Eating Poetry Study Guide

Eating Poetry by Mark Strand

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Contents

Introduction

Mark Strand is one of the most prominent figures in contemporary American poetry, and yet his poems are often considered some of the most elusive. Much of his work encompasses dark themes and macabre scenarios that shift quickly from the physical to the metaphysical, usually placing people and animals in bizarre situations. Why, then, has Strand won numerous awards and fellowships for his poetry, been sought as a teacher, lecturer, and reader at universities across the country and across the world, and been selected Poet Laureate of the United States? The answer lies in how readers *approach* Strand's work, and "Eating Poetry" provides us ample opportunity to delve into it, get caught up in it, and come out knowing we have experienced something unusually intriguing. Strand's second collection, *Reasons for Moving* (1968) contains the poem "Eating Poetry," and this collection earned him national recognition as a poet.

Just the title "Eating Poetry" piques curiosity. The first assumption may be that this is only an interesting metaphor for the notion of really enjoying verse, but Strand does not stop there. This poem features a character *literally* eating poetry. All in the span of 18 lines, a man gobbles up poems in a library, mystifies the librarian, turns into a dog, and terrifies the librarian. This is obviously not a poem we go into looking for a concrete exploration of human experience. It is, however, an abstract and sensuous look at one experience in particular□that of truly and completely fulfilling an attraction, in this case, to poetry. "Eating Poetry" also exemplifies Strand's tendency to taint even light or comical situations with an eerie and gruesome flavor. For this reason, we are often left not quite sure of a poem's overall intent, but we are sure our minds have ventured some place new.

Author Biography

Although Mark Strand was born in Summer-side, Prince Edward Island, Canada, in 1934, he moved with his family to the United States at the age of four and spent most of his childhood in New York, Philadelphia, and Cleveland. As a teenager, he lived in Colombia, Peru, and Mexico, most of the traveling due to his father's business in sales. His first education interest was in the visual arts, and he studied painting at Yale after completing his bachelor's degree atAntioch College in Ohio. During this time, he also became interested in writing and turned his attention full time to poetry and short fiction, eventually completing a Master of Fine Arts degree in the writer's workshop at the University ofIowa. Strand never lost his desire to paint and to study art and has published several articles and books on art criticism. He has written nine books of poetry, including the recent 1998 publication of *Blizzard of One,* as well as three illustrated children's books.

Reasons for Moving, containing the poem "Eating Poetry," was Strand's second collection and earned him national recognition as a poet. Published in 1968, this book established Strand's reputation as a writer of poetic "conundrums," or riddles, usually full of incongruous details, sometimes funny, always bizarre. The early work also presented Strand as a poet with dark, foreboding themes, often centered around death or the idea of negation. His popularity derived from an ability to stimulate a reader's intellect with exact language and surreal imagery, and the fact that the allusions, metaphors, and scenes were on the odd or macabre side only fueled interest in the work.

Because so much of Mark Strand's poetry takes place in an unreal world where anything can and does happen, there is little evidence to link it specifically to events in the poet's actual life. While some later pieces have drawn slightly from a more confessional bent, "Eating Poetry" represents the "true" Strand poem. *Reasons for Moving* and the third book, *Darker* (1970), put Strand on the path to prominence in American poetry. Over his career, he has received fellowships from the Ingram Merrill, Rockefeller, and Guggenheim foundations and from the National Endowment for the Arts; he has been honored with an Edgar Allan Poe Award, a MacArthur Award, the Bobbitt Prize for Poetry, and Yale's Bollingen Prize. Strand has taught at over 15 universities from New York to California to Brazil and currently teaches in the Committee on Social Thought at the University ofChicago.

Poem Text

Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.

There is no happiness like mine.

I have been eating poetry.

The librarian does not believe what she sees.

Her eyes are sad

and she walks with her hands in her dress.

The poems are gone.

The light is dim.

The dogs are on the basement stairs and coming

up.

Their eyeballs roll,

their blond legs burn like brush.

