Curse Study Guide

Curse by Frank Bidart

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Frank Bidart's "Curse" is addressed to the masterminds of September 11, 2001—those who planned and carried out the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and those who crashed an airliner into a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. As the title suggests, the poem is a harsh and bitter indictment of these terrorist acts, and Bidart leaves no room to doubt the loathing he feels toward the perpetrators. That said, "Curse" does not rave in predictable angry language or trite sentiment. Instead, Bidart approaches this sensitive topic in a methodical and provocative manner that causes readers to think, regardless of any already-formed opinions they may have.

"Curse" is a relatively short poem, but its carefully chosen words, precise style, and intense message provide a dramatic comment on one of the most world-changing events in modern history. Ironically, Bidart relies on an early-sixteenth-century form of cursing a vile act or individual to express his dismay over an event that occurred in the early twenty-first century. The blending of old-style damnation with contemporary resolve makes this poem a memorable statement on a single day in U.S. history that dominated headlines for several years.

"Curse" was published in 2005 in *Star Dust*. It appeared previously in the spring 2002 issue of *Threepenny Review* and was subsequently posted on that journal's website. However, readers should be aware that poems on the Internet may not appear as they do in printed publications. In this case, the line breaks in "Curse" on the *Threepenny* site are not the same as they appear in *Star Dust*.

Author Biography

Frank Bidart was born in rural southern California on May 27, 1939, and grew up on a potato farm owned by his father as part of a thriving family business. As of 2007, Bidart Brothers was still one of the largest diversified farming operations in Kern County, California. But Bidart knew at an early age that he did not want to follow in his father's footsteps to become a farmer. Instead, Bidart was interested in the theater and movies, and he dreamed of becoming an actor or a film director.

Although the family ran a prosperous business, Bidart's father and mother were not as successful in their personal lives. When Bidart was five years old, his parents divorced, and he was raised primarily by his mother. After a somewhat tumultuous childhood and adolescence, Bidart started classes at the University of California at Riverside, where he mixed literature and philosophy studies along with his interest in theater and film. Ultimately, he turned his attention to poetry, although he never completely relinquished his flare for the dramatic or his love of theatrical performance. He simply found a way to work those passions into his poems.

As an undergraduate, Bidart enjoyed the work of such notable twentieth-century poets as Robert Lowell, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound. He especially enjoyed Pound's *Cantos*, a lengthy series of works that showed Bidart, among other things, that poetry could encompass virtually any subject in the world—a premise he would adopt for his own work and that figures heavily into his unusual topics and characters.

After Bidart completed his undergraduate degree at University of California, he began graduate studies at Harvard University. Although he never earned a degree from Harvard, he did meet accomplished poets and teachers there whose work would ultimately influence his own. Robert Lowell was a teacher, mentor, and friend whom Bidart greatly admired and respected. In general, his experiences at Harvard led to his own serious attempt at becoming a poet—an endeavor that paid off with the 1973 publication of his first collection of poems, *Golden State*.

Several collections followed over the next thirty-some years, with *Star Dust*, appearing in 2005 and including the poem "Curse." Although much of Bidart's poetry is noted for its atypical, often controversial, subjects—his personas include a pedophile, a murderer, and an anorexic woman, among others—it is also highly regarded for its strength of language, graphic imagery, and intensity.

Bidart's work has been honored with various awards and nominations, including the Bobbitt Prize for Poetry (1998) and nominations for the Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, and National Book Critics Circle Award—all for *Desire* (1997). His chapbook, *Music Like Dirt* (2003), was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and was republished two years later as the first section of *Star Dust*.

Plot Summary

Line 1

The explication of “Curse” depends as much on understanding its style as its language. Bidart is noted for his quirky punctuation and presentation of words, such as using all capital letters or italics. In this poem, he uses italics and gaps in lines to emphasize his point, but what he does *not* use is just as important. The first line, for instance, may be confusing initially because it lacks the commas it needs to make the meaning easier to grasp. If it were punctuated as “*May breath, for a dead moment, cease, as, jerking your*,” its message would be clearer.

