Delights and Shadows Study Guide

Delights and Shadows by Ted Kooser

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Delights & Shadows (2004) is a highly regarded collection of poetry by one of the best known, most accessible, and most respected poets in the United States. Ted Kooser's Pulitzer Prizewinning bookcontains poems published previously in literary magazines from 1994 to 2004. *Delights & Shadows* sold more than fifty thousand copies, an extraordinary number for a collection of poetry in the United States. Kooser was named Poet Laureate of the United States soon after its publication.

Like much of Kooser's work, the poems in *Delights & Shadows* are written in a simple style with clear language and lucid yet challenging constructions. Kooser has lived much of his life in Iowa and Nebraska, and the poems reflect life as he knows it on the Great Plains. The poems in the collection touch on topics both bleak and celebratory, including impressions of strangers, family, memories, mortality, and history.

Throughout *Delights & Shadows*, Kooser repeatedly notes the unexpected in the smallest of objects, touches, and connections. He contrasts surprising images in his poems to create an emotional response in readers. In the *Library Journal*, reviewer Louis McKee noted, "That he often sees things we do not would be delight enough, but more amazing is exactly what he sees. Nothing escapes him; everything is illuminated." While some critics regard *Delights & Shadows* as the product of a regional writer, others believe that Kooser has transcended his background and reached a universal audience with this collection of poems.

Author Biography

Born on April 25, 1939, in Ames, Iowa, Ted Kooser is the son of Theodore, Sr., and Vera (nee Moser) Kooser. Raised in Iowa, Kooser began writing poetry at an early age and became serious about his poetry as a teenager. Kooser attended Iowa State University in Ames, earning his bachelor's degree in 1962 from Iowa State University. He then spent a year working as a high school teacher in Madrid, Iowa.

In the mid-1960s, Kooser moved to Nebraska to attend graduate school at the University of Nebraska, where he earned a master's degree in English in 1968. He wanted to be a poet but realized he could not support himself and his family by writing poetry. He began working in the insurance industry while a graduate student. Kooser was hired by Bankers Life Nebraska as a correspondent in 1964 and became an underwriter the following year. He held various positions in the insurance industry for the next thirty-five years, reaching the executive ranks. Kooser chose the insurance industry because the demands of work did not sap all of his creativity. He also worked as an adjunct professor of writing at the University of Nebraska from 1970 to 1995.

Kooser rose in the early morning to write for several hours before going to work each day. He was influenced by William Carlos Williams and he believed, like Williams, that poetry should be readily accessible to readers. From his earliest poems, Kooser often expressed a sense that life is fragile. Kooser began publishing poetry in periodicals in the mid-1960s and put out his first collection, *Official Entry Blank*, in 1969. He continued to publish in literary magazines and other periodicals throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, while putting together several collections. Kooser won many awards for his writing, such as the Pushcart Prize, the Stanley Kunitz Prize, the James Boatwright Prize, and two fellowships in poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Kooser retired from the insurance business in 1999. In the late 1990s, he developed cancer and stopped writing for a time. Fighting for his health, he began writing again when he started taking walks in the early morning and writing poems based on what he saw. He sent the poems on postcards to his friend Jim Harrison, and they became the book *Winter Morning Walks: One Hundred Postcards to Jim Harrison* (2001). He also returned to the University of Nebraska as a visiting professor of English in 2000.

In 2004, Kooser published his tenth collection of poetry, *Delights & Shadows*, which was awarded the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Beginning in 2004, Kooser was named the thirteenth Poet Laureate of the United States. As poet laureate, he seeks to increase appreciation for poetry in the United States, a task he approaches with gusto in his column "American Life in Poetry." Kooser has continued to publish his own poetry collections, as well as two nonfiction books on writing for aspiring authors, *The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice for Beginning Poets* (2005) and *Writing Brave and Free: Encouraging Words for People Who Want to Start Writing* (2006). As of 2006, he lives on a farm near Garland, Nebraska, with his wife Kathleen Rutledge. He continues to write poetry and teach at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Plot Summary

I. Walking on Tiptoe

In the first of the four sections in *Delights & Shadows*, the poems are primarily impressionistic sketches of people. The first poem in this section, "Walking on Tiptoe," laments how the many burdens humans carry have forced them to walk more heavily than certain animals that are graceful and ready to spring into motion. At the end of the poem, Kooser notes that humans still sometimes creep silently in the night, like animals, when they walk on tiptoe through the house.

Kooser continues to observe the human experience in the next poem, "Tattoo." In this poem, he describes an older man shopping at a yard sale. The man has a tattoo of "a dripping dagger held in the fist of a shuddering heart" on his shoulder. The poet senses that neither the man nor the tattoo is as bold or vital as it was once.

In "At the Cancer Clinic," Kooser observes a woman who cannot walk to an exam room without the assistance of two others and a nurse, who urge the patient on. The woman is dignified, the nurse is calm, and the people in the waiting room are respectful. Kooser portrays the situation as one exemplifying grace and kindness.

The next poem, "Student," describes a young male student who seems like a turtle moving forward with awkward determination into his future. Kooser compares the student's backpack to a shell and his chin to a beak as he enters the library with the same effort that a turtle shows in leaving the sea.

"Gyroscope" also begins with a first-person observation. Kooser observes a young girl playing with a gyroscope on an enclosed porch. This small event takes place on a sunny day in February, with spring inching closer. Kooser draws a comparison between the girl with her plaything and the balance of the changing seasons.

Kooser returns to the evidence of age in "New Cap." Each short line of the poem focuses on the corduroy cap that an eighty-six-year-old man bought when he was young, and which he still wears. Kooser conveys that what is literally and figuratively contained in the cap—the man's head and its contents—has changed, becoming smaller and more fragile.

In the next poem, "Cosmetics Department," Kooser describes two beautiful women together in what seems like an eternal pose. This poem contrasts with "New Cap" in color and content. The first word in "New Cap" is "Brown," describing the color of the old man's cap. The five two-line stanzas that make up "Cosmetics Department" also make use of color imagery. The women Kooser describes wear black and look like they should be decoration on a white cup. White is used as an image of their youth: "The white moth of timelessness flutters about them."

The five lines of "Biker" create a poem of motion. Kooser describes a motorcycle rider returning to motion after being stopped at a traffic light. Again invoking animal imagery, Kooser contrasts the biker's movements with "the old dog of inertia" who "gets up with a growl and shrinks out of the way."

"The Old People" is more abstract and seems to view the aged in a different light than the other poems in this section. After describing them physically in the first line ("Pantcuffs rolled, and in old shoes"), Kooser uses metaphors to compare aging to going into the night, away from the light of youth.

The next two poems are similar to each other in their use of weather images and movement. The ten lines of "In January" contrast the only light in town, coming from a small Vietnamese cafe, with the winter wind blowing through and shaking windows. "A Rainy Morning" focuses on "a young woman in a wheelchair" pushing herself through the rain. Kooser compares the motion of her hands with the movements and rhythmic chords of a pianist's.