The poor librarian begins to stamp her feet and weep.

She does not understand.

When I get on my knees and lick her hand.

she screams.

I am a new man.

I snarl at her and bark.

I romp with joy in the bookish dark.

Plot Summary

Lines: 1-3

From the outset of "Eating Poetry," the scene is peculiar, and it builds toward an even stranger, extraordinary climax at the end. The first line has us picture a man with ink running from his mouth. Notice that the verb Strand chose is not "drips" or "drizzles" or "seeps," but *runs.* It gives the impression of someone eating very hungrily, "shoveling it in," so to speak. We do not have to wait long to find out if this gluttonous act is painful for the speaker, for in line 2, he tells us, "There is no happiness like mine." Now we know that the ink running from his mouth is comparable to the juice of a thick steak on a beef lover's lips or a refreshing sports drink pouring down the chin of a happy athlete. But what causes such glee for the speaker here is not food or drink. Rather, his reason is: "I have been eating poetry." This line□as all the others□is very simply put, as though a common statement of fact. The *fact* here, though, is anything but common, and as we move through the next lines, the speaker acknowledges such.

Lines: 4-6

Line 4 introduces a second character in the poem, and she appears quite a bit more normal than the narrator. In learning that "The librarian does not believe what she sees," we are drawn back into a fairly realistic world□one in which we may have the same reaction and share the feeling of the person who has just witnessed something bizarre. Lines 5 and 6 depict the librarian's initial response to her unusual patron, portraying her as "sad." Her eyes apparently show sympathy, and by walking "with her hands in her dress," she demonstrates a helplessness to do anything about the situation. Resigning herself to pace with hidden hands also indicates cautious behavior and a desire to protect herself. While there is nothing strange about the librarian's responses at this point, she is still a part of an abnormal scene, and her own behavior will take a turn for the odd side as she becomes more and more caught up in the weird actions of the man who is eating poetry.

Lines: 7-9

The third stanza sends us back into the surreal world of the speaker. In this scene, he has finished devouring whatever pile of books he had in front of him, and states very simply, "The poems are gone." Just as simply, he tells us, "The light is dim," and it may be because the library is closing and someone is turning off the lights or it may refer to evening coming on with its loss of sunlight. Whichever "literal" meaning this line refers to, it also lends figuratively a gloomy, darkening aura to an already eerie setting. In line 9, Strand demonstrates his tendency to introduce further oddities into a poem by suddenly shifting to completely different characters (in this case, dogs) whose presence is incongruous to everything mentioned so far. "The dogs are on the basement stairs

and coming up" is a puzzling statement that only evokes questions: What dogs? How does the speaker know the library has a basement? Why are there dogs in it? Why are they coming up? There are no answers offered to these questions, but the animals do become a part of the build-up toward the poem's bizarre ending and a metaphorical link to the speaker himself.

Lines: 10-12

The fourth stanza provides a description of the dogs much in the same way that the second did for the librarian. The dogs, however, are more difficult to grasp for the language is more unlikely, the scene more horrific. "Their eyeballs roll," indicates a sign of madness and portrays a wild or hysterical lack of control. While wild-eyed animals may not be all that far-fetched, line 11 ("their blond legs burn like brush") is unrealistic. But it does serve the purpose of heightened horror and unbelievable occurrence that fuel this poem with a macabre, comedic effect. The poem returns to the librarian in line 12, and she, too, is becoming more hysterical and behaving irrationally in light of the situation. While mad dogs run up the stairs with their legs on fire, the "poor librarian begins to stamp her feet and weep." This response makes the woman seem both childlike and foolish, considering that any "normal" person would most likely be running for the door instead of standing there stamping her feet. The scene, however, is somewhat funny and most certainly surreal, and this is the effect for which Strand is most noted.

