and death that comes with being alive, the speaker suggests that one can cultivate "small tremors of love" that extend "into your days, and beyond." This love comes not despite the fact that human beings will die but because of it. It is the finality of death, the certainty that all of the "undeniable selves" that inhabit each person will end, that enables the recognition of beauty and gives birth to love.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "The Continuous Life," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Bradish and Sutro discuss the "haunting and surreal" tones of Strand's poetry, noting that his The Continuous Life *is a collection "depopulated and prone to extinctions, untellings, and an ongoingness rooted in vacancy."*

Mark Strand is one of the finest, most controlled of lyric poets, his poems written with an impeccable and seemingly effortless technique. They are fascinating not only as superbly finished poetry but also for the artistic strategies they employ and, despite his own completely distinct voice, for the other writers and artists they do not echo but evoke. The quintessential Strand can be found in the concluding part of "Seven Poems," from *Darker*.

I have a key
so I open the door and walk in.
It is dark and I walk in.
It is darker and I walk in.

Spare and windblown, these lines are stripped of everything nonessential. The utter simplicity of action and language, the repetitions, the subtle alternations in sentence structure (especially the shift to the comparative "darker"), and the placings of the "I" work to wondrous and mysterious effect. The voice is unmistakably Strand, yet the repetitions, the simple denotative words tricked into unexpected connotations, and the darkness are reminiscent of Samuel Beckett.

The four lines are also a touchstone for other important aspects of Strand's poetry. The symmetry of the last two lines shows an exquisite sense of balance, and precarious balances between dichotomies, opposites, and contradictions□such as absence/presence, dark/light, life/death, night/day, indoor/outdoor□are basic to his technique. The contraries, like the vocabulary, are simple, but they are artfully arranged, rearranged, and varied to create patterns of meaning and complication. An example central to man and artist is "I empty myself of my life and my remains" ("The Remains," from *Darker*). Since the romantic beguilement with it, the subject-object dichotomy has provided the magic caesura that allows such contraries to merge or reverse themselves, and across that same caesura is the work of Beckett and Harold Pinter also written and "reality," as in Strand, so brilliantly undermined.

This undermined or transformation of the landscape of reality is accomplished as well by the suppression, implicit in lyric poetry, of narrative fact and dramatic situation. The entire volume of Strand's *The Story of Our Lives*, with its deliberate allusion to storytelling, makes use of this method. Like Beckett, a virtuoso with endings and beginnings, and Pinter, who tells *Betrayal* backward, Strand manipulates narrative time and the sequence of events and deliberately excludes needed information. In *The Story of Our Lives* Strand begins with "Elegy for My Father," the end of one of the stories, moves to a poem called "To Begin," and ends the final poem, "The Untelling," with the line "He sat and began to write."

The telling, not telling, or retelling of stories is explored extensively in this volume. The "Elegy for My Father," with its ambiguous and intensifying refrain, "Nothing could stop you," is one kind of story. "To Begin" recounts the true beginning, the struggle to write. "The Room" is an ambiguous dramatic situation that recalls in its oblique angle of vision Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* and his screenplay for Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad*. The surface story is presented and dismissed in the poem "The Story of Our Lives," which is followed by "Inside the Story." The climax of the volume comes with the brilliant construction and deconstruction of a narrative in "The Untelling." Here an account of a memory is told four times. Each time its telling is not right, and at the close of the poem the fifth attempt is about to commence. The story in its four variations is haunting and surreal, as these lines suggest:

Although I have tried to return, I have always
ended here, where am I now. The lake
still exists, and so does the lawn, though the people
who slept there that afternoon have not been seen
since.

Many parallels come to mind. Among them are the strangely shifting landscapes of Georges Seurat, the novels of John Hawkes, the theater work of Robert Wilson, and Pinter's screenplay for *The Go- Between*. Strand, who once studied to be a painter, has also written about Edward Hopper in an essay title "Hopper: The Loneliness Factor," in which he argues that several of Hopper's paintings are constructed around the dominant shape of a "nonexistent vanishing point"; the works cannot resolve their conflicts within their own boundaries. Interestingly akin to Hopper's paintings, Strand's poetry creates a central disquiet that resonates, often chillingly, beyond the lines on the page. Even poems written thirty years into his career seem to work and rework the conditions of his well-known "Keeping Things Whole" from the 1964 volume *Sleeping with One Eye Open*: "In a field / I am the absence / of field. / This is / always the case. / Wherever I am / I am what is missing."

