Early in the Morning Study Guide

Early in the Morning by Li-Young Lee

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Contents

Introduction

Li-Young Lee's "Early in the Morning," was published in *The American Poetry Review* and later included in Lee's first collection of poems, *Rose* (1986). It is a four-stanza, free-verse poem written from the point of view of an adult looking back on his adolescence or late childhood and, like many of the collection's poems, reflects on Lee's complex relationship with his parents and his past. It is the sixth poem in the collection, coming right after "Dreaming of Hair," and contains many subjects and images typical of Lee's poetry, such as parentchild relationships, the importance of food, family rituals, and the act of watching. Like many of Lee's poems, it is told in the first person. Although the first two stanzas of the poem describe Lee's mother's ritual of combing her hair, in the second two stanzas the speaker zeroes in on the significance of the act to his father. Lee's father, a powerful, authoritarian, emotionally distant, and, at times, tender man, died in 1980, and Lee's early poems can be seen as an attempt to come to peace with his memories of him. Lee's voice is soft, almost sad, and his language direct and accessible. This poem serves as a useful introduction to Lee's work, as it describes an experience with which most people are familiar: watching and learning from their parents.

Author Biography

Li-Young Lee is one of the leading poetic voices of the Chinese diaspora writing in America. Lee was born August 19, 1957, in Jakarta, Indonesia, to Richard K. Y. Lee and Joice Yuan Jiaying, the granddaughter of China's provisional president, Yuan Shikai, elected in 1912 during the country's transition from monarchy to republic. Before moving to Indonesia, Lee's father was China communist leader Mao Zedong's personal physician. In 1959, the Lees left Indonesia after President Sukarno, for whom Lee's father had been a medical advisor, began openly persecuting the country's Chinese population. After wandering through the Far East for five years, the family immigrated to the United States, settling in Pennsylvania. Lee attended Kiski Area High School in Vandergrift, Pennsylvania; the Universities of Pittsburgh (1975-1979) and Arizona (1979-1980); and the State University of New York at Brockport (1980-1981). With publication of his first collection of poems, *Rose*, in 1986, Lee garnered widespread attention from critics, who were moved by the mix of tenderness, fear, and longing in his portraits of his family, especially his father. In poems such as "Early in the Morning," Lee evokes a child's wonder at the mysteries of adulthood and his parents' daily rituals. *Rose*, for which Lee received New York University's Delmore Schwartz Memorial Poetry Award, was followed in 1990 by *The City in Which I Love You*, which was the 1990 Lamont Poetry Selection of the Academy of American Poets. Lee has also received grants, awards, and fellowships from the Illinois Arts Council, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Ludwig Vogelstein Foundation, the Whiting Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation. In addition to the two titles mentioned above, Lee has written a critically acclaimed memoir, *The Winged Seed* (1995), which reads like an extended prose poem. His most recent collection of poems is *The Book of My Nights* (2001). Lee lives in Chicago, Illinois, with his wife and two children.

Poem Text

While the long grain is softening
in the water, gurgling
over a low stove flame, before
the salted Winter Vegetable is sliced
for breakfast, before the birds,
my mother glides an ivory comb
through her hair, heavy
and black as calligrapher's ink.
She sits at the foot of the bed.
My father watches, listens for
the music of comb
against hair.

My mother combs,
pulls her hair back
tight, rolls it
around two fingers, pins it
in a bun to the back of her head.
For half a hundred years she has done this.
My father likes to see it like this.
He says it is kempt.

But I know
it is because of the way
my mother's hair falls
when he pulls the pins out.
Easily, like the curtains
when they untie them in the evening.

Plot Summary

Stanza One

Lee uses the title as the setting of the poem, the first stanza of "Early in the Morning" describing what happens at that time of day. He is very precise in locating the time when his mother combs her hair. It is "while the 'long grain' is softening" but "before / the salted Winter Vegetable is sliced." The "long grain" is most likely rice, a breakfast staple for many Asian cultures. It softens when cooked. The winter vegetable could possibly be a cucumber or a pickled whole radish with garlic. These are often heavily salted and served in a kind of gruel called congee. This is very early morning, as it is also "before the birds" appear. The precision with which Lee details when his mother combs her hair suggests an organized and efficiently run household, one in which such simple rituals carry meaning beyond their appearance. The fact that she uses a comb made of ivory, an expensive material, adds symbolic weight to the act and also provides visual contrast to the mother's black hair.