Lines: 13-15

Line 13 is an obvious example of understatement. *Of course* the librarian "does not under stand," and the speaker admits it. We have the impression, however, that he does not consider her feeling obvious nor that it should go without saying. The simplicity of the sentence underscores his own naivete, and the next line takes us even further into the strange mind of the man who eats poetry. It also renders a startling connection between the dogs and the man. Suddenly, he has become one, or, at least, begun to act like one. The man-dog in line 14 does not appear as ferocious as the animals that were charging up the basement stairs, but, metaphorically, the link between the images works. The man who is now on his knees is docile at this point and merely licks the librarian's hand. Finally, the woman returns to a more likely reaction: "she screams."

Lines: 16-18

The imagery in the final stanza is both ironic and contradictory. We learned in line 14 that the speaker had taken on the characteristics of a dog, but in line 16 he tells us "I am a new man." He immediately follows this statement with more canine allusions: "I snarl at her and bark." Bouncing back and forth between images that are incongruous and offering no ultimate explanation for the confusion is a technique that draws readers to this poet's work instead of driving them away. Strand piques curiosity and teases the

intellect in such a way that we are prepared for such odd and delightful lines as the one that ends "Eating Poetry": "I romp with joy in the bookish dark." This line sustains the man-dog metaphor (dogs and people may both romp with joy) and presents yet another paradoxical scene. The word "bookish" carries a dull, stuffy tone, most often connoting a studious, formal person or place. And in this case, it is "dark" as well. But this rather somber image is butted up against a reference to raucous, carefree play, as the speaker who has been eating poetry finally gives in to the overwhelming pleasure of doing so. We do not know what happens to the librarian nor whether the dogs in the basement are real, and by the end of the poem it doesn't matter much. The man who seems deranged at first has taken the reader from a bizarre beginning through a frightening episode and finally to a gleeful end in which we can celebrate his love of poetry along with him. We are not expected to analyze nor apply logic to the work. It is meant to entice, provoke, puzzle, and delight.

Themes

Realism vs. Surrealism

The most obvious element of Mark Strand's "Eating Poetry"□as well as much of his other work□is the surrealism that bombards and takes over the poem. As a twentieth-century artistic movement, surrealism is an attempt to express what the subconscious mind is thinking and how it works as opposed to the realities that we experience in the conscious mind. One way to grasp the nuances of what is "surreal" is to think about what dreams are like. Consider the fantastic imagery, the weird occurrences that could not happen in real life, and the ease with which they are accepted in the dream itself. We don't often halt the action in a bizarre nightmare to say, "Wait a minute. This isn't realistic." Instead, we simply follow the lead of whatever strange events take place without any idea of the outcome.

The speaker in "Eating Poetry" is caught up in a dreamlike, abstract world, and his behavior, in turn, draws the librarian into the same unreal circumstances. The entire premise of the poem□the idea of digesting so much paper that the ink runs from his mouth□is a surreal one, and, just as in dreams, each character plays a strange role. A brief synopsis of this poem is evidence enough: a man sits in a library eating books, the librarian paces, the lights go out, dogs run up from the basement with their legs on fire, the librarian cries, the man turns into a dog and licks her hand, the librarian screams, the man growls and barks and romps in a very unlikely place□a library. We cannot discern an exact reason that the events unfold in this manner any more than we can come up with a definitive analysis of odd dreams. There may be many theories, but the main point is the disturbing, thought-provoking surreal experience itself. As editor for the Winter 1995-96 issue *of Ploughshares,* Strand said in the introduction in regard to his selection of poems that "I am not concerned with truth, nor with conventional notions of what is beautiful." This sentiment is obvious in his own poems, which are usually neither "truthful" nor beautiful, but which intrigue the imagination and command attention just the same.