The short poem "Mourners" gives Kooser's impressions of people after a funeral. After describing the shady churchyard setting and the physical characteristics of the mourners, "White shirt cuffs and collars," the poet focuses on an irony of funerals: The people gathered are saying farewell to one life yet greeting the others present, still alive and holding on to their connections with one another.

The section ends with "Skater," in which the poet describes a young woman figure skating. While the poem focuses on her physical movements on the ice, the sounds her skates make, and the clothes she wears, Kooser ends by relating her skating to a flash of maturity: "skating backward right out of that moment, smiling back / at the woman she'd been just an instant before."

Ii. the China Painters

Many of the poems in this section focus on life in the Midwest and Kooser's own family in Iowa. The first poem is also the title poem, "The China Painters." This poem describes the well-worn tools of china painters, including the brushes and colors used to create delicate flowers. Kooser then notes that this art has gone out of fashion but returns "like a garden" when the good dishes are used for Sunday dinner.

"Memory" is a swirl of images that uses a tornado as a metaphor for memories. Kooser describes a tornado cutting through a farm, disrupting its fields, machines, barns, animals, and a family eating dinner. He describes the tornado removing the roof of the house, picking up the people one by one, and gazing at them before returning them to their place. The poem's last words reveal that the tornado is the poet: "its crowded, roaring, dusty funnel, / and there at its tip was the nib of a pen."

Kooser examines a place resonant with the past in the three stanzas of "Ice Cave." In the first stanza, he describes a cool cave where ice harvested from local waterways during the winter was stored. In the second stanza, Kooser tells readers that in summer

some of the winter ice still remained and the cave was used by families as a cool escape. He concludes by describing the visitors' walk home with the cold from the cave seeming to follow them.

Several of the poems in the heart of this section focus on Kooser's own family. "Mother" is written in the first person, with Kooser describing the details of nature and life on an April day a month after his mother's death. In the five stanzas, Kooser mourns what he has lost but thanks her for his life and for giving him a perspective that allows him to move on.

"A Jar of Buttons" is another domestic poem, written in two-line stanzas. Describing a long-used jar of buttons, "a core sample / from the floor of the Sea of Mending," Kooser continues the nautical metaphor in his description of the women who use these buttons to maintain their families' clothes. He writes that they work on "decks sometimes salted by tears," like sailors on the ship of life.

Kooser returns to a more personal past with "Dishwater" and "Zenith." In "Dishwater," he describes in detail his grandmother's routine chore of throwing out the dirty dishwater, emphasizing the physical actions involved. "Zenith" recalls another memory in which Kooser and his sister would sit with their grandmother in her parlor and listen to news of the war on the radio.

In this section, Kooser also writes several poems about responsible adult men. "The Necktie" describes a man as he dresses for work. Though clearly a serious man embarking on serious business, there is a moment of private playfulness as he waves "hello / to himself with both hands" as he ties his tie. "Father," written on May 19, 1999, is an ode to his father on what would have been his ninety-seventh birthday. The poet is glad that his father is not alive and unhappy, but still misses him and reminisces about a story his father used to tell.

Some of the poems about Kooser's past focus more ambiguous people. While the woman at the center of "Depression Glass" is not identified, Kooser makes clear that she is someone from the past with whom he had a close relationship. He describes times in which they drank coffee in carefully collected cups, now reserved for company, and shared the week's news and gossip. Kooser seems to have a similar relationship with the woman at the heart of "Applesauce." He begins by describing what he liked about the process of making homemade applesauce before offering details about the meticulous earnestness of the woman who makes it.

"Creamed Corn" follows "Applesauce," and is linked to it by a mention of Iowa. Employing a more prose-like style, Kooser talks about racism in Iowa. Though white locals were comfortable with the black families that had lived there for a long time, they were more suspicious of the Jamaicans who came to work at a local canning plant in the 1940s. Kooser bemoans gossip that the Jamaicans tampered with the creamed corn, ending his poem proclaiming, "Years later … our ignorance spoils the creamed corn."

In the next poem, Kooser talks specifically about his family again. "Flow Blue China" is an ode to his aunt who gave him the china she used for much of her life. Kooser compares the ever-serving flowers on the china to his aunt, honoring her existence after she "has slipped beyond the thin line at the edge." In "Pearl," he tells the story of a visit with his mother's cousin. In one of the longest poems in *Delights & Shadows*, Kooser travels to Pearl's house in Iowa to tell her that his mother has died. She tells him stories about his mother and about her own poor health. In the course of their conversation, Pearl tells him about the people she sees in her house cataloguing her possessions who she knows are not real, and he suggests that she go to her doctor. After the visit has ended and the poet has left, Kooser leaves the reader with Pearl's imaginary people: "the others stepped out of the stripes of light / and resumed their inventory."

The idea of the nearness of death is also present in "Old Cemetery." Kooser observes the poor groundskeeping job someone has done at a cemetery. Detailing the results of the rushed, careless job, the poet considers the perspectives of the deceased, imagining their relief as the groundskeeper's truck leaves and the weeds rise again. The section ends with "A Winter Morning," a quiet four-line poem set in a farmhouse and focusing on the sound of a kettle and the sight of a tiny flame.

Iii. Bank Fishing for Bluegills

The poems in this section are primarily about history, and they imagine looking at the past with the neutrality of objects. The section opens with its title poem, which begins with the image of an "empty aluminum boat" in the water. Kooser uses this image as a metaphor for a dying man; both are tethered lightly to the world. The rest of the poem links the boat to the man, his pastime, his appearance, and his fading, tenuous hold on life.

The next poem, "Four Civil War Paintings by Winslow Homer," opens with Homer's quote from newspaper in 1865 about how a painter's work can be seen like nature if the painter is more of an observer than a reflector. The poem is divided into four parts, each examining a different painting and offering a brief explanation of its subject. Through the poem as a whole, Kooser looks at four perspectives of the Civil War.

"1. SHARPSHOOTER" portrays a Union soldier sitting in the tree at the ready. Kooser begins by calling it a "painting of waiting," then describes what he sees in the painting itself: the man ready to shoot. Next, "2. THE BRIGHT SIDE" features five black Union teamsters who haul the necessities of war. Kooser contrasts their appearance of dark weariness with the light, bright objects in the background. In "3. PRISONERS FROM THE FRONT," the poet describes three Confederate soldiers as they wait for a Union general to determine their fates. Kooser believes that one young soldier would spoil this picture for the general if the painter had let him. "4. THE VETERAN IN A NEW FIELD," the shortest of the four parts, focuses on a single man, a veteran of the war, working in a wheat field during the summer.

Beginning with "Turkey Vultures," an impression of the animals flying lazily around in the air above, taking a break from their business of attending to death, Kooser moves through a number of descriptive poems about objects and animals. "Pegboard" compares the outlines for the tools on a board with French cave drawings from prehistory, while "At the County Museum" uses ten two-line stanzas to describe an old hearse, ruminate on its past, and remember death. "Casting Reels" and "Praying Hands" also ponder the title objects, commonly found for re-sale. Kooser wonders about the uses for both.