Lee uses a simile when he describes his mother's hair as "heavy / and black as calligrapher's ink." Similes are comparisons using "like" or "as" to underscore similarities between dissimilar things. Calligraphy refers to stylized writing or lettering, and Chinese calligraphy is comparable to painting in its ability to evoke emotion through a rich variety of form and design. It is both abstract art and, from a practical point of view, written language. By comparing his mother's hair to "calligrapher's ink," Lee evokes his knowledge and love of Chinese culture.

Stanza Two

In this stanza, Lee locates his mother in space. The speaker not only watches his mother but his father as well, who is also watching the mother. The boy's attention now is on the father's observation of the hair-combing ritual. The boy watches his father watching. The sound of the combing is so beautiful that the speaker imagines it is "music" to his father's ears. Such subtle music could not be heard, however, without utter silence, and it is this silence that pervades this poem and acts as backdrop to the speaker's observations and thoughts.

Stanza Three

In this stanza, the speaker describes the mother's actions step by step. It almost reads like an instruction manual for proper hair hygiene. Putting one's hair up often signifies that there is work to be done. It is not unlike "rolling up your sleeves." You do both to make sure your hair, or your sleeves, don't get dirty. The mother has been doing this for most of her life, as illustrated in the line, "For half a hundred years she has done this." Assuming she began combing her hair when she was a child, this makes Lee as speaker a late adolescent or young adult. As with the previous stanza, in the last lines of

this one, the speaker's attention gravitates to the father, who likes his wife's hair back because "He says it is kempt." "Kempt" means neat and tidy. This line underscores both a primary value of the father's neatness and the mother's desire to please her husband.

Stanza Four

For the last two stanzas, the speaker has described his mother's morning ritual of doing her hair and the father's response to it, and in the last line of the third stanza, the speaker says his father likes his mother's hair pulled back because it is "kempt." In this stanza, the speaker questions the father's explanation, saying that the reason he likes his wife's hair pulled back is that it means that he can undo it at the end of the day. Lee releases this information as carefully and as slowly as his father "pulls the pins out" of his mother's hair. He uses a simile for the way her hair falls, comparing it to how the curtains fall "when they untie them in the evening." This evening ritual, a bookend to the morning ritual, is also suggestive of sexual intimacy, as "letting one's hair down" can be an erotic act. The curtains close, admitting no more light to the observer, just as the poem closes.

Themes

Ritual

Rituals are acts or series of acts that are repeated at particular times for particular reasons, sometimes religious, sometimes secular. By detailing his mother's ritual of combing her hair, Lee emphasizes the importance of this act in his own life as well as his parents'. Family rituals are the glue that bonds members to one another, giving them both meaning and identity. Simple acts such as combing one's hair, or watching a mother comb her hair, accrue meaning for family members as time passes, as the very repetition of the act cements the image of the ritual in one's mind. This image can become the dominant memory a family member has for another. Lee's own memory of this ritual includes not only watching his mother comb her hair but watching his father watch her.

By presuming to know his father's "real" reason for liking his mother's hair pinned back, Lee provides an added dimension to his memory of the ritual: it is an opportunity for Lee, the son, to feel superior to his father, who remains unaware of his own desires. In this way, Lee's own description of the ritual becomes a chance for him to show his love for his father and how, through time, he has come to understand him.

Gender

Sociologists maintain that gender roles are learned rather than prescribed by one's genetic makeup. The mother in Lee's poem fulfills the conventional expectations of female behavior. She cooks for her family and shapes her physical appearance to please her husband, whose role it is to appreciate her beauty. Even when she is engaged in such a seemingly mundane act as combing her hair, her husband is there to watch, to savor "the music of comb / against hair." In the evening, it is the father who "pulls the pins out" of his wife's hair, adhering to his own gendered role of initiator, the one who acts upon the female.

Memory

Some evolutionary psychologists claim that the memories that stay with human beings are of incidents and events that help them to survive. By choosing this memory of his mother's morning ritual to describe, Lee suggests that it remains somehow significant for him in the present, that it is formative to the way in which he sees himself and thinks of his parents. The absence of interaction between child and parents in the poem and the focus on the father's endorsement of his mother's ritual suggest a rather formal relationship among the three. However, the tenderness with which Lee describes his mother's actions and his father's obvious pleasure and love for his wife also illustrates a deep emotional bond. It is not surprising that in other poems in the collection, Lee

weaves memories of his parents and childhood with descriptions of his own children, highlighting how memory contributes to shaping his own behavior.