Dark Comedy

Sometimes we may become so distracted by the macabre and morbid imagery of a surreal work that we neglect to notice the humor in it. "Eating Poetry" presents such a deranged scenario that most people do not laugh while reading through it. On a second or third read, however, we may find some levity in picturing a fretful librarian keeping an eye on a patron shoving pages of a book into his mouth. We may also laugh at the notion of a grown man leaping and rolling about on the floor like a playful pup who has no regard for rules or protocol. On one level, the poem is actually a *happy* one, a clever metaphor for a true love of poetry. The speaker tells us from the outset that "There is no happiness like mine," and, yet, we don't tend to take his word for it. And this is where the comedy's "darkness" comes in. Although we are told very matter-of-factly that the

man is happy and although we might really laugh if we saw someone acting so bizarre in a public place, there is enough of a sense of uneasiness and horrific details to keep this from being a "light" poem. The undercurrent of distress and puzzlement prevents it from being truly funny, but there is still an undeniable jocular element in the work. Strand surely had his own poetry in mind when he commented in the *Ploughshares* introduction that "Sense, so long as it's not too familiar, is a pleasure, but so is nonsense when shrewdly exploited." "Eating Poetry" is a good example of nonsense, but it also demonstrates a clever manipulation of the folly into a delightful exercise for the mind.

Style

The language a poet uses may not always be "thematic" by itself, but often a recurring style or word selection can present a certain motif. In "Eating Poetry," the language is simple and precise, written (or spoken) in a very brief, controlled manner. What makes this especially interesting in Strand's poetry is that the simple language is juxtaposed against a complex, easily misinterpreted background of abnormal events. He describes these wild, uncanny circumstances with the conventional monotony of a recipe. And, yet, the poem is far from monotonous. The use of unpretentious words actually adds tension and absurdity to an already surreal situation. To state calmly such lines as, "I have been eating poetry," "The poems are gone," "I am a new man," and "I snarl at her and bark" makes their meanings more eerie than if they were screamed or shouted as though by a madman. The speaker does not "sound" mad, but his actions tell a different story.

On the page, "Eating Poetry" appears very structured and uniform. It consists of six stanzas, each containing three lines. One line in each stanza (with the exception of the second) is obviously much lengthier than the other two, and most of the "lines" are simple, declarative sentences with a subject, verb, and period at the end. While it is common for poets to resort to illustrative language and use "flowery" words strung together in only pieces of thoughts and cryptic phrases, Strand typically does not employ such techniques. Read each line of "Eating Poetry" by itself, out of context, and it makes perfect sense. The *meaning* of the statement "Ink runs from the corners of my mouth" may be far-reaching or very odd, but we know exactly what the sentence tells us—and we can picture it. The same may be said for the description of the librarian, the dimness of the room, dogs running up the stairs, and even a man on his knees licking a woman's hand. It is only when we put all these lines together to form a poem that they suddenly become peculiar and difficult to understand.

There is only *one* simile in this poem: "their blond legs burn like brush." Most eighteen-line poems (as well as much shorter ones) contain several figures of speech, and the simile, or the comparison of two items typically using the word "like," is a very common one. But in Strand's "Eating Poetry," poetic devices are nearly nonexistent. There are two exact rhymes (understand/hand and bark/dark) and little alliteration. What like-sounds do exist are not all that obvious and seem to occur by happenstance: mouth/mine, sees/sad, dim/dogs, and so forth. Line 11 is the most poetically "devised" line in the poem, as it contains not only the one simile, but also the alliteration of three "b" words: blond/burn/brush.

As we can see, a discussion of Strand's poetic style usually involves talking about what is *not* there. He is a poet noted for an ability to turn everyday language and simple sentence structure into captivating verse, and his poems often leave readers puzzled even though we seem to have understood every word we read. That alone speaks for Strand's uniqueness as a contemporary poet.

Historical Context

Strand wrote "Eating Poetry" sometime during the mid- to late-1960s and published it in his 1968 collection *Reasons for Moving.* The setting for this poem is indeterminate, for we know only that the narrative takes place in a library, but we don't know in what city, state, or country, and there is no time period mentioned. Strand spent 1965 and 1966 as a Fulbright lecturer in Rio de Janeiro and returned to the United States afterwards to teach at MountHolyoke College in Massachusetts in 1967. These two positions may not have had any bearing on the poems in *Reasons for Moving,* but the significance may lie in the amount of traveling the poet had already done and in his continuing to move about throughout his career.