"Horse" is a six-line poem about the appearance of a horse, highlighting its majesty. "*Lobocraspis griseifusa*" is a "tiny moth who lives on tears" harvested at night from a sorrow-filled dream, unburdening the dreamer. Kooser then returns to objects, beginning with "Home Medical Dictionary," which focuses on not on the dictionary itself but on how it is used by the elderly as they fearfully seek to understand their pain.

In "In the Hall of Bones," Kooser describes the skeletons of three different animals and one human that are put together on display. The poet emphasizes the differences between the human and animal skeletons by ending with the observation that the human skeleton "is the only one / in which once throbbed a heart / made sad by brooding on its shadow." Kooser sees a sheep's pain in "A Jacquard Shawl," carefully woven in 1778 with wool taken from sheep that were killed by dogs. The poet includes the perspective of the weaver, imagining that her loom echoes the sounds of the attack.

The next two poems, which face each other in the text, contrast darkness and light. In "Telescope," Kooser compares a telescope to a pipe in a dam "that takes off some of the pressure," to keep "the straining wall of darkness" from crashing down. "A Box of Pastels" uses first-person perspective to describe the title object, once owned by the artist Mary Cassatt. Cassatt primarily painted domestic scenes, and Kooser notes that the pale colors are worn down while the darker shades are barely used. Kooser leaves the experience feeling lighter himself.

The poet returns to nature with "Old Lilacs" and "Grasshoppers." He anticipates the change from spring to summer as it relates to horses in "Old Lilacs." After observing how skinny horses are as they look for food in the changing weather of spring, Kooser spends the last stanza painting the month of May as a time of greenery which will make the horses fit and attractive again. "Grasshoppers" is a poem about farmers' struggles. Kooser compares the size and color of the crop-eating pests to an object from the drought of the 1930s, a pencil his grandfather used for keeping track of rainfall. The poet compares the way grasshoppers sound when they are in the grass to the sound of raindrops, noting the irony.

The last poem in the section, "The Beaded Purse," is a narrative poem set in a time when train and wagon travel were the norm. Kooser tells the story of a man in rural Kansas who meets a train carrying his daughter's remains. She left the family to become an actress in the East and told them she was successful and happy. He sees that she has aged severely and that her purse contains no money. He puts a few dollars inside and takes his daughter's body home.

Iv. That Was I

Many of the poems in this section focus on themes of perception and hope as well as loss and love. The section opens with the title poem, "That Was I." In each of the three stanzas, Kooser describes a scene in which an older man, himself, explores lonely sites. He knows that observers might see him and think of decay and age, but his thoughts are of hope and control. Each stanza ends in the refrain, "Yes, that was I."

Between the brief "Screech Owl," which equates the loud sound this small owl makes with hopefulness, and the simple "The Early Bird," which describes the joy humans get from the sound of a bird singing in the rain, sits "A Spiral Notebook." In this poem, Kooser equates aging with not needing a five-subject notebook because of the lack of subjects in one's life. The only subject he focuses on is the notebook itself and what it could mean. "On the Road" is another meditation on the importance, or unimportance, of holding things or letting them go. The poet describes finding a pretty rock while walking, and he writes that his inner voice tells him to drop it and continue on his path.

Kooser turns to observation once again in "A Washing of Hands." In this poem, he watches a woman washing her hands, focusing his metaphorical language on the water and how her hands manipulate it. He describes the water as a tassel, a cocklebur, and a rope. Another woman is at the heart of "After Years," in which the poet uses first-person perspective to describe seeing someone who is far away and walking farther away. He is lonely because the person he would most like to tell about what he sees is the person moving away from him.

The next poem is also about someone's absence. In "Garage Sale," Kooser again uses the first-person perspective to describe shopping at a garage sale just as it begins to rain. The poet talks with the woman holding the sale and wonders where her husband is. He leaves with nothing, since none of the woman's husband's belongings are suited for him. The potential for loss permeates "Surviving," as the poet describes a ladybird beetle and sees how it reacts to the threat of death, as fearful as all living things.

After a brief visit by a sparrow in "A Glimpse of the Eternal," Kooser compares the fading importance of a love affair and the way memories change over time to the way land masses on the Earth move and re-form in "Tectonics." The collection ends with "A Happy Birthday." Written in first person, the poem describes the experience of reading a book in the evening until darkness overtakes the room. The poet does not turn on the light but continues to sit with the book in the dark.

Themes

The Human Condition

Many of the poems in *Delights & Shadows* explore various aspects of the human condition—what it means to be human in terms of common experiences and reactions to these experiences. In "Walking on Tiptoe," Kooser describes how the psychic weight of being human physically affects us: "There is little spring to our walk, / we are so burdened with responsibility." This poem differentiates humans from animals, a point also touched on in "In the Hall of Bones." Here, the poet emphasizes how people are conscious of their humanity and suffer as a result. Kooser writes of humans, "Of all the skeletons / assembled here, this is the only one / in which once throbbed a heart / made sad by brooding on its shadow."

Not all of Kooser's poems are as solemn. While the title of "At the Cancer Clinic" suggests illness, the poem itself is focused on the kindness of three people who assist and encourage a patient. Kooser writes that "Grace / fills the clean mold of this moment." In "Bank Fishing for Bluegills," Kooser compares an older fisherman in poor health to an aluminum boat and likens his physical decline to weightlessness: "His face has the flat gray sheen of a man / with a failing heart, but he is all lightness now, / and tethered only gently to this world."

A number of Kooser's poems about the human condition contain an air of sorrow, often related to broken or complicated connections between people. "The Beaded Purse" tells the sad story of a Midwestern father picking up his daughter's remains at a train station. She had left without his permission at the age of nineteen and claimed to have become a successful actress in the East, though the state of her body and possessions indicate otherwise. Despite the disconnect between the father and daughter, the father wants to protect his wife's memory of their daughter. He places some money in his daughter's purse for his wife to find and take comfort in. This gesture of protection distances the man from his wife and the truth. "Garage Sale" takes a more personal tone for Kooser, as he describes briefly chatting with a woman holding a garage sale as he helps her move some goods out of the rain. He notices some men's things, which are not suitable for him, or for anyone other than their original owner. He wonders where that man is, seeing the connection between husband and wife as conspicuous in its absence. He leaves with nothing: "I walk so empty-handed to my car."

Aging and Death

In this collection, the poet repeatedly explores the effects of time on the human body and mind. In "Tattoo," Kooser describes an older man's fading tattoo, and sees that while he still wants to seem tough, "he is only another old man, picking up / broken tools and putting them back, / his heart gone soft and blue with stories." "New Cap" also describes the physical effects of aging on an old man, who has grown smaller over time,

while "Home Medical Dictionary" emphasizes the book's use as "an atlas for the old, / in which they pore over / the pink and gray maps of the body." "A Spiral Notebook" describes seeing a five-subject notebook in a drugstore and realizing that he has aged: "It seems / a part of growing old is no longer/ to have five subjects, / … / but instead to stand in a drugstore / and hang on to one subject / a little too long."