Starting the sentence with the word “May” is in keeping with the title of the poem, as the speaker expresses a wish or desire for what is to follow. What follows is the beginning of the “curse” that the speaker wants to befall the targets of his hex. Specifically, the first line expresses the speaker’s desire for the “you” in the poem (here, plural) to be so shocked at what is happening that they lose their breath for a moment and jerk in response to the scene. The fact that the moment is “dead” foretells the sorrow and death that underlie the main focus of the poem.

Lines 2–4

These lines identify the subject of the poem, as indicated by the reference to “*one hundred and ten / floors*” collapsing. Each tower of the World Trade Center had 110 floors that burned and collapsed on September 11. Here, the speaker’s desire is that those responsible for the attack should have to experience *in slow motion* the same horror of being trapped in a crumbling skyscraper. The hope that it occurs slowly implies the speaker’s yearning for the attackers to suffer as long as possible. He wants them to *hear* the floors falling *evenly*, one on top of the other, above their heads until finally all the floors “*descend upon you*.”

Line 5

This line employs the old “eye for an eye” concept of retribution. Just as the terrorists of September 11 “made” the World Trade Center fall, killing nearly three thousand people, the speaker wishes for the same to happen to them. Another common saying that this line brings to mind is, “You reap what you sow.” At the heart of the speaker’s curse is the desire for the terrorists themselves to experience terror.

Lines 6–7

In these lines, Bidart uses word spacing to slow down the action of the poem. By offsetting “your victims,” “their eyes,” “their / breath,” he effectively halts each image

long enough for the reader to grasp it completely. The idea is that the attackers should have to consider very deliberately the human beings they have killed. Ears, eyes, and breath are all real and physical, and they suggest the strong, haunting connection that the speaker wants the terrorists to feel with their victims.

Lines 8–9

The anger displayed in these lines is biting, but controlled. Referring to the previous two lines, the speaker wants the terrorists to be so plagued by their actions that their victims' breath may actually "enter" their bodies and become vile and destructive, "like acid." The part of the terrorists that the speaker wants the acid to "eat" is important to note: it is "the bubble of rectitude that allowed you breath." "Rectitude" means righteousness or morally correct character or behavior. It is a form of goodness that generally implies sternness and strict adherence to a set of rules. The word appears twice in "Curse" and carries much weight in the evaluation of the terrorists' mindset. While it seems contradictory to apply any word that has to do with morality or righteousness to people who commit heinous crimes, the speaker uses "rectitude" to describe the killers' beliefs that they are justified in attacking a country, regardless of the loss of innocent life. He suggests that it is their sense of self-righteousness that gives them life and purpose in the first place.

Line 10

The message in line 10 sums up the ultimate purpose of the curse. It may be paraphrased this way: May you identify so closely with your dead victims that it is as though you now must breathe for them. Once again, Bidart uses italics to stress the significance of this single line.

Lines 11–12

Line 11 introduces an "us" into the poem, referring to people in general in a post-9/11 world—perhaps Americans in particular, but, more broadly, anyone emotionally affected by the events of that day. The arrangement of the words in these two lines appears awkward, but they also read like the archaic language used to cast curses centuries ago. "You cannot for us / not be" means that, just as the terrorists "wished," their existence and their acts will never be forgotten by those left behind. The speaker hopes that this fact is the killers' "single profit"—the one and only infamy they enjoy.

Lines 13–14

In line 13, the word "rectitude" appears again, but now the terrorists are "disenthralled," or set free, of it. Describing them as "at last disenthralled" alludes to the hijackers' own deaths on September 11, as they supposedly achieved everything they desired in their

own “moral” sense. Themselves deceased, they now “seek the dead,” trying to “enter them” just as the terrorists entered their living victims on the final day of their lives.