The lack of a permanent or semi-permanent home during childhood and adolescence possibly contributed to Strand's tendency to write poems with "neutral" settings. There is no indication that his early life presented personal hardships, but frequent moving could have played a role in his frequent writing about absence and movement. One of his most well-known poems, "Keeping Things Whole," contains the lines "Wherever I am /I am what is missing" and "We all have reasons / for moving. /I move / to keep things whole." And, of course, he selected words from this poem to be the title of the entire collection.

Not much has been written about Strand's personal life nor his responses to the turbulent world of the 1960s. His poems at the time did not reflect the war in Vietnam, social and political movements, the drug culture, or environmental issues. When Bill Thomas interviewed him in 1991 forZos *Angeles Times Magazine,* Strand's comment on being a popular poet during that restless time period was, "Groupies were a big part of the scene. Poets were underground pop stars, and when we made the campus circuit, girls would flock around. It wasn't bad. I rather liked the uncertainties of my life then."

Strand's flippancy here should not be taken to mean that he was oblivious to or unconcerned about the turmoil that was happening throughout the United States and across the world during the 1960s. Although he often gave amusing or wry answers to interview questions, his poetry makes apparent a much more serious, even darker outlook. Perhaps the most revealing statement in Strand's response is his comment about liking the "uncertainties" of his life at the time. He was not alone in his feeling, of course, for there was much uncertainty not only in individuals but in institutions, political systems, and society in general. Mentioning specific locations or limiting a creative work to a particular time and place seems ineffectual for many of Strand's poems, and especially one such as "Eating Poetry." The bizarre nature of the scene itself would override the fact that it takes place in New York or Iowa or Hong Kong. The lack of setting identity actually lends itself to the oddness and mystery of the poem. It says this macabre scene could happen in any place at any time.

Critical Overview

From the beginning, Mark Strand's work caught the attention and won the praise of critics and readers of poetry in general. His distinct style and odd subject matter were the major draw. The first two books, *Sleeping With One Eye Open* and *Reasons for Moving,* established his reputation as a poet caught up in morbidity and death, as well as self-absorption most often expressed through dreamlike events. That he was able to write clear, concise, brief poems that opened up a very complex world of distortions for the reader was a credit to his talent as a poet. Critic David Kirby, in his *Mark Strand and the Poet's Place in Contemporary Culture,* states that, "Many poems in Strand's first book show an uneasy preoccupation with the serf, and the vehicle used to express that preoccupation is often a dream state in which the speaker is divided between two worlds and can locate himself comfortably in neither."

In Richard Howard's *Alone with America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in the United States Since 1950,* the critic comments that *Reasons for Moving* is "two dozen poems in which [Strand] not only raises his voice but rouses his vision with it, so that we do not again forget what we have seen, what we have heard." Addressing "Eating Poetry" in particular, Howard claims that "The poems Strand is eating are those of his first book, and the diet affords him a distinct playfulness, a grotesquerie unthinkable in the old forebodings."

Regardless of the specific interpretations and broad assumptions that critics have made and continue to make about Mark Strand's poetry, nearly all agree that its uniqueness is both stimulating and refreshing. His work is still well-received, and his latest collection entitled *Blizzard of One* elicited this anonymous online comment: [it is] "an extraordinary book□the summation of the work of a lifetime by one of our very few true masters of the art of poetry."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Jonathan N. Barron is associate professor of English at the University ofSouthern Mississippi. He has co-edited Jewish American Poetry *(forthcoming from University Press of New England),* Robert Frost at the Millennium *(forthcoming from University ofMissouri Press), as well as a forthcoming collection of essays on the poetic movement, New Formalism. Beginning in 2001, he will be the editor-in-chief of The* Robert Frost Review. *In the following essay, Barron examines "Eating Poetry" in relation to Surrealism and Deep Image poetry, and compares the eating of poetry to Communion.*