Kooser looks at death primarily as a phenomenon affecting the living, such as in "The Beaded Purse." In the short poem "The Mourners," he describes the events after a funeral, when the attendees are reluctant to part. At least three of the poems about death focus on the poet's parents. While "Pearl" focuses on his visit to an aged cousin to inform her of his mother's death, "Mother" offers Kooser's own feelings about his mother's passing as he describes what has happened in nature in the month since she died. He misses her but is grateful to her, saying, "Were it not for the way you taught me to look / at the world, to see the life at play in everything, / I would have to be lonely forever." Kooser shares similar sentiments in "Father," written on his long-deceased father's birthday. The poet imagines what life would be like if his father was still alive and is glad that he did not have to become fearful and feeble with age. However, Kooser misses him and is reminded of him by the lilacs blooming all around. The poet accepts death as an inevitable—and not-unwelcome—part of life.

The Past

A number of poems in *Delights & Shadows* describe events of the past. Kooser often draws on his own memories for inspiration, making the poems more personal. Certain poems in the collection refer to specific times in the past. "Creamed Corn" describes how Jamaican workers acted and were treated by Iowa locals when they came to work at a Green Giant plant during the 1940s, while "A Jacquard Shawl" details the title object, made in 1778 from the wool of sheep who lost their lives to a dog attack.

Kooser's recollections of the past are sometimes general and sometimes very specific. "Memory," for example, is a furious tornado of images sweeping through a farm, recalling the people and things that once belonged there. "Ice Cave" presents a set of memories associated with a specific place. In the past tense, Kooser describes a cave where people once stored ice cut from the river and spent hot summer days in the coolness. "Applesauce" is one of several poems that seem specific to Kooser's personal memories. In this poem, he offers his fond recollections of the way an older woman in Iowa made applesauce, clearly something he watched many times.

Style

Prose Poems

Many of the poems in *Delights & Shadows* are prose poems. These are poems that are not metered or rhymed and do not use traditional poetic line breaks. Even though prose poems use everyday language, they often employ some poetic elements, such as vivid imagery, repetition, and fragmentation. Prose poems can be of any length and focus on any subject. In Kooser's collection, "Surviving," "Flow Blue China," and "Screech Owl" are a few examples of prose poems.

Free Verse

Some of the poems in *Delights & Shadows* are written in free verse. This type of poetry does not use a specific kind of rhyme or meter—there is not a set limit to the number of syllables in a line, and there are no rules concerning the placement of stresses in the line. Instead, free verse employs a structure determined by the poet, in which the poem's pattern and line breaks make the piece look and sound like traditional versed poetry. Poems like "*Lobocraspis griseifusa*," "Cosmetics Department," and "A Jar of Buttons" are examples of free verse in *Delights & Shadows*.

Narrative Poems

Narrative poems tell stories. Narrative poems can be written in verse, but, as in Kooser's book, they can also be more like short stories. The most obvious narrative poem in *Delights & Shadows* is "The Beaded Purse." In this poem, Kooser tells the story of a father who has to pick up his estranged daughter's corpse at a train station. Kooser describes how the father takes it upon himself to put money in his daughter's purse to spare his wife unnecessary pain, because his daughter does not appear to have become a successful actress like she has led her mother to believe. "Pearl," a first-person account of visiting his mother's cousin to tell her of his mother's death, is another narrative poem in the collection.

Figurative Images

Koozser employs figurative images throughout *Delights & Shadows*. Such imagery does not describe things literally but is representational and symbolic. Metaphors and similes cast the poet's observations in terms of the familiar. The young man in "Student," for example, is compared to a turtle, and the old man in "Bank Fishing for Bluegills" is compared to a boat. The use of figurative images can describe something's appearance and add an emotional element to a poem. Figurative images can also help the reader understand and relate to the theme of a poem. In the poem "Memory," the funnel cloud-pen is a figurative image used to represent the surprising power of memories. "A Jar of

Buttons" also uses this technique to convey history and hard work. It begins with the stanza: "This is a core sample / from the floor of the Sea of Mending."

Literal Images

Kooser uses literal images in *Delights & Shadows* as well as figurative ones. Literal images represent exactly what they describe. Literal images make poems more accessible to readers and often help them better understand the figurative language being used. For example, in "Applesauce," Kooser begins with "I liked how the starry blue lid / of that saucepan lifted and puffed." Readers can picture the lid of the saucepan, and with that image gain entrance into Kooser's more figurative descriptions in the rest of the poem, which concern the woman who is making the applesauce. When he describes the sailboats on her apron as "the only boats under sail / for at least two thousand miles," he uses a literal image to launch a figurative one that references their physical location in the Midwest.

Mood

Mood is the primary emotion a poem evokes. The poems in *Delights & Shadows* vary in their mood from celebratory ("A Box of Pastels") to angry ("Old Cemetery") to morose ("Home Medical Dictionary"). In the poems in which Kooser writes about his deceased parents, the mood is by turns somber and sentimental, as in "Mother" and "Father." Sometimes the mood is surprising considering the poem's subject. For example, "At the Cancer Clinic" and "The Old People" are both uplifting, comforting poems about people nearing the ends of their lives.

Historical Context

Nebraska

Kooser finds much of the inspiration for his writing in the state of Nebraska, where he has made his home for most of his adult life. He has lived for many years on a farm near the village of Garland. In many of the poems in *Delights & Shadows*, Kooser reflects on places or situations he has experienced in Nebraska. The state is not mentioned by name in any of the poems, but the culture, society, and values of Nebraska and the Great Plains have influenced his perception of the world and his writing.

Known as the "Cornhusker State," Nebraska has had primarily an agricultural and ranch-based economy since it became a part of the United States with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. In its early days as a state, Nebraska was populated by Americans who were lured by the promises of the Homestead Act. In the Homestead Act of 1862, the federal government promised to give 160 acres of land to anyone who could pay a small fee and remain on the land for a specified period of time. Even the state's official seal attests to the importance of agriculture, with a farmer's cabin, wheat sheaves, and growing corn among its primary images.

Nearly 95 percent of Nebraska's land is dedicated to farming and ranching, and about one-fifth of the state's workforce is employed in the agriculture industry. Corn and soybeans are two of the state's primary crops. In the late 1990s, the number of farms in Nebraska decreased, but the farms that remained were larger and often relied on mechanization to optimize output. Though drought hindered farm output in the first years of the twenty-first century, Nebraska remained the fourth most profitable state in agriculture in 2001, with cash receipts from the marketing of farm products totaling $9.5 billion.