Style

Imagery

Concrete imagery refers to images born of the senses. They include seeing, hearing, taste, touch, and sound. Lee describes his memory of his mother combing her hair by using a detailed set of images to present a clear description to readers. Following is a list of images and the sense to which each corresponds: "the music of comb / against hair": sound; "salted Winter Vegetable": taste; "black as calligrapher's ink": sight; "my mother glides an ivory comb / through her hair": touch. Images, such as the latter, can also be dynamic; that is, they can describe actions.

Point of View

Point of view refers to the eyes and sensibility through which the poem is presented. Lee's poem is told from the first person point of view, meaning that he uses the "I" to structure his description. Short, first-person poems characterized by the expression of the speaker's private thoughts are known as lyrics and are the most popular kind of poetry written today. The term comes from the Greek for "lyre," a musical instrument played while a poem was being sung. Other well-known lyric poets include Emily Dickinson, Sara Teasdale, and Philip Larkin.

Historical Context

The year during which Lee's poem is set is not given, nor is it important, for the poem expresses ideas and evokes emotions that are timeless. Lee's publication of *Rose* in 1986 was part of a tidal wave of literature published by Asian- American writers during the 1980s. This tidal wave, however, began as a ripple during the 1970s with the publication of three anthologies, *Asian- American Authors* (1972), *Asian-American Heritage* (1974), and *Aiiieeeee*! (1975). These anthologies, however, include work mostly by male Chinese and Japanese Americans. The popularity of Chinese-American Maxine Hong Kingston's novel *The Woman Warrior* in 1978 sparked increased interest in Asian-American women writers, which blossomed in the 1980s with works such as Filipina-American Jessica Hagedorn's *Pet Food and Tropical Apparitions*, which received the American Book Award in 1981, Chinese-American Cathy Song's lyrical and haunting first collection of poems, *Picture Bride*, which received the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award in 1982, and Chinese-American Amy Tan's first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, which won the National Book Award and the L.A. Times Book Award in 1989. Anthologies such as *Home to Stay: Asian-American Women's Fiction* (1990) and *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora* (1993) collect many of the major Asian- American women's voices of the 1970s and 1980s.

Apart from Song and Lee, many other Asian- American poets launched their careers in the 1980s. Varied in approach, subject matter, and style, Asian-American poetry draws on sources from Zen Buddhism to American cartoons. Garret Hongo, a Hawaiian-born American of Japanese descent, won widespread acclaim for his collections, *Yellow Light* (1982) and *The River of Heaven* (1988), which received the Lamont Poetry Selection of the Academy of American Poets Prize and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Hongo's poems address the search for cultural identity by those like himself who are estranged from their ethnic roots. Hongo, who teaches in the creative writing program at the University of Oregon, has also edited a collection of Asian-American poetry called *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America* (1993). More recently, anthologies that target poets from particular ethnic groups have appeared, underscoring the differences among various groups and the traditions from which they spring. For example, in 1998, *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry & Prose*, was published, edited by Barbara Tran, Monique T. D. Truong, and Luu Truong Khoi. This collection signals a break with the idea that all Vietnamese-American poetry focuses on the alltoo-expected theme of war. In 1996, *Flippin': Filipinos on America*, edited by Luis H. Francia and Eric Gamalinda, appeared. This anthology gathers writing from both Filipino and Filipino-American writers, who tell stories of their complicated relationship to country and self. Another important recent collection of Asian-American writing is *Black Lightning: Poetry in Progress* (1998), edited by Eileen Tabios, which traces the development of particular poems by some of the country's leading Asian-American poets, including Meena Alexander, Indran Amirthanay-agam, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Luis Cabalquinto, Marilyn Chin, Sesshu Foster, Jessica Hagedorm, Kimiko Hahn, Hongo, Timothy Liu, and Lee.