Line 15

This line indicates the defiance and disgust that the victims feel toward their killers. In death, they have the power to “spit . . . out” whatever unwelcome thing tries to enter their mouths. In the end, they have the strength to prevent the terrorists—and, more specifically, the terrorists’ philosophy—from becoming a source of energy or nourishment. They are “not food” for the dead.

Lines 16–17

The final two lines of “Curse” allude to a line from the prose work *In Defense of Poetry*, by nineteenth-century poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. In the “Notes” section at the end of *Star Dust*, Bidart writes: “Shelley in his *Defense of Poetry* says that ‘the great secret of morals is love’—and by love he means not affection or erotic feeling, but sympathetic identification, identification with others.” In his poem, Bidart puts a twist on Shelley’s benevolent intention, turning *“the imagination to enter / the skin of another”* into a curse, instead of an attempt to sympathize with someone. The goal is to have the terrorists receive just and equal punishment for the act they have committed. In essence, the speaker condemns them to suffer the same as they have caused others to suffer.

Themes

Equal Retribution

The most obvious theme in “Curse” is the justification of “an eye for an eye” punishment for those responsible for the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. The curse that the speaker places upon the terrorists calls for equal retribution for their acts: “May what you have made descend upon you” and “*May their breath now, in eternity, be your breath*.” In these lines, the speaker’s wish is more figurative than literal, as he speaks in general terms of what has been “made” on this day and the eternal repercussions for the deeds committed. His curse is more precise, however, in lines 3 and 4, in which he calls for the same number of floors to collapse on the attackers as they caused to fall on the people in the World Trade Center.

The idea of equal retribution is, of course, symbolic in this poem because the hijackers are already dead—dying alongside their victims when the planes crashed. But this obvious fact is overshadowed by the very compelling desire for revenge, even if it is only emblematic. The speaker acknowledges the deaths of the terrorists toward the end of the poem, but he seeks their punishment, regardless. He is glad that they are “spit . . . out” each time they try to “enter” the dead, and he appears to enjoy telling them that they “are not food” for the ones they killed. While symbolic retribution does not cause any actual harm to the intended persons, it may have a cathartic effect on the one who wants revenge. That seems, at least, to be the case for the speaker here.

If the “you” in the poem applies only to the infamous nineteen hijackers of 9/11, then the speaker’s curse can be only a symbol of his anger and wish for revenge, since the attackers cannot be brought to justice. If, however, the “you” covers anyone who had a hand in planning the attacks, then the possibility for justice—or retribution—continued after September 11, 2001. Most likely, those addressed in the poem account for more than the nineteen men on the airliners. The theme of equal retribution easily applies to both the deceased hijackers and their still living fellow terrorists.

The Act of Making

Much of Bidart’s late twentieth-century and early 2000s work, including the poems in *Star Dust*, explores the theme of making things. While this sounds broad and undefined, Bidart is actually taking a close look at the myriad of things that human beings create—from the obvious invention of concrete objects to the more intangible making of art, war, friendship, enemies, love, and so forth. Sometimes *making* is a positive endeavor, but it may be negative and detrimental. In “Curse,” what is *made* is most certainly negative.

The word “made” is used twice in the poem, in lines 5 and 17. In both instances, it is aligned with an adverse notion—what the terrorists have made should come back to haunt them and what the speaker has made is a curse. From the outset, the poem

builds toward the final statement, “what I have made is a curse.” The hex is constructed from a series of statements beginning with the word “May,” followed by the description of what the speaker wishes to befall his targets. Each one involves a form of punishment that the “you” in the poem should suffer for the suffering they created. In essence, the speaker’s act of making is a mirror image of what the architects of 9/11 made.