Nebraska has been attempting to diversify its economy to ensure long-term financial stability, in part by encouraging an already large manufacturing industry. The state's population, however, has not changed rapidly. In 2002, population only increased about 1 percent over the previous year. Nebraska's demographic makeup is also relatively unchanged. As of 2002, more than 90 percent of Nebraskans were white, and about half the population was over the age of thirty-five.

Iowa

Iowa, Nebraska's neighbor to the east, also plays a role in Kooser's poetry and perception of the world. Nebraska and Iowa have much in common: Both were original parts of the Louisiana Purchase and both have a basically static population. Agriculture and ranching are two of Iowa's primary industries, with corn, soybeans, oats, and hay

being the major farm products. To make a living from farming in Iowa, as in Nebraska, has required long hours and constant struggle.

In the early twentieth century, the number of farmers in Iowa decreased as mechanization lead to the creation of larger farms. Though the state had been a leading egg producer and had a significant number of milk cows, these farm industries essentially disappeared by 1960. In that year, more Iowans lived in urban areas than rural areas for the first time. Because of the uncertainties of a changing agricultural market, Iowa worked to diversify its economy after World War II. However, many of the state's major non-farming businesses are still related to agriculture, such as food processing, meat packing, and farm equipment manufacturing.

Dust Bowl

Several poems, including "Grasshoppers," in *Delights & Shadows* allude to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. In the mid-1930s, at the height of the Great Depression in the United States, farmers in the Great Plains states faced economic disaster caused by an extended and harsh drought. From 1934 to 1938, the weather remained bone dry, extremely windy, and intensely hot during the seasons when crops usually grow the most. During this time period, intense wind storms removed the dry topsoil from farmland in states affected by the drought, further eroding the economy and spreading dust over large parts of the country. While Nebraska and Iowa were not at the center of the Dust Bowl—Kansas and Oklahoma bore the brunt of the disaster—the drought and dust storms caused economic and social hardships for Nebraskans and Iowans as well.

Critical Overview

Critics have generally regarded Kooser's *Delights & Shadows* as representative of his poetry as whole: sparely written and accessible, with powerful imagery that explores the unexpected in the small events of everyday life. Reviewing the book for the website ninetyandnine.com, David Bunch wrote,

He continually grabs the reader's attention by taking a seemingly ordinary event or observation, placing it into what at first glance could be an ordinary poem, and then turning it all on its head by linking it with something so striking that the reader is faced head-on with the enormity of reality.

One aspect of Kooser's work that has gained much critical attention is the craft and depth of the collection as a whole. Calling the poems "understated, more plain than pretty," Elizabeth Lund of the *Christian Science Monitor* also noted that "what's most remarkable about this book … is the consistency of tone and quality. Page after page illumines small moments." Similarly, Kathleen de Grave of the *Midwest Quarterly* commented, "*Delights & Shadows* is a book that can be read more than once, for the immediacy of color and line, and then again, for the generosity of its vision."

A few critics found fault with the poetry in *Delights & Shadows* and with the poet's own outlook on life. Brian Phillips of *Poetry* quibbled with the notion that the literature of the Great Plains necessarily demands plain language. The critic believed that "there is some quaintness in Kooser's new book," which he argued "comes more from Kooser's outlook than from any particular flaw in his use of rural Nebraska settings or his plainspoken register."

While Jeffrey Galbraith of the *Harvard Review* found much to like in the collection, the reviewer noted, "sentiment is one of the weak spots in the otherwise splendid *Delights & Shadows*." Gailbraith elaborates, "With a few notable exceptions, *Delights & Shadows* is most rewarding when Kooser is not directly involved in the poem but watching from a distance. In this position, the poet finds magic in activities and objects typically considered mundane."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Petrusso is a history and screenwriting scholar and freelance writer and editor. In this essay, Petrusso analyzes pairs of poems from Delights & Shadows that echo each other in their exploration of the theme of death.

In a 2004 interview with the periodical *American Libraries*, poet Ted Kooser said, "Poetry can make our lives brighter and more interesting. The challenge is in overcoming people's fear of poetry, learned in public schools where poems are taught as if they were algebra problems with one right answer." While Kooser writes poems that are absorbing and accessible to readers that might otherwise avoid poetry, a number of the poems in *Delights & Shadows* deal with death, a subject that makes many people uncomfortable. Many of the poems pertaining to death tell some sort of story, from a brief moment to a complicated tale, all while addressing mortality head-on. It is as he writes in the poem "Surviving": "There are days when the fear of death / is as ubiquitous as light. It illuminates / everything."

Kooser looks at death from a number of perspectives in *Delights & Shadows*. There are several pairs of poems in the book that mirror each other. The poems in these pairs play off one another in terms of specific perspective, content, and/or structure, adding depth to Kooser's ideas and helping tie together *Delights & Shadows* as a whole.

"At the County Museum" and "Old Cemetery" both concern physical appurtenances of death. "At the County Museum" describes a horse-drawn hearse that is carefully maintained in a museum. Kooser describes how the hearse looks and muses on what it might look like if drawn by horses again. In the sixth stanza, he asks a question related to its somber use: "How many times must a thing like this be emptied / to look so empty?" He ends by describing the bench where the drivers once sat, focusing on its seat, "a black plush cushion that for each, for a time, / helped to soften the nearness of death."

In contrast, "Old Cemetery" concerns a graveyard that is treated without such respect and care. Most of the poem describes how poorly the groundskeeper has done his job, beginning with his "coming and going unseen / but leaving tracks." While the people who respectfully and meticulously care for the hearse are never mentioned but are implicitly commended, Kooser has no sympathy for the neglectful groundskeeper. He calls him "mean and peevish," "too hurried," and "careless and reckless." Kooser notes the ignored details—that he did not "pull the bindweed" or "trim the tall red prairie grass" near the gravestones, but did manage to leave "green paint / scraped from the deck of the mower" on a grave marker.

At the end of "Old Cemetery," Kooser imagines the perspective of the dead, whom he believes are happy the mower is gone as they hear the weeds uncut in the cemetery path standing up again, "in the lane / that leads nowhere the dead want to go." The groundskeeper was in proximity to death, but he gave it no notice. Kooser implies that the drivers of the hearse in "At the County Museum" were more sensitive to death,

needing a cushion to ease their discomfort at their task. Death and caring for the dead should be respected, Kooser admonishes, and those who have no respect deserve none.

Another pair of poems that echo each other are more personal for Kooser. "Mother" and "Father" are about his deceased parents, and they share some imagery that ties them together. However, each poem looks at the departed parent in a different way. Written in first-person perspective, "Mother" addresses a parent lost only a month earlier. In the first three stanzas, he tells his mother what she has missed as spring has arrived: blooming flowers, growing grass, three rainstorms, one tornado watch, and returning birds.

In the last two lines of the third stanza, "The peonies are up, the red sprouts / burning in circles like birthday candles," the poem begins to take a more personal direction. The month, April, is the month of his birth, and while he is grateful for spring's renewal of life, Kooser acknowledges that he is sad because of his mother's death. Kooser laments that his birthdays will be different now, without remembrances from his mother. However, the poet appreciates what she has left him: "Were it not for the way you taught me to look / at the world, to see the life at play in everything / I would have to be lonely forever."