Critical Overview

Reviewers were unanimous in their praise of *Rose*, though because Lee is such a young poet and has written relatively little, there is scant criticism on his work. Reviewing the collection for the *Nation*, Jessica Greenbaum writes, "*Rose* announces Lee's obsessions but also bears the innate triumph of ordering language." One of those obsessions is Lee's father, who appears throughout the book as a spectral presence Lee grapples to understand. Lee's mentor at the University of Pittsburgh, poet Gerald Stern, writes in the collection's foreword: "What characterizes Lee's poetry is a certain humility, a kind of cunning, a love of plain speech." Stern adds: "The father is the critical event, the critical "myth" in Lee's poetry." Ruth Y. Hsu, in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, ties Lee's passion for his family to his ethnic heritage, noting, "In *Rose* Lee reveals a diasporic consciousness that is frequently inextricably woven into the memories and feelings he holds for his father and the rest of the family." Hsu continues, "The sense of uprootedness, loss, the vague yearning for a return to some lost existence is sometimes the overt topic of his poetry." Reviewing the collection for *Prairie Schooner*, Roger Mitchell writes: "I don't think Lee set out to write a book about the loss of his father . . . but the dead father enters almost all of these poems like a halfbidden ghost." Chinese scholar Zhou Xiaojing takes issue with critics who focus on Lee's ethnicity. In his essay, "Inheritance and Invention in Li-Young Lee's Poetry," Xiaojing argues:

> Ethnocentric readings of Lee's poems . . . are not only misleading, but also reductive of the rich crosscultural sources of influence on Lee's work and of the creative experiment in his poetry. Their readings presuppose a misconception that a pure and fixed Chinese culture has been inherited and maintained by Chinese immigrants and their descendants in America.

Xiaojing looks instead to the Bible and to Western philosophy for influences on Lee's poetry.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of literature and composition. In this essay, Semansky considers Lee's voice.

When critics discuss a writer's voice, they are using the term figuratively. They do not literally mean the way a writer might sound if his or her poem were read aloud. Voice, rather, refers to the writer's relationship to audience and subject matter and to the purpose he or she has for writing. Lee's voice in "Early in the Morning" is typical of the voice he uses throughout his work. It is sad and wistful and full of loss, and it expresses a self grappling with memory to make sense of the present.

Consisting of a list of concrete nouns that economically build a scene, the poem's first stanza is obsessed with time, with getting things just right. What difference does it make if the speaker's mother combs her hair before or after the water boils? By being precise with his list of what happens and when, the speaker establishes authority for himself. Readers trust him because they could not believe that anyone would be so detailed in making up something. This attention to seemingly mundane details of everyday life is a common feature of realistic writing and explains Lee's reputation as a poet of the possible.

Lee also wins readers' trust because he is writing about his family. People are often closer to members of their family than anyone else, and parents, especially in Chinese culture, are revered. By making readers privy to a morning ritual between his parents, Lee risks offending the sensibilities of readers who might see his poem as a betrayal of trust. However, Lee's tender attitude in describing the scene works to mitigate any misgivings some readers might have. He is, after all, highlighting the love his parents feel for each other and the love he feels for them. It is this tenderness, more than any other quality, that allows readers to imagine the person writing the words. In *Developing a Written Voice*, Dona J. Hickey writes this about the relationship among the reader, the writer, and voice:

> As we read, we are the audience to the voice we hear.
> Not only do we take in information about the world,
> but we also meet the person delivering information.
> In all but purely technical or scientific writing, we
> hear not only what the writer knows but also who he
> or she is. The personality we hear determines the
> level at which we respond as one interested, sympathetic
> human being to another.

It is easy to confuse the living, breathing author of a poem with its speaker. Authors may or may not be writing about themselves, and the speaker is just one of the many tools of the writer's craft, the sensibility through which the writer presents the subject matter. Lee is an author who does write about his own lived experience, though he shapes it to fit the poem. In interviews and in his memoir, *The Winged Seed*, he recounts the

experiences of his family as they wandered through the Far East on their way to the United States. In this way, his verse echoes information he has provided in nonfictional venues and has a kind of confessional feel to it. Because of Lee's accessibility, many readers who might otherwise not be readers of modern poetry find it easy to sympathize with him, as they like to believe themselves capable of noble sentiments and tenderness towards their parents.

All of Lee's work addresses memories of his family, in one way or another, and especially of his father, a man who, even in his absence, was at the center of Lee's life. As such, his poems are elegies of a sort, paying homage to the past. Elegies are poems or songs expressing sorrow for one who has died. Lee's sorrow is muted, less direct than that in conventional elegies, as he celebrates as much as mourns his father's life. The bulk of the poems in *Rose* were written in the early 1980s, shortly after Lee's father died and, taken as a whole, detail a portrait of a writer who is obsessed with the memory of his father and with searching for the meaning of his life. In his foreword to the collection, Gerald Stern writes that Lee's search emphasizes

> a willingness to let the sublime enter his field of concentration and take over, a devotion to language, a belief in its holiness, a pursuit of certain Chinese ideas, or Chinese memories, without any selfconscious ethnocentricity, and a moving personal search for redemption, which takes the form of understanding and coming to peace with a powerful, stubborn, remote, passionate, and loving father.