In his 1990 collection *The Continuous Life*, his first after a decade-long hiatus, the poet reminds us, in longer-lined poems and a few short prose narratives, that events do not necessarily lead to meaningful ends. Like the weltanschauung of Kafka or Beckett, Strand's is depopulated and prone to extinctions, untellings, and an ongoingness rooted in vacancy. "A.M." says,

Another day has come,
Another fabulous escape from the damages of night,
so even the gulls, in the ragged circle of their flight,
Above the sea's long lanes that flash and fall,
scream their
approval.
How well the sun's rays probe
The rotting carcass of a skate, how well
They show the worms and swarming flies at work,

How well they shine upon the fatal sprawl
Of everything on earth.

A surrealistic emptiness pervades the fortyfive sections of Strand's long poem *Dark Harbor*, a collection that utilizes different tones, genres, and stances to create a full world of mysterious shapes and serene disappearances and that reads like a night of dreams: "And yet all you want is to rise out of the shade / Of yourself into the cooling blaze of summer night / When the moon shines and the earth itself / Is covered and silent in the stoniness of its sleep." Many of the sections of the book concern themselves with aging and decline and with the role of poetry in the world: "Rivers, mountains, animals, all find their true place, / / But only while Orpheus sings. When the song is over / The world resumes its old flaws." The poet of *Dark Harbor* always seems to find himself in the twilit world of fragile beauty and peril.

The collection *Blizzard of One* evokes a more crowded world than the one we usually see in Strand, with poems dedicated to his poet and painter friends and with a looser, more unabashed verve swinging within the lines of the poems. Love passing, mortality, the sad frontier of nostalgia, and the eroticism of our lone interiors are still his concerns, but he seems to see them with flourish. In the book's second poem, "The Beach Hotel," he writes,

Oh, look, the ship is sailing without us! And the
wind
Is from the east, and the next ship leaves in a year.
Let's go back to the beach hotel where the rain
never stops,
Where the garden, green and shadow-filled, says,
in the rarest
Of whispers, "Beware of encroachment." We can
stroll, can visit
The dead decked out in their ashen pajamas, and
after a tour
Of the birches, can lie on the rumpled bed, watching
The ancient moonlight creep across the floor. The
window panes
Will shake, and waves of darkness, cold, uncalledfor,
grim
Will cover us.
And into the close and mirrored catacombs of sleep
We'll fall, and there in the tided light discover the
bones,
The dust, the bitter remains of someone who might
have been
Had we not taken his place.

Source: Gaynor F. Bradish and Martha Sutro, "Strand, Mark," in *Contemporary Poets*, 7th ed., edited by Thomas Riggs, St. James Press, 2001, pp. 1160-62.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, McDowell briefly explains how Strand's poetic study of the "Self dissembling" is rendered transparent amid the "literary pyrotechnics" or "opaque ruminations" of his contemporaries.

Through nine poetry collections, beginning in 1968, Mark Strand has gone about building his reputation with the cunning of a chameleon. Even with his early, more energetic poems in the volumes *Moving* and *Darker*, Strand had a tendency to become invisible between the dramatically different writing styles of a tight club of poet-friends: the literary pyrotechnics of Charles Simic and James Tate at one end, and the meditative, at times opaque ruminations of Charles Wright and the late William Matthews at the other. Perhaps not surprisingly, an at times unbearable anxiety permeates the poems:

In a field
I am the absence
of field.
This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.

This vision of cynical self-absorption and eerie delight is reinforced by minimal attention to line and phrasing. It is almost as if the writer is insisting that the reader provide the additional insights and discoveries one would need to fill in the blanks, to populate the void. This method succeeds in creating a reciprocal anxiety in the careful reader, which spreads to cover the arc of Strand's career.

More than other poets of his generation, Strand has adapted his own writing to suit what he perceives to be prevailing currents in poetry. In the sixties his verses mimicked the irreverence of the Beats and Louis Simpson; in the seventies he often sounded like Simic, or Tate, or both; by the late eighties, after a younger generation had inspired a resurgence in narrative poetry, he laid claim to having always been a narrative poet; in the nineties, his poetry has become increasingly diffuse, strangely echoing, at times, his old nemesis, John Ashbery.

But through the permutations of style, Strand's one subject has always been the Self. It is not the Self made whole, or yearning for completion and greater awareness; it is the Self dissembling, the proud Self both preening in a mirror and refusing obligation by ducking out of the receiving line. It is the Self most interested in every aspect of itself:

I cannot decide whether or not to stroll
Through the somber garden where the grass in the
shade
Is silver and frozen and where the general green

Of the rest of the garden is dark except
For a luminous patch made by the light of a window.
I cannot decide, and because it is autumn
When the sadness of gardens is greatest, I believe
That someone is already there and is waiting
For the pale appearance of another.