While "Mother" is marked by death, it is also a celebration of life. Many of the figurative images in the poem are about birth and the newness of spring. "Father" also ends with a mention of birth and blossoming flowers, but this poem pays homage to the mercy of death. Written in first person on what would have been his father's ninety-seventh birthday, Kooser begins "Father" grateful that his father died when he did, with his "dignity intact." The poet notes that if his father were still alive he would be "an ancient, fearful hypochondriac," and that "we would all be / miserable, you and your children." These images are much more pragmatic than the ones which open "Mother." This is perhaps a reflection of the perspective distance has given him on his father's death, twenty years earlier, while his mother's absence is still palpable.

In "Father," as he does in "Mother," Kooser goes on to describe the ways in which he misses his parent—in little, daily things. As with "Mother," birthdays are important and are linked to flowers. After talking about his own birthday, Kooser ends "Mother" with a description of a hearty iris plant he moved from her house to his after her death. At the conclusion of "Father," Kooser remembers his father's story about the poet's grandmother noticing blooming lilacs outside when the poet's father was born, and notes: "Well, today / lilacs are blooming in side yards / all over Iowa, still welcoming you." Though deceased, both parents are still part of Kooser's daily existence.

Perspective, as well as perception, plays a role in the two narrative poems that mirror each other in *Delights & Shadows*, "Pearl" and "The Beaded Purse." "Pearl" is a story of the day when Kooser drove across Iowa to inform his mother's cousin Pearl of his mother's death. The poem presents death in several different ways. "Pearl" begins with Kooser focusing on how he felt a twinge of grief as he had to explain to Pearl who he was: "it came to me, nearly sixty, I was still / my mother's boy, that boy for the rest of my

life." In the next stanza, Kooser describes Pearl, who is older than his mother, and he describes how he told her of his mother's death. Over coffee Pearl shares a humorous childhood memory of his mother.

The rest of "Pearl" focuses not on Kooser's mother, but on Pearl's approaching end. Pearl tells him about her poor health, and about the people she sees in her house who she knows are not really there. She says they sit quietly in her home and have begun making lists of all of her possessions. Pearl says, "I'm not afraid, / but I don't know what they want of me." Kooser expresses concern for her and her health but never dismisses what she sees: Death is looming. At the end of the poem, Pearl and the poet touch hands as he leaves. He acknowledges the hovering presence of death around them, writing "our warm bony hands among the light hands / of the shadows that reached to touch us but / drew back." "Pearl" concludes with Pearl's silent companions resuming their cataloging duties, "touching / the spoon I used and subtracting it from / the sum of the spoons in the kitchen drawer."

Like "Pearl," "The Beaded Purse" focuses on the aftermath of a death. The poem tells the story of a father living in Kansas, presumably in a past era, who has to pick up his daughter's body at the train station. He and his wife had been informed by telegram the previous week that their daughter has died and that her remains are being sent home. The daughter had left home against her father's wishes twelve years before, at the age of nineteen, to become an actress in the East. After the coffin arrives and is removed from the train, the father pries open the coffin when he is alone and sees his daughter is "no longer young and pretty. / She looked like one of the worn-out dolls / she'd left in her room at the farm / where he would sometimes go to sit," belying her claim in letters to her mother that "she was happy, living in style."

To protect his wife's feelings, the father puts money in his daughter's empty purse before re-sealing the coffin and starting toward home "with his rich and famous daughter." Like Kooser in "Pearl," the father is aware of the reality of the situation but mindful of the feelings of others. Both men deal delicately with the feelings of the living who must face the dimness of death. Life does not stop because of the deaths in these poems, but goes on, leaving the dead in their rightful place and the living in theirs.

As poetry shines on life's small moments, the fear of death illuminates life, and Kooser is ever aware of its nearness. His poetry should be a comfort to readers who fear death and try to resist its inevitability, as well as to those grieving a recent—or a distant—loss. "The Old People" portrays those nearing the ends of their lives as calmly facing the next stage, explaining their perplexing behavior to the still-vibrant: "They are feeling their way out into the night, / letting their eyes adjust to the future." In "Mourners," he describes people leaving a funeral: "They came this afternoon to say goodbye, / but now they keep saying hello and hello, / peering into each other's faces, / slow to let go of each other's hands." In Kooser's writing, death is neither to be feared nor cursed, but acknowledged and respected. In the poet's view, this acknowledgement and respect can heighten one's appreciation of life.

Source: A. Petrusso, Critical Essay on *Delights & Shadows*, in *Literary Newsmakers*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, McDougall draws parallels between Kooser's sense of time and place with that of Flannery O'Connor.

In her enlightening essay about Southern literature, "The Regional Writer" in *Mystery and Manners*, Flannery O'Connor makes a fascinating and well-known comment: "The writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location." Although her essay is primarily about Southern writers, her comments apply to all writers who use regional details to transmit what they believe to be eternal, abiding truths to a universal audience.

O'Connor found the location for her fiction, her "triggering town" (in Richard Hugo's words), in and around Milledgeville, Georgia. Poet Ted Kooser finds his in Garland, Nebraska. At first glance, these writers could not seem more disparate. By native ground, temperament, and chosen genre, they are distinctly apart. But in one endeavor they are united: both recognize the "mystery" of the human condition and both delight in the "manners"—the community of a shared culture and past, a time and place—of their peculiar regions.

While O'Connor finds her crossroads in the deeply human, flawed, sometimes grotesque characters who, as she notes, "lean away from typical social patterns"—a wondrous under-statement—Kooser finds his crossroads in the mystery and eternal truths of the plain folk and unpretentious subjects of the Great Plains. In that world, where his community and larger, eternal truths meet, Kooser works the alchemy of his poetry.

That transmutation is startlingly evident in the poem "Old Cemetery" from *Delights & Shadows*. Here lowly mowers and bindweed and gravestones take on a luminosity that calls us to awareness, that transcends the phenomenological and the mortal:

> Somebody has been here this morning
> to cut the grass, coming and going unseen
> but leaving tracks, probably driving a pickup
> with a low mower trailer that bent down
> the weeds in the lane from the highway,
> somebody paid by the job, not paid enough,
> and mean and peevish, too hurried
> to pull the bindweed that weaves up
> into the filigreed iron crosses
> or to trim the tall red prairie grass
> too close to the markers to mow
> without risking the blade. Careless
> and reckless, too, leaving green paint
> scraped from the deck of the mower

on the cracked concrete base of a marker.
The dead must have been overjoyed
to have their world back to themselves,
to hear the creak of trailer springs
under the weight of the cooling mower
and to hear the pickup turn over and over
and start at last, and drive away,
and then to hear the soft ticking of weeds
springing back, undeterred, in the lane
that leads nowhere the dead want to go.