This desire, this longing to understand the father is evident in "Early in the Morning," as the speaker experiences his mother's ritual through his father's eyes, watching his father as his father watches his mother combing her hair. The desire to inhabit the position of witness to his father's desire as well as his own suggests a yearning to fathom a man whom Lee represents in other poems and prose as emotionally distant. In the penultimate stanza, Lee presents his father as someone with stereotypical Chinese tastes: for example, he likes his wife's hair tied back because it is "kempt." Lee, however, presents himself as a son who knows his father's desires even better than does the father. He insists that the real reason his father likes his mother's hair tied back is that it affords him an opportunity to let it down at night. By comparing how "[his] mother's hair falls / when he pulls the pins out" to "the curtains / when they untie them in the evening," Lee evokes the intimacy between his mother and father, an intimacy that Lee will articulate, even if his father will not or cannot. In her essay, "Beyond Lot's Wife: The Immigration Poems of Marilyn Chin, Garrett Hongo, Li-Young Lee, and David Mura," critic Mary Slowik claims that Lee's voice has a "declarative and documentary force." Slowik writes:

> Li-Young Lee is . . . reverent towards his parents . . . even brash, in evoking his father's life as a way of understanding his own. His writing is insistently in the present tense, where past experience and future

promise are fused in the confusion of the present moment,
intensely and immediately experienced.

Lee's voice, then, fights against itself. In attempting to document his past, he must rely on the only tool he has: his memory. But, memory is obstacle as well as tool for self-understanding, as it prevents him from moving forward. The personality behind the voice that Hickey writes about is of someone who is spinning his wheels, but for whom traction remains impossible. It is of someone who needs to relive his past to live in the present, which, ironically, is but another version of the past. In another poem, "Braiding," Lee describes brushing his daughter's hair, recalling that his father did the same thing for his mother and realizing that, in the future, one of them, Lee or his daughter, will have to imagine and remember this ritual. The ritual described in "Early in the Morning" is but one of many that Lee describes in *Rose*, poems such as "Eating Together," "The Weight of Sweetness," and "Braiding." As a poet of ritual and memory, Lee honors the past but, in doing so, risks postponing the future.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "Early in the Morning," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Taibl is an English instructor and writer. In this essay, Taibl examines Lee's poem in relationship to an Asian-American poetic tradition.

Asian-American poetry developed as an institutionalized category of literature from the 1970s to the 1990s as the first anthologies of Asian- American poetry were received into the literary marketplace. The category emerged along with the work of other marginalized minority writers and, like the work of these writers, has been defined by several specific, observable poetic characteristics, including its use of a personal lyric voice using the "I" pronoun□the lyric "I"□to claim the poet's story. At the same time as many minority writers' voices were emerging, many white male heterosexual writers were involved in the Language Poetry movement, whose goals were opposite to many minority writers' goals. The Language Poets, according to Timothy Yu, in his *Contemporary Literature* article, "Form and Identity in Language Poetry and Asian American Poetry," strove to avoid the personal, lyric voice and shunned the lyric "I" in their work. Yu observes that the choices of minority writers, especially Asian-American poets, to claim their personal history through their work are a result of having been "'objects' rather than 'subjects' of American history." The subjugation of their identity through many decades of American writing created a "need to make their voices heard. . . . for these 'stories' have not yet been told." Li-Young Lee's work fits, in many ways, into this definition of Asian-American poetry. Whereas the Language Poets strove to undermine their personal voices in their work, the Asian-American poets, like Lee, along with other minority writers, embraced the personal lyric form as a way to claim a place in the American poetic tradition, a place they had never occupied before.

Many of the elements in Lee's "Early in the Morning" embody the tenets set out in the definition of Asian-American poetry mentioned above. Lee's story is personal and he uses the lyric "I" to tell his story. He also uses images that most readers would consider distinctly ethnic, specifically Asian, to tie the poem to his unique experience. In the poem, there are "Winter Vegetable" and cooking rice, distinct eastern foodstuffs. The mother's long black hair is "black as calligrapher's ink." Calligraphy, artistic, stylized, or elegant handwriting or lettering, is popular in Asian cultures. The eastern images, or ethnic markers, serve as ways to place the poem within the poet's unique story and ethnic identity.