The anxiety of the earlier poems has been replaced by an attitude of world-weariness. It is as if the poet has come to the conclusion that every thought bears equal weight, that every idea is ephemeral, disposable. Note how the narrator speaks with the coldness of stones, how the author's early, gnomic utterances have given way to longer, Ashberyesque, prepositional phrasing, either creating multiple opportunities for indirection, or emotional and spiritual evasion.

Either way, ennui constitutes the increasingly dominant tone of Strand's compositions. In an era when American poetry has opened up to so many multicultural voices and small revolutions in style, Strand's concise, distant, and bloodless manner, in language and in theme, stands out from the frenetic activity going on all around him. Many contend that this alone makes Strand the perfect point person, in a dark time, for a marginal art. But others question the truth, substance, and ultimate staying power of suck work.

Source: Robert McDowell, "Strand, Mark," in *Reference Guide to American Literature*, 4th ed., edited by Thomas Riggs, St. James Press, 2000, pp. 819-21.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Bloom locates in "The Continuous Life" a "Sublime apotheosis fuller and deeper in its authority than anything previous in Strand."

It is now a decade since Mark Strand's *Selected Poems* appeared. That volume confirmed the vision of Strand long held by his admirers: here was an authentic artist, legitimately descended from Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop, and akin also to several crucial modern Hispanic poets. Strand's voice, always grave and measured, seemed to go through most of his work with an extraordinarily controlled consciousness of self and the limits of self, in order to avoid being engulfed by a luminous phantasmagoria. A poet of Borgesian irreality, this earlier Strand found his way to a fresh evocation of a universal anguish, one that moved dialectically between everyone's narcissism and anyone's despairing quest for survival.

Some months ago, recuperating from a recent illness, I spent many hours immersing myself in the manuscript of Strand's *The Continuous Life*. I had read only two or three of its thirty or so poems before; my immersion was a continuous surprise, indeed an astonishment. In the movement from his mid-forties to his mid-fifties, Strand truly has given birth to his own father; he has re-invented his art and himself.

What I always have loved most in Strand's poetry is its capacity first to empty out, and then to renew or even reinvent the self. Eliot famously wrote of a rejoicing that depended upon inventing something upon which to rejoice. Strand rather restrains himself; he invents neither his happiness nor its object, but the self that can generate a drive. Happiness *falls* in Rilke; in Strand it comes when least expected, and then experiences a more traditional elevation into the uncanny. In an earlier poem, Strand luminously lamented:

How can I sing?
Time tells me what I am. I change and I am the same.
I empty myself of my life and my life remains.
It is a long road from that to a recent poem

where Strand can write:

Another day has come,
Another fabulous escape from the damages of night.

The strength of refabling has replaced the obsession with self-emptying, as Strand teaches us again what Dr. Johnson first taught us: that the essence of poetry is invention or□as Strand would say□reinvention.

That reinvention is continuous in *The Continuous Life*. In an elegy for the self called "Orpheus Alone"; in an epiphany named "Luminism"; in the extraordinary title-poem, "The Continuous Life," one hears what Stevens termed the voice that is great within us

rising up, in a Sublime apotheosis fuller and deeper in its authority than anything previous in Strand:

Explain that you live between two great darks, the
first
With an ending, the second without one, that the
luckiest
Thing is having been born, that you live in a blur
Of hours and days, months and years, and believe
It has meaning, despite the occasional fear
You are slipping away with nothing completed,
nothing
To prove you existed.

Strand's phantasmagorias are still with him, but modulated now into high comedy, as in a lovely poem about an arcane sect called "the great forgetters," whose communal enterprise destroys reality: "Then Florida went and San Francisco . . . And afterwards Bulgaria was gone, and then Japan." Strand gently recognizes that in a bad time we now are besieged by great forgetters, who are converting our academies into temples of forgetfulness. Our inchoate rhapsodies have become our academic impostors; we are in danger of forgetting how to read poems, which means that no one will know how to write authentic poems. Strand is of all true poets perhaps the least polemical, and so he is in no way responsible for my amiable attempt to employ him as text for one of my benign sermons against that rabblement of lemmings, our contemporary School of Resentment. I give you then Mark Strand, now one of the strongest of Sublime poets, and I conclude by expressing my renewed gratitude towards him for his poetry that helps renew me, perhaps most of all in the conclusion of one of his grand new poems aptly entitled "The Famous Scene":

So let the unsayable have its way.
Let the moon rage and fade, as it will, and the heads
Of Queen Anne's lace bow down in the fields,
And the dark be praised. We shall be off,
Talking aloud to ourselves, repeating the words
That have always been used to describe our fate.