Much has been written about Kooser's clean, clear, "accessible" style. It is true that, in Kooser's poems, high school dropouts and Rhodes scholars alike can feel a flash of recognition in the haunting details, transporting images, and metaphors doing their right and inexplicable work. But Kooser has discovered, and conveys by way of that "accessible" language, the perplexing mysteries at work in the world. That mystery gives his work its tough complexity and force.

Winter Morning Walks: One Hundred Postcards to Jim Harrison (2000) is another collection of poetry written by Kooser. The book of poems, inspired by Kooser's morning walks as he recovered from cancer, won the 2001 Nebraska Book Award for Poetry.

Local Wonders: Seasons in the Bohemian Alps (2002) is a collection of essays by Kooser. This book was the Winner of the Nebraska Book Award for Nonfiction in 2003 and consists of essays about the author's life and the area in which he lives.

Weather Central, published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 1994, is a collection of Kooser's poems. The poet has identified this collection as his personal favorite.

In an effort to increase the popularity of poetry in the United States, Kooser created a website, www.americanlifeinpoetry.org, which regularly features new American poets. This website is related to his column "American Life in Poetry," which is available for free to any publication.

Braided Creek: A Conversation in Poetry (2003) is a collection Kooser wrote with Jim Harrison. Winner of the 2003 Award for Poetry from the Society of Midland Authors, the book contains poems that the two writers exchanged with one another during Kooser's recovery from cancer.

The Art of Drowning (1995) is a volume of poetry by Billy Collins, U.S. Poet Laureate from 2001 to 2003. Like Kooser, Collins uses straightforward, approachable language to explore nature and life's little details. Collins is known for his wit and warmth and is one of the country's best-known and best-loved poets.

Poet William Carlos Williams (1883–1963) pioneered the use of clear imagery and plain language in poetry in the United States. *William Carlos Williams: Selected Poems*

(2004) introduces the reader to Williams's uniquely American voice and his poetry of everyday events.

We read a poem like "Old Cemetery," then, with pleasure and a sense of peril. For here, as in most of Kooser's poems, we face the inevitability of time lost, of our own extinction. We are brought face to face with mystery. It's a tribute to Kooser's superb handling of tone that the revelation of such truths is subtle, never labored. He is cognizant of an intelligent reader capable of making leaps of imagination, of finding the truth of a poem on his own.

How Kooser brings the reader to realization by his handling of a poem's elements is remarkable. Consider in "Old Cemetery" his nuanced control of sound imagery. The reader is led to imagine the harsh sounds of the mower operated by somebody "mean and peevish" who leaves "green paint / scraped from the deck of the mower / on the cracked concrete base of a marker." Then the mower cools, the pickup drives away, and we are left with the "soft ticking of weeds." We are not told that the mower's engine has also ticked as it cooled; the poet leaves that important conclusion to the reader.

Kooser's mastery of language is at full power in this poem. The delicate image of the "filigreed iron crosses" contrasts with the harshness of the invading mower and suggests the age of the markers. The "ticking" of the weeds and the "cooling" mower are potent metaphors, reminders of our mortality.

To my eye and ear this is a seamless poem. Nothing could be added, nothing taken away. To paraphrase it would mar the magic; it demands to be read word by word, detail by detail. Kooser's enjambed lines and strategic line breaks serve the poem's conversational but deliberate pace. The scattered slant rhyme (mean/peevish, grass/tracks, close/mow) give a nod to the formal feeling we hold toward the poem's subject. The silences—the fulcrums—inform the meaning: a major fulcrum between lines fifteen and sixteen marks a significant turn, a pause; we note that the human, noisy presence has been superceded by the "undeterred" weeds and the dead. As the poem closes with the sobering image of the "lane that leads nowhere the dead want to go," a silence lingers. And lingers.

In "Old Cemetery" Kooser stands firmly at that crossroads of time, place, and eternity of which O'Connor speaks. Midwestern readers will readily connect with this cemetery. They hold in common a metaphorical and physical community of time and place—small, rural towns, reverence for the weathered and the unadorned, sad knowledge of the ticking and erosion of time. They know the land; they've seen firsthand how weeds and nature triumph. Kooser shepherds the reader beautifully in this poem, as he does in most of his work, through that shared time and place to a universal truth, a mystery—mystery being what I think O'Connor meant by "eternity."

And there is something else, something that gives this poem its authority and authenticity. To write such a poem as "Old Cemetery," one must have looked into the abyss, accepted the inevitable, and decided to go on, affirming life with whatever time and talents are left. In mystery lies paradox; in "Old Cemetery," Kooser leads us to

realize that, in Death's finality, we are offered the power of acceptance. We are offered —and I believe O'Connor would have approved—a moment of grace.

Source: Jo McDougall, "Of Time, Place, and Eternity: Ted Kooser at the Crossroads," in *Midwest Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 4, Summer 2005, pp. 410-13.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, McDougall discusses the recurring symbolism of hands among the poems in Kooser's Delights & Shadows.

As I read Ted Kooser's new volume of poetry, *Delights & Shadows*, I was struck by how many poems he has written about hands, and I began turning down pages. It was my hand fluttering over the hands of his characters—or rather—my hand fluttering over the alphabet he has wrought with his hands to represent people, many of whom are portrayed through the action of their hands, like those Nebraska people I myself knew and loved. This essay of appreciation for a fellow Nebraska poet is about how Kooser, writing about people in that part of the country, manages to convey essential facts about the human condition. He catches the people he sees around him in practical poses and with a physical reality that contrasts to the cerebral or virtual reality many of us now live with so many hours a day. Here in a large city on the East Coast, where few of us work with our hands except at computers, I hear Kooser calling us back to our bodies, back to the childlike wisdom of our senses, back particularly to the wonder of hands that can grasp and hold and touch one another and make objects that convey meaning to others.

The word *hand* would appear to be burned out. It is an abused noun, a battered verb, a shopworn adjective. Functioning as several different parts of speech, the word can be found in a surprising number of formulaic English phrases; *hand* is, to put it another way, the pillar that holds up countless clichés. Consider, for example, *hands down, ready to hand, a bird in the hand, hand made, handy, give me a hand, handful, handedness, hand over*. The trouble is, these expressions are useful, and so are used often. But as set phrases, they conceal the actual, physical presence of the hand they name. *Hand* in these phrases is only a metaphor for something else, and the something else takes precedence. In the continuing drama of the English language, therefore, the word *hand* has become a character we do not often notice for itself. It plays Horatio to Hamlet. As some critic might put it, we have learned through practice to look right past the signifier to the signified.

In his famous poem, "Dishwater," Kooser restores the word *hand* to its original physicality by making us experience his grandmother whose hands are "hot red" from doing the dishes, as she purposefully heaves a dishpan full of water from the back porch.

> Slap of the screen door, flat knock
> of my grandmother's boxy black shoes
> on the wooden stoop, the hush and sweep
> of her knob-kneed, cotton-aproned stride
> out to the edge and then, toed in
> with a furious twist and heave,
> a bridge that leaps from her hot red hands
> and hangs there shining for fifty years

over the mystified chickens,
over the swaying nettles, the ragweed,
the clay slope down to the creek,
over the redwing blackbirds in the tops
of the willows, a glorious rainbow
with an empty dishpan swinging at one end.