Interestingly, Lee rejects taking a stance as an Asian-American writer, which he says, in a *Kenyon Review* interview with Tod Marshall, is "a question about one's dialogue with cultural significance." Lee claims to have no dialogue with cultural significance; his interest is in "spiritual lineage," the way poets are connected across the ages through theme, language, and spiritual motivation. In other words, his is not a poetry of specific images and specific stories but of universal spirit. Lee tells Marshall that he views himself in relationship to poets whose concrete "line of poetry says one thing, but . . . also says many other things." He cites T. S. Eliot, John Donne, and Pablo Neruda among his influences and implies that though his own images are specific and ethnic, the story they tell is not. The story is rooted in the universality of the spirit. Poetry, for

Lee, is ultimately a dialogue with a poet's self, which he tells Marshall is "so essential to his being, to his self, that it is no longer cultural or canonical." The ethnic specificity in a poem, whether portrayed through images or through a story that is particular to a poet's identity, can be difficult for readers, who may find the "Winter Vegetable" and "calligrapher's ink" too personal to be relevant to their own experience. This is one challenge of Lee's poem, that the specific images and ethnic markers make it difficult for non-Asian- American readers to experience a deeper connection to the work. But, as Lee posits, the poem is about more than images, ethnic or otherwise. The poem is about spirit, though to assist the readers' translation of the poem, Lee offers one, central image from which to dissect and interpret underlying themes and messages.

The use of the central image□in this poem, the hair□is a common tool of Lee's. As critic Zhou Xiaojing, in his *MELUS* article, "Inheritance and Invention in Li-Young Lee's Poetry," says, "To deal with his cross-cultural experience and to show culturally conditioned ways of perception in his poetry, Lee employs and develops a major technique which relies on a central image as the organizing principle for both the subject matter and structure of the poem." Lee said of this technique, in a 2001 interview with Amy Pence in *Poets & Writers* that, "The image is a revelation of sorts, therefore apocalyptic as opposed to ecliptic. While eclipses cover, an apocalypse is an uncovering." The central image as Lee writes it is apocalyptic because it uncovers several layers of meaning that transcend his particular ethnic experience. In this poem, the image is the tying up of the mother's hair. This simple, daily act becomes metaphor, or symbol, for other revelations about history, family, and personal identity.

The hair is compared to ink, the medium through which a story is written. It is not simply ink, but calligrapher's ink. A calligrapher in the Asian tradition is artist, storyteller, and poet, who writes in an ancient Asian form. The hair as ink connects the mother to her Asian identity and suggests a written or recorded history. The hair also sings through the comb, which suggests the passage of stories through oral history. So, the hair represents a history and identity that is older than writing. The darkness of the hair is juxtaposed, or set against, the "ivory" of the comb. The contrast between dark and light suggests that the mother's identity is plain to see. She looks Asian; her hair sets her apart. Though her son shares much of the same ethnic identity, his identity is a bit more ambiguous. He watches his mother tie up her hair, which is an action that he has come to associate strongly with his mother's identity. He also watches his father watching his mother. His share in the moment is from the periphery. He is an observer, not an actor, and therefore, the story is not so much his as it is his parents,' which raises questions about the lyric "I's" identity and where he might locate himself in relation to his parents, their ethnicity, and his own experience.

Like the images of dark and light that begin to uncover the complexities of the relationship the son has with his parents, there are many other dichotomies, or opposites, presented in the poem that work to tell a story that goes beyond the moment of the hair. There is a temporal dichotomy. Early in the morning, the mother ties her hair into a bun. At night, it comes down. There is distinction between what is "kempt," or tidy, and what is messy. There is a suggestion of public propriety when the hair is pulled up and a private freedom when the hair is released and free. There is an opposition

between youth and age, between parent and the child, and there is a suggested opposition in the cultural difference that stems from generational gaps and cultural gaps when Asian parents raise a son in America.

The mother's hair is the immediate link for all of the poem's dichotomies. In the hair, there is familial lineage. There is a suggestion that the father, mother, and son are connected through extensions of time, place, physical likeness, and culture. There are parts of this connection that are tidy and kempt, just as the hair is tidy and kempt during the day, and there are times when that history and identity is untidy, when the ethnic and relational ties are blurry. As the son grows up in America□on a symbolic level, as he lives from the early morning of his life toward the evening□these ties and connections become even blurrier. As an observer of the scene, the son must step back to reconcile the dichotomies that make him who he is. The poem is the place in which he does this.