Source: Harold Bloom, "Mark Strand," in *Gettysburg Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Spring 1991, pp. 247-48.

Adaptations

In 1996, Rhino Word Beat released a set of audiocassettes, titled *In Their Own Voices: A Century of Recorded Poetry*, on which Strand and other poets read from their work.

Topics for Further Study

Write a dialogue in which your future self speaks to your present self about the past. Speculate as to what you think you will know about life in the future that you do not know now.

Write a response to Strand's poem, taking the point of view of children giving advice to their parents. Read the poem to your class and then discuss it.

Interview at least six children under ten years of age, asking them to describe the advice their parents give to them. Categorize the responses and then write a short essay interpreting their significance.

On the board, brainstorm responses to the question, "What is the meaning of life?" Discuss responses.

Read the rest of the poems in Strand's collection, *The Continuous Life*, and in an essay describe how they are similar to and different from the title poem.

In the last line of the poem, the speaker mentions "undeniable selves." Discuss this line in relation to your self-image. Is there more than one of you? How so? When are these different selves most apparent? Write a short essay exploring the issue of multiple selves.

As a class, discuss how often each student thinks about death, and in what context. Does the awareness of death change the decisions you make or how you behave? Discuss as a class.

The narrator advises parents to tell their children, "That your search goes on for something you lost." Do you consider your own life a search for something? Brainstorm answers on the board and then discuss as a class.

What Do I Read Next?

Roland Barthe's *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) is a difficult but rewarding meditation on the pleasure of reading. Many of Strand's poems poetically address subjects in Barthe's study.

Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979), a postmodern novel, addresses themes that recur in Strand's poetry, such as the role of the reader, the relationship between words and the material world, and how stories shape human beings' conception of themselves and others.

In 1985, Strand published *Mr. and Mrs. Baby*, his only collection of fiction. Like his poetry, many of these stories concern fantasy and dreaming.

Strand's *Selected Poems* (1990) contains most of the poet's best-known work and is indispensable for critics or those interested in Strand's literary development.

Further Study

Altieri, Charles, *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, 1984.

Altieri surveys a number of poets, including Strand, describing their relationships to dominant poetic modes.

Bloom, Harold, *Figures of Capable Imaginaton*, Seabury Press, 1976.

Bloom is one of Strand's staunchest supporters, as well as a leading critic of American poetry. In this collection of essays, he looks at the work of poets such as William Coleridge, Wallace Stevens, and John Ashbery and discusses Strand's early work as embodying a kind of transcendental vision.

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

Gery explores the imagery of nuclear annihilation and emptiness in poets such as Denise Levertov, Richard Wilbur, John Ashbery, and Mark Strand.

Kirby, David, *Mark Strand and the Poet's Place in Contemporary Poetry*, University of Missouri Press, 1990.

Kirby's study, though thin, remains the only booklength critical examination of Strand's poetry and career.

Stitt, Peter, "Stages of Reality: The Mind/Body Problem in Contemporary Poetry," in *Georgia Review*, Vol. 37, 1983, pp. 201-10.

Stitt discusses how a number of contemporary poets, including Strand, address the relationship between the mind and the body in their work.

Strand, Mark, ed., *Contemporary American Poets: American Poetry since 1940*, Ecco Press, 1969.

In this groundbreaking anthology, Strand presents poets who have had a deep influence on American poetry and on his own work. These poets include Adrienne Rich, Charles Olson, James Wright, and John Ashbery.

□, *The Weather of Words*, Knopf, 2001.

In this collection of essays, Strand examines the poet's role in contemporary society and contemporary poetry's debt to the past. He also discusses Virgil, William Wordsworth, Archibald MacLeish, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Donald Justice, and Joseph Brodsky, among other poets.

Vine, Richard, and Robert von Hallberg, "A Conversation with Mark Strand," in *American Poetry Observed: Poets and Their Work*, edited by Joe David Bellamy, University of Illinois Press, 1984.

Strand discusses a number of subjects including poetic form, the poetry that has influenced him, and his relationship to critics.

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Birkerts, Sven, "The Art of Absence," in the *New Republic*, Vol. 203, No. 25, December 17, 1990, pp. 36-38.

Cavalieri, Grace, "Interview with Mark Strand," in *American Poetry Review*, Vol. 23, Issue 4, July-August 1994, pp. 39-42.

Gregerson, Linda, "Negative Capability," in *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, Vol. 9, 1981, pp. 90-114.

"Picks and Pans," in *People Weekly*, Vol. 47, Issue 17, May 5, 1997, p. 41.

Strand, Mark, "The Continuous Life," in *The Continuous Life*, Knopf, 1990, pp. 21-22.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

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□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:

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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.

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