In the first statement, the speaker wishes for the terrorists to experience the same fate as their victims, looking up only to realize many floors collapsing upon them. His subsequent statements pair the attackers’ acts with just and equal payback, step by step until the curse is complete. The poem reads as though it describes something being made from the ground up—layer added upon layer until the construction is finished. Ironically, what the speaker builds will ultimately lead to destruction, just as what the terrorists made led to destruction. If the act of making is central to human desire, as many of the poems in *Star Dust* suggest, Bidart shows here that its *negative* side is just as powerful, just as desirable as its positive.

Style

Free verse is poetry that does not rhyme or have a regular meter—poetry that is literally *free* of traditional conventions and restrictions. Its popularity is often traced back to nineteenth-century French poets such as Arthur Rimbaud and Jules Laforgue but is easily recognizable in the works of twentieth-century American poets such as William Carlos Williams, Carl Sandburg, and Marianne Moore. By the end of the twentieth century, free verse was the most common form of poetry being written. But the most important thing to keep in mind about free verse is that the style does *not* mean that a poem is completely without distinctive cadence, form, or structural complexity. “Curse” is an apt example of just how structured a free verse poem can be.

Bidart is noted for his unusual punctuation, capitalization, and word spacing—all to draw special attention to a line or a single word or to emphasize a certain point. For example, in some works he capitalizes words or entire lines in an attempt to shout at the reader, “Hey, this is important!” While he does not use unexpected capitalization in “Curse,” he does rely on italics and spacing to make the poem more effective.

The four italicized lines that begin the poem indicate right away that they are significant in setting up the message of the entire work. Not all the lines that begin with the word “May” are italicized, but line 10 is—an implication that it is as important as the first four lines and also serves to complement them with a similar subtlety in making a “deadly” wish. The portions of lines 16 and 17 that appear in italics are emphasized because “*the imagination to enter / the skin of another*” expresses the mechanism through which the curse works. These words encompass the core of the poem’s theme.

Besides italics, Bidart also uses extra line and word spacing to emphasize his point by slowing down the reader long enough to contemplate what he is saying. The first four lines are double spaced, even though they essentially comprise a sentence or at least a single thought. But the impact of their message is made even stronger by having them read separately and slowly, rather than running them together in a typical single-spaced verse. He uses the same tactic in lines 6 and 7, but here he also adds extra spaces between words to slow down the reading even more. The blank space between “victims” and “their” and “eyes” and “their,” as well as the line break between “their” and “breath,” all serve to decelerate the reading of the poem, forcing the reader to take in the full impact and weight of each word.

Finally, Bidart separates lines 10 and 11 with an odd dot that divides them by four line spaces. The first word in line 11, “Now,” implies movement in the poem, from the first part entailing the elements of the curse to the second part, or present, in which the elements of the curse are in place. While the dot may be unusual, it provides an abrupt and necessary break between the poem’s set-up and its conclusion. The curse is concocted above the dot, and it is “made” after the dot.

Historical Context

Some people, especially Americans, became familiar with the term “terrorism” on September 11, 2001, and believe this is the date the United States first encountered it. In fact, the United States had been battling terrorists for decades, responding in a variety of ways to such incidents as the kidnappings of U.S. diplomats in Latin America in the late 1960s and 1970s; the murder of two U.S. diplomats in Sudan in 1973; the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Iran in 1979; the suicide bombings of the U.S. Embassy and U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon in 1983; the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993; and the suicide bombing of the *USS Cole* in 2000. While the U.S. government met some of these acts with CIA operations and secret meetings with leaders of the nations involved, others were met with military strikes and a no-concessions policy against the perpetrators. Since the September 11 attacks, the response has been primarily swift and decisive military action.

The first U.S. military campaign following the terrorist attacks on U.S. soil began in October 2001 in Afghanistan, where Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda network of terrorists had thrived for years. The ruling Taliban government was toppled, but large pockets of remaining Taliban fighters and their Al-Qaeda colleagues took refuge in the nation’s vast mountainous regions and began to rebuild their forces, emerging little by little in subsequent years in a bid to retake Afghanistan from the control of the new U.S.-backed government and international troops. By 2005, Islamic extremists in Afghanistan had strengthened enough to conduct several deadly terrorist attacks and assassination attempts on government officials, as well as gain control of small towns in remote areas.