Like the mother's hair in a bun, the Asian- American poetic tradition can be viewed as a tidy category with the distinct characteristics mentioned in the opening of this essay, or it can be more free and uncertain than that, which is what Lee suggests is his preferred outlook. Just as critics make tidy definitions of poetry, the father claims to like the tidiness of the mother's hair. In truth, the father revels in its evening fall, just as Lee seems to revel in the complexities of his poetic identity, the spirit of the poem rather than its technical and ethnic characteristics and manifestations. The son's understanding of his father's preference for the free hair is the revelatory moment in the poem, the moment in which the son sees the complexities of the familial and cultural relationship. In this moment, the poem transcends ethnic markers and enters the world of the spiritual and universal.

The poem ends with an image of curtains falling in the evening, which is a comparison to the hair's fall when the father pulls out the pins. Depending on the side on which you stand when a curtain falls, the curtain either retains the private stories that occur behind it or prevents the outsider from entering into a private scene. Both of these distinctions are supported in the poem. As an observer, the son is prevented from understanding the complexities of his parents' relationship and identity. He cannot see behind the curtain of their relationship. There is something mysterious, something "easy" left between the couple that does not translate to those outside of their relationship. Similarly, the non-Asian-American reader is prevented, just as the son is prevented from knowing his Asian parents, from fully understanding the Asian identity presented in the poem. For the mother and father, the curtain protects identity and keeps some aspects of their life together and the history they share private. Similarly, the Asian-American poem portrays enough of the complex Asian-American identity for the reader to know it just a bit. The revelation in the poem is knowing that there are things that simply cannot be known and finding in them, despite the curtain, something to appreciate beyond the specific.

In his interview with Pence, Lee claims that what he is trying to do now in his work "is to embody my twofold nature." This twofold nature manifests itself in all the dichotomies established in the poem. Lee has also suggested, in his conversation with Marshall, that the poet's job is not to witness the visible acts of life but the invisible, to write the spirit. Writing the spirit, the invisible, is what leads to a more universally accessible poetry in

which cultural and ethnic markers are simply the beginning of understanding. In this poem, Lee is witness to the visible, his mother's hair, his father's observation of his mother, and the complexities of their relationship and identity in the context of his own ethnicity. In a broader context, and one that allows a connection with a more general audience, he is also witness to the invisible history of relationships between man and woman, parent and child, and what resides between them that is unutterable in every culture except through a suggestion of what lay beyond the curtain that separates these apparent opposites. The central image allows for apocalypse, or the revelation of the complex that, in rare and precious moments, reveals a person's physical and spiritual place in the world. For the reader who reads beyond the specificities of image and ethnic markers in Lee's poetry, a richer story than the personal history of one poet, is revealed, a story that can offer any reader an insight into identity, a story in which the lyric "I" may become the readers' as well as the poet's.

Source: Erika Taibl, Critical Essay on "Early in the Morning," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Adaptations

Lee has appeared with Bill Moyers in Public Broadcasting System's series *The Power of the Word*. This video is available at many public libraries.

Lee reads poems from his collection *The City in Which I Love You* in a 1990 cassette distributed by New Letters on the Air, located at the University of Missouri at Kansas City, 5100 Rockhill Road, Kansas City, Missouri 64110.

Acorn Media distributes the video series *A Movable Feast* (1991), which is hosted by Tom Vitale and profiles eight contemporary writers, including Lee. Acorn Media can be reached at 7910 Woodmont Avenue, Suite 350, Bethesda, Maryland 20814.

Topics for Further Study

With classmates, brainstorm a list of daily rituals in which you engage and then discuss their origins. Are they rooted in family history? In necessity? Are they common among other people in your racial or ethnic group? Discuss what, if any, wider significance they may have.

Write a short essay recounting your earliest memories of your parents. Are you a participant or an observer? Discuss the significance of the memories of your relationship with your parents.

Conventional wisdom has it that children grow up to become just like their parents. In what ways are you most like your parents? Do you consider these similarities positive or regrettable? Discuss your responses with your class and with your parents.

Lee's speaker claims to know something about his father that his father does not know. In your journal, describe something that you know about a family member and a friend that you think they do not know about themselves. What would be the benefits and drawbacks of sharing this information with them?