Calling the reader to summon up his grandmother first through the bang of the screen door behind her, Kooser then furnishes us her "boxy black shoes," and we begin to pan the woman from her feet up, as with a camera's eye. We feel her "twist and heave" in our own bodies, but we never see the dishwater flying across the yard. It has already been transformed—was transformed long before then poem was written—first, into a bridge. Then, as the poem comes to rest cleverly on the word *end*, the dishwater and the hands and the grandmother Kooser so powerfully called into physicality vanish, leaving the miracle of a rainbow that has remained in place for fifty years. The miracle is that anything so flashing and temporary can have such permanence. The poem itself stands as a bridge between the grandmother on the one end and on the other, fifty years later, the poet and his readers. The transformation is a king of slight-of-hand that is only possible because we have been made to think of her hands at first as utterly literal and concrete. It is by writing against the abstraction of cliche, by creating a detailed, believable portrait of his grandmother's hands that the cunning poet first gives our own hands back to us and then endows the acts of the hands with permanence.

Poems like "Praying Hands" underscore Kooser's fascination with hands, not only those attached to living people, but those that are modeled as art objects:

There is at least one pair
in every thrift shop in America,
molded in plastic or plaster of paris
and glued to a plaque,
or printed in church-pamphlet colors
and framed under glass.
Today I saw a pair made out of
lightweight wire stretched over a pattern
of finishing nails.
This is the way faith goes
from door to door,
cast out of one and welcomed at another.
A butterfly presses its wings like that
as it rests between flowers.

As in Kooser's other poems, here the hands are literal and concrete, too; they are kitsch, though Kooser never say so, because he is everywhere a master of leaving things out. The poem depends upon the reader to make that judgment. Cleverly

withholding his own criticism, Kooser describes home-made representations of hands in increasingly amusing detail. They are objects that most of his readers would be likely to spurn, or at least refuse to take home from a thrift shop. Once our rejection becomes really established, in the last five lines, Kooser reverses tack and points out how the despised hands may be "cast out of one" door—that is, presumably, the read-er's—but "welcomed at another," presumably the door of someone who is wiser. The homemade hands in the thrift shop may not be worthy of a Sotheby's auction, but Kooser likens them to faith, perhaps because, like Christ, they have no permanent home, but stay with anyone who will give them room.

The way Kooser focuses on how these praying hands are made and what they are made of suggests that work of the hands, even this work at a hobby which doesn't rise to the level of art, represents a kind of prayer. The phrase "cast out" echoes "molded" and implies that both the creation of and the taking in of such pieces is a kind of making. After all, each requires an act of the imagination, and it is imagination that endows the hands with beauty. Using his own imagination, Kooser compares the people who buy the hands to flowers. When the hands are not at work, restoring faith to people in their houses, they rest in thrift shops, looking like the folded wings of a butterfly at rest. The hands do not need the reader's praise. They are composed and self-contained, and they will be welcomed by someone.

In his newest volume Kooser sets up the literal, concrete, detailed, muscular presence of hands as a sign that stands for the whole, robust, believable body. By our hands we create objects and make meaning. With our hands we touch one another. Likening our hands to animals and birds, we understand nature. Everywhere Kooser avoids both the abstract and the teacherly, reviving the physicality of the image. That is part of the reason why his poetry vaults so neatly and with such precision to a higher level. He doesn't need to tell the reader anything. With astonishing clarity he sets up a physical reality—often involving hands—and compares that to something else, and voila! the reader does the work and understands the point without being lectured. As Ted Kooser hands over Nebraska, he is really handing over the world. These detailed portrayals of character and action that seem so located in a Midwestern landscape merely give "a local habitation and a name" to what we feel when we are most human.

Source: Jeanne Murray Walker, "Watching Kooser Hand Over Nebraska," in *Midwest Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 4, Summer 2005, pp. 426-30.

Topics for Further Study

- Research the work of Mary Cassatt or Winslow Homer. Compare your impressions to Kooser's descriptions in "A Box of Pastels" or "Four Civil War Paintings by Winslow Homer." In a paper, describe your observations and reactions as informed by the poem.
- Reread "The Beaded Purse." What do you think the story in the poem about? Keeping your interpretation in mind, write your own narrative poem from the point of view of another character in Kooser's poem, such as the daughter, the mother, the station agent, or the father.
- The painting on the cover of the 2004 Copper Canyon Press edition of *Delights & Shadows* is "August Night at Russell's Corners" by George Ault. Kooser says of it, "There's a kind of strangeness about that image … you don't know what's beyond the darkness. The painting says that if you can awaken inside the familiar and discover it strange, you need never leave home." Pick a poem in the collection that most evokes this feeling in you. In a small group, have each person share why the poem he or she selected represents this idea.
- Research African American history in Iowa. Focus your research on the lives of African Americans in that state during the first half of the twentieth century. Using your findings, discuss the origin, evolution, and legacy of the tensions described in "Creamed Corn."
- Explore Ted Kooser's nonfiction advice book for poets, *The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice For Beginning Poets* (2005). Is his advice reflected in *Delights & Shadows*? How are examples of his advice present or absent in the works of other well-known poets, like Robert Frost or Langston Hughes? Research Kooser's advice and different poets' poetry individually, then, as a group, discuss how much you believe his wisdom applies in different cases.

Further Study

Cikovsky, Nicolai, et. al., *Winslow Homer*, Yale University Press, 1995.

This biography explores the life of Winslow Homer, whose paintings are the subject of a four-part poem in *Delights & Shadows*.

Frazier, Ian, *Great Plains*, Picador, 2001.

Frazier chronicles his explorations of the whole of the Great Plains, offering his experiences as a traveler as well as information about local culture and history.

Kooser, Ted, *The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice for Beginning Poets*, University of Nebraska Press, 2005.

In this collection of Kooser's essays, he offers advice for those who want to express themselves through poetry.

Kooser, Ted, and Steve Cox, *Writing Brave and Free: Encouraging Words for People Who Want to Start Writing*, Bison, 2006.

The second of Kooser's how-to books, this volume offers gentle encouragement and practical advice to would-be writers.

Maharidge, Dale, and Michael Williamson, *Denison, Iowa: Searching for the Soul of America Through the Secrets of a Midwest Town*, Free Press, 2005.

In this nonfiction book, the authors examine how changes over the course of a year in the town of Denison have affected the community, focusing primarily on economic decline and shifting demographics.

Whye, Mike, *Nebraska Simply Beautiful*, Farcountry Press, 2004.

This book contains photographs of Nebraska's diverse landscape.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) 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, NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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

NfS 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 Novels 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 NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS 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 Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels 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 NfS 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." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Novels 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 NfS, 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 Novels 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 NfS, 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 Novels 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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