The initial destruction of the Taliban and hundreds of Al-Qaeda operatives did not diminish terrorist activities elsewhere in the world, as evidenced by the first Bali, Indonesia, bombing in 2002; the Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, bombing in 2003; the Madrid, Spain, bombing in 2004; and the two bombings in London and the second attack in Bali in 2005. While these were some of the most deadly, high-profile terrorist activities during those years, many other smaller-scale suicide bombings, kidnappings, shootings, and beheadings occurred in dozens of countries around the world.

In 2003, U.S. and coalition forces invaded Iraq and quickly defeated the Iraqi military, bringing down Saddam Hussein’s regime in a few weeks. Although President George W. Bush declared major combat operations over in Iraq on May 1, 2003, the anti-American insurgency that developed among various Iraqi factions did not prove so easily put down. War in Iraq continued in the following several years, although by 2007, it seemed to be more a military campaign against radical insurgents than against an official military opponent.

The sentiment expressed by Bidart in “Curse” toward the terrorists of 9/11—or terrorists in general—is shared by many people around the world, not just Americans. In the months following the attacks in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania, the sense of outrage, patriotism, and desire for justice, if not revenge, permeated the thoughts, speech, and actions of many people, and especially many U.S. citizens. Over

the following five years as U.S. and other casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq increased, much of the initial fervor was replaced by disillusionment and skepticism that the war on terror in either country could ever be won. Instead, many people came to believe that terrorism would continue, echoing Bidart's assertion that, "Now, as you wished, you cannot for us / not be."

Critical Overview

Bidart's poetry has been well received by critics, scholars, and readers in general, since the publication of his first collection in the early 1970s. His reputation is based primarily on his work in dramatic monologue—a type of poem popular during the Victorian period in which a one speaker delivers an oftentimes lengthy speech explaining his or her feelings, actions, or motives. Bidart's choice of rather unusual characters (murderers, rapists, an anorexic woman, among others) may be seen as an attention-getter, but his ability to develop the monologue in realistic, compelling, yet poetic style earned him high praise.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Bidart turned more toward writing shorter poems, while still retaining the passionate voice and provocative language of his lengthy monologues. Many poems in *Star Dust* reflect the new style, and this collection received very positive reviews. A comment in the "Editor's Corner" for *Ploughshares* notes that "Bidart illustrates with unforgettable passion that the dream beyond desire is rooted in the drive to create." Writing for the *Library Journal*, critic Barbara Hoffert says that *Star Dust* "offers bold yet perfectly calibrated poetry that celebrates the act of making. . . . Bidart is back doing something he's done with verve since 1965: making poetry." In his review of the collection for *Harvard Review*, critic Jonathan Weinert claims that *Star Dust* "carries the imprimaturs of greatness." He goes on to say that the poetry "interrogates the act of making, which Bidart considers an imperative of being rather than a choice." While many acts of making are positive, Weinert asserts that "The architects of 9/11, addressed directly in "Curse," represent its hellish negative." Weinert concludes his review by stating that Bidart is "not only one of our most challenging poets, but also one of our most responsible."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, she examines "Curse" as an anathema, explaining the origins of the word and considering how the religious overtones of the poem suggest the theological roots of its subject.

The word, curse, typically connotes a wish for harm or punishment placed on an individual or group of people. It is often associated with the supernatural, usually evil, such as curses conjured in rituals of witchcraft or black magic. But curses also are found in records of traditional religious doctrines such as the Christian Bible, the Muslim Qur'an, and the Jewish Torah. In these works, they often imply a desire for the target of the curse to be deprived of the blessings of a supreme being and to suffer the consequences of being abandoned by goodness. Many times, the curse is inspired by a need for justice—that one bears punishment for the harm he or she has caused others. Bidart's poem "Curse" is based on this latter principle.