In groups, represent this poem as a collage of images that you take from popular magazines. It cannot be a literal representation. That is, you cannot simply use images of a woman combing her hair. Rather, try to capture the tone or theme of the poem. Be prepared to discuss your collage with the rest of your class.

Rewrite this poem from the point of view of the mother. Read the resulting poems aloud and discuss how point of view shapes the content of the poem.

List all of the poems in which the image of hair appears in Lee's poems, and then, as a class, discuss the significance of this image.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: With the opening to the outside world and the steady improvement in standards of living in the late 1970s and 1980s, Chinese women again attach great importance to their hairstyles. They begin to put waves and curls into their hair, and some even have permanents.

Today: Chinese women can wear their hair in whatever style they like, give it the color they prefer, wear a wig, or even have their heads shaved. Most Chinese women style their hair because they want to improve the quality of their lives and show respect for themselves.

1980s: Asian/Pacific Americans, according to the United States Census Bureau, number 3.5 million, or 1.5 percent of the total U.S. population, double the 1970 figure.

Today: In 1999, Asian/Pacific Americans, according to the United States Census Bureau, number almost 11 million, or 4 percent of the total U.S. population.

1980s: In 1982, Chinese-American Cathy Song's first collection of poems, *Picture Bride*, receives the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award; in 1989, Chinese-American Amy Tan's first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, wins the National Book Award and the L.A. Times Book Award.

Today: The readership for Asian-American literature continues to expand as Americans become more interested in learning about the Far East and the Asian-American population increases.

What Do I Read Next?

The City in Which I Love You (1990) is Lee's second collection of poems and has been warmly received by critics and reviewers.

In his most recent collection of poems, *Book of My Nights* (2001), Lee continues to explore his memories of his father and other family members.

Essays in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (1997), edited by King- Kok Cheung, provide a useful introduction to the authors and themes of Asian-American writers, including Lee.

Cynthia Sau-Ling Wong has also written *Reading Asian-American Literature* (1993), a more comprehensive approach to Asian-American literature.

For readers who want to sample Asian- American fiction, the following anthologies offer a range of voices and subject matter: *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* (1991), edited by Jeffery Paul Chan et al., and *Charlie Chan Is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction*, edited by Jessica Hagedorn (1993).

Further Study

Lee, Li-Young, *The Winged Seed*, Simon & Schuster, 1995.

Lee's memoir of his family's life in China and Indonesia reads at times like a prose poem. This is a fine introduction to many of the characters that populate Lee's poems.

Maira, Sunaina, and Rajini Srikanth, eds., *Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map North America*, Temple University Press, 1996.

Winner of the 1997 American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, this anthology critically explores the family tension about the concept of home for South Asians who have immigrated to America. It includes fiction, poetry, essays, and photography.

Miller, Matt, "Darkness Visible," in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Vol. 159, Issue 22, pp. 34-37.

This short essay describes Lee's family's migration to the United States after leaving Indonesia, Lee's emergence as a poet, and his kinship to classic Chinese poets Li Bo and Tu Fu of the Tang dynasty.

Wong, Cynthia Sau-Ling, *Reading Asian-American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*, Princeton University Press, 1993.

Wong's examination of Asian-American literature has become a classic in its short time in print and an indispensable resource for students just beginning their research and for seasoned critics seeking new perspectives.

Xiaojing, Zhou, "Inheritance and Invention in Li-Young Lee's Poetry," in *MELUS*, Vol. 21, Issue 1, Spring 1996, pp. 113-33.

Xiaojing discusses the ideas of inheritance and invention in Lee's poetry and how Lee has fashioned himself as an immigrant in America and as a poet.

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Lee, Li-Young, *Rose*, BOA Editions, 1986, p. 25.

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Slowik, Mary, "Beyond Lot's Wife: The Immigration Poems of Marilyn Chin, Garrett Hongo, Li-Young Lee, and David Mura," in *MELUS*, Fall-Winter 2000, p. 221.

Stern, Gerald, Foreword, in *Rose*, by Li-Young Lee, BOA Editions, 1986, pp. 8-10.

Xiaojing, Zhou, "Inheritance and Invention in Li-Young Lee's Poetry," in *MELUS*, Vol. 21, Issue 1, Spring 1996, pp. 113-33.

Yu, Timothy, "Form and Identity in Language Poetry and Asian American Poetry," in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 41, No. 1, Spring 2000, pp. 422-61.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

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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