In the original Greek, anathema means something lifted up as an offering to the gods, or, later, to God. As such, it took on the role of a sacrifice, or something to be cast out or slaughtered.

Regardless of one's association with the terrorist events of September 11, 2001, or opinion on the actions of U.S. and international armed forces since that day, no one can deny that the magnitude of the attacks was unprecedented in U.S. history and that many people—Westerners, in particular—have paid more attention to the Middle East and the world of Islam than they ever may have otherwise. Initial reactions ranged from fear of and anger toward all Muslims to a call for greater compassion and understanding among people of all faiths and cultures. As of 2007, neither extreme dominated the process of moving beyond 9/11.

Among the countless number of poems written in commemoration of that day, "Curse" is interesting in that Bidart attempts to respond to it on a level equal to the purported reasoning of those who planned and committed the attacks: in their minds, crashing the planes was justified by Allah (God). In spite of the fact that Muslims insist that violence is not condoned or encouraged by Islamic laws, terrorists typically use their own interpretation of the Qur'an to defend their acts. Bringing religion into it seems to excuse the violence. In "Curse," Bidart employs both subtle and overt religious overtones to meet the terrorists of 9/11 on their own terms.

In the "Notes" section at the end of *Star Dust*, Bidart writes this about "Curse": "The poem springs from the ancient moral idea . . . that what is suffered for an act should correspond to the nature of the act. . . . Identification is here called down as punishment, the great secret of morals reduced to a curse." Even the language he uses

to explain the work carries religious overtones, and the word that comes to mind in regard to “ancient moral idea,” “what is suffered for an act,” and “reduced to a curse” is *anathema*—a word originating in Greek theology.

Anathema is both an interesting and confusing word, all for the same reason. In the original Greek, anathema means something lifted up as an offering to the gods, or, later, to God. As such, it took on the role of a sacrifice, or something to be cast out or slaughtered. Eventually, any positive connotations of the word were lost, and anathema came to mean something evil or damned. In the Christian Bible, the word *herem* (or *haram*) is the equivalent of anathema and is used to describe one who is condemned to be cut off or exterminated. In some interpretations of Christian doctrine, it refers to a formal excommunication from the church, someone officially banished from the holy community—in other words, one who is cursed.

The final phrase of Bidart’s poem announces his intention in creating it: “what I have made is a curse.” More specifically, what he has made is an anathema. The language and temper of “Curse” are somber, even funereal in places: “*May breath for a dead moment cease*”; “May what you have made descend upon you”; “*May their breath now, in eternity, be your breath*.” These lines are spoken with solemn clarity and determination, seemingly uttered by an authority with the power to make the stated wishes come true. Each time the word “may” repeats adds another layer to the curse that is being created, and it also adds to the ceremonial tone of the entire poem. The single lines and couplets and the repeated use of “may” make the poem read like a melancholy chant heard in religious rituals.

Before and after 9/11, Islamic extremists invoked the teachings of the Qur’an to justify their acts of violence, and many were heard using the name of Allah in taped messages before carrying out suicide attacks on primarily Western targets. While people of all faiths, including moderate Muslims, tried to downplay the notion that the war on terrorism was a religious war, terrorists played *up* that idea in order to incite anger in the Islamic world, where some believers might come to think that the entire religion is under attack. In “Curse,” it is not Islam that is damned—only those who would try to defend murder as a self-righteous, holy cause in the name of Islam.

The aspect of Bidart’s poem that makes it especially interesting is the parallel method he uses to bring a metaphorical justice to the 9/11 hijackers—one in name only, of course, since they perished along with their victims. From the first line to the last, the poet builds his anathema one step at a time, starting with a chilling allusion to the collapse of the World Trade Center and a wish that the terrorists endure the same horror. While the first four lines are presented in italics for apparent emphasis, they do not shout at the reader or at the hijackers. Instead, these opening lines quietly and methodically say, “I curse you to suffer the same fate of being crushed by one hundred and ten floors falling upon you as you caused to happen to people in the World Trade Center on a Tuesday morning in September.” As simple—and as terrifying—as that.

Bidart’s use of the word “rectitude” also suggests the moral or religious roots of the poem’s subject. The most fundamental element of terrorists’ rationalization of their

violent acts is the assertion that they are morally correct in committing them. “Rectitude” implies “righteousness,” and the latter is generally associated with things that are good, virtuous, honorable, even saintly. Bidart states that it is a “bubble of rectitude” that allows terrorists to exist in the first place. Later, when they are “disenthralled” of that notion, their one pathetic option is to “seek the dead” who want nothing to do with them.

The notion of seeking the dead implies an otherworldly endeavor, also pointing to the spiritual basis of the poem; but even when Bidart steps outside the normal realm of religious subject matter, the tone still sounds like a hallowed, ceremonial rite. He solemnly tells the terrorists that the victims they try to “enter” do not want them and, in fact, “spit [them] out” like some vile, inedible thing in their mouths. The statement “The dead find you are not food” is a grim and final assessment of the 9/11 attackers’ dismal fate. It denies them the glory of the supposed martyrdom they believed their suicide missions would bring. In short, the contention that their own deaths are revered by Allah and, therefore, sanctified by Islam is simply another attempt to rationalize their acts.

Bidart’s allusion to Shelley’s phrase “the great secret of morals,” from *Defense of Poetry*, is a fitting conclusion to “Curse”—mainly, because it turns Shelley’s purpose on its head, just as terrorists turn religion on its head to meet their own sense of reasoning. The nineteenth-century poet says the secret of morals is “love.” The twenty-first-century poet says it is “*the imagination to enter / the skin of another*.” By identifying so closely with the subjects of his poem, Bidart uses the secret to create a curse—anything but the “love” that Shelley intended.

Although the word anathema is never used in this poem, its implication runs throughout. The language, the style, and the themes all point to a controlled, methodical placement of a curse on a specific target—a punishment as old as the biblical “eye for an eye.” While there is a general sense of revulsion, even hatred, expressed in “Curse,” Bidart never succumbs to raw anger or emotional tirade. Instead, his desire for retribution is outlined carefully in a step-by-step ceremonial damnation of the 9/11 terrorists. His decision to address such a event obviously speaks to his ability as a poet, but it also makes a much stronger case for his cause. Ranting and raving may be expected. But quietly building an anathema against his subjects proves to be both haunting and spiritual, in kind.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on “Curse,” in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Adaptations

• *Frank Bidart, the Maker* is a twenty-eight-minute documentary on the poet, produced by “Art Close UP,” a monthly TV series from WGBH in Boston. Filmmaker Jay Anania visits Bidart at his home in Cambridge and accompanies him to his classroom at Wellesley College. The 2004 documentary includes an interview, readings, and discussions of Bidart’s poems. People may contact WGBH for information on the availability of a copy.

• In 1992, the Academy of American Poets produced a CD of Bidart and C. K. Williams reading selections of their poems. Bidart reads six short poems and his lengthy dramatic monologue, “Ellen West.” This is a two-disc set that runs eighty-eight minutes and is available online at poets.org from the academy’s Poetry Audio Archive.

• As of 2007, a recording of Bidart reading a selection of poems was available at http://wiredforbooks.org/frankbidart/ on the Wired for Books website. The reading runs just over fifty-three minutes.

Topics for Further Study

• Where were you on September 11, 2001? Write an essay expressing your thoughts, actions, and emotions on that day. Include an assessment of how your feelings may or may not have changed since then and why.

• Research the roots of the word terrorism and present your findings to your class. Concentrate on the historical events surrounding the coining of the word and be prepared to answer questions on how it has evolved into the way Americans in particular define it in the early 2000s.

• Terrorists, both before and after September 11, 2001, cited the existence of the State of Israel—and U.S. support for it—as a reason for the violent response to a nation they consider an intrusion on Palestinian territory. Research the history of the region and write an essay that takes into account the opposing viewpoints, being careful to be fair to both.

• Since its beginning in 2003, the war in Iraq has elicited mixed and increasingly negative reactions from people around the world, especially Americans. Take on the role of a politician and prepare a speech either in favor of or against the war and try to persuade your audience to vote for you and the ideals you support.

What Do I Read Next?

- Bidart's highly acclaimed *Desire* (1997) was nominated for several prestigious awards. The underlying theme of this volume is that human beings cannot choose what brings them joy—joy chooses the individual.

- *An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind*, edited by Allen Cohen and Clive Matson and published in 2002, is a collection of works by over one hundred poets from all across the United States, writing in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks. Many of the poets project themselves into the minds and bodies of the victims, as well as the firefighters, police officers, and hijackers. Poets include Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Robert Creeley, Lyn Lifshin, and Diane di Prima.

- After September 11, 2001, journalist and teacher Samar Dahmash-jarrah wanted to do something to dispel the stereotypes that many Americans believed were true about Muslims and Arabs. The result was *Arab Voices Speak to American Hearts*, written with coauthor/editor Kirt M. Dressler and published in 2005. The book is compiled from interviews with Arabs and Muslims living outside the United States who agreed to answer over a hundred questions that Dahmash-jarrah gathered from interested Americans. The authors believe that most of the responses are surprising to Americans and Westerners in general.

- Critic Thomas M. Allen's lengthy article "Frank Bidart's Emersonian Redemption" (in *Raritan*, Vol. 25, No. 4, Spring 2006, pp. 95–114) presents an interesting comparison of the poems in Bidart's *Music Like Dirt* and the nineteenth-century poetry of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The author's basic argument is that the nation Bidart tried to disown as a young poet became a backdrop for many of his later works, as he evolved through a love/hate relationship with U.S. history, values, and landscape. Allen likens Bidart's use of common language to that of Emerson's, who also included American themes and subjects in much of his work.

Further Study

Armstrong, Karen, *Islam: A Short History*, Modern Library, 2000.

This popular introduction traces the history of Islam from its origins through to modern times, explaining the various sects, the central points of the Qur'an, and the effects of Western civilization over the centuries. Published in 2000, the book does not reflect an attitude about or response to the events of 9/11.

Chomsky, Noam, *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy*, Henry Holt, 2007.

In this carefully documented study, Chomsky explains how the Bush administration's actions after 9/11 transformed the United States into an imperialist power, one eschewing both international and domestic law and endangering itself and the world in military escalation.

Hennessy, Christopher, *Outside the Lines: Talking with Contemporary Gay Poets*, University of Michigan Press, 2005.

Despite its title, this book does not concentrate on the sexual preferences of the poets, and Bidart's homosexuality is mentioned only in an offhand manner in his discussion of the controversial subjects he often chooses for his poems. He also talks about what he feels is most fundamental in his writing and his blending of mind and body in many of his works.

Kowit, Steve, *In the Palm of Your Hand: The Poet's Portable Workshop*, Tilbury House, 1995.

Kowit provides background and how-to information, strategies, and exceptionally fine models by known and unknown poets, all in a readable text intended to support interested readers in improving their skills in writing poetry.

Bibliography

Bidart, Frank, “Curse,” in *Star Dust*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005, pp. 25–26.

———, Notes, in *Star Dust*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005, p. 83.

“Editor’s Corner,” in *Ploughshares*, Vol. 31, No. 2–3, Fall 2005, p. 232.

Hoffert, Barbara, “Best Poetry of 2005,” in *Library Journal*, Vol. 131, No. 7, April 15, 2006, p. 80.

Weinert, Jonathan, Review of *Star Dust*, in *Harvard Review*, Vol. 30, June 2006, pp. 167–69.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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