In his *Biographia Liter aria* (1817), the great English Romantic poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously distinguished between two mental faculties, "fancy" and "imagination." According to Coleridge, fancy is a rather mundane, even boring mental exercise where one thinks about things that do not exist. In other words, the fancy is not the mental faculty that allows us to conjure for supernatural things. The imagination, by contrast, is, according to Coleridge, "the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception ... It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate." In other words, the imagination allows us to dream and envision the impossible, the wonderful, the bizarre. To make the distinction between fancy and imagination even more clear, Coleridge says that if fancy never allows us to think of anything unusual, the imagination insists that we only think of impossible, unusual things. As an example of what he means by "imagination" Coleridge says that Fancy is "the drapery" and "imagination the soul." To him, then, the essence of human creative endeavor is located in the imagination and its ability to link seemingly impossible things together: "sameness, with difference; ... the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image."

A little more than a hundred years later, in 1924, the French poet, Andre Breton, launched a poetic movement, "surrealism," that, through the use of Sigmund Freud's new discoveries in psychology, took Coleridge's idea of "the imagination" to even higher levels of bizarre and strange associations and conjunctions. Breton wrote: "Beloved imagination, what I most like in you is your unsparing quality." What he meant was that the imagination "knows no bounds" and so, in surrealism, he meant to free the imagination in order to allow for an ever more rich, more provocative literature. He defined surrealism as verbal or written expression made "in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern." In this way, Breton meant to challenge, combat, and stop the influence of realistic, straightforward literature. "I loathe it," said Breton about "the realistic attitude. "It is made up of mediocrity, hate, and dull conceit." That way of thinking, what Coleridge called the fancy, said Breton, is "a dog's life." In order not to be a dog, then, one must adopt the surrealist principle of a liberated imagination and tap into one's deepest unconscious, subconscious truth.

In the United States, it was not until the early 1960s that significant numbers of fine poets began to turn to such surrealistic ideas. In the 1960s in the books of such notable American poets as Robert Bly, James Wright, Galway Kinnell, W. S. Mer-win, Louis

Simpson, and Mark Strand one finds an abundance of surreal imagery the like of which had never before been included in such quantity and quality in America. In part, Robert Bly deserves a great deal of credit for this new interest in the power of surreal imagery. In the early 1960s, he wrote a powerful and influential essay, "A Wrong Turning in American Poetry." There, he attacks the great Modernist poets of the preceding generation for ignoring the "imagination" in favor of mere "fancy." In that essay, he calls for a renewed attention to the South American and Spanish poetic traditions which had been, in the 1930s, almost entirely overtaken by surrealism. What Bly most objected to in English poetry was its lack of imagination, its lack of what Coleridge called soul. Said Bly of such poetry, "it is first of all a poetry without a spiritual life." More troubling, however, was the fact that "the poetry we have had in this country is a poetry without even a trace of revolutionary feeling." For Bly the trouble with American poetry was that it "has been a poetry essentially without the unconscious," the very thing Breton had insisted enter European poetry. Eventually, Bly's demand that American poets make use of surreal imagery in their work led to a full-blown poetic movement, "deep image poetry." The poets associated with this movement include Mark Strand, and their work was notable particularly because it claimed to reveal, through the use of bizarre, unusual imaginative imagery, the depths of spirituality and religious feeling latent in the human soul. Deep image poetry was as a result of this group of poets' reading in their surrealist predecessors a spirituality that was also deeply anti-materialistic. Deep image poetry, however, often refused to traffic in the more frightening, even sinister themes surrealism opened up for poetry. In surrealism, for example, one finds a slight edge□a dark and sinister quality, a belief that an animalistic unrestrained power exists deep in every individual.

Of all the deep image poets, then, Mark Strand mined the surrealists dark and sinister vein the most. In Strand's witty and terrifying "Eating Poetry" (1968) one gets a wonderful sense of the disturbing and even beast-like energy released by a surrealist approach to the deep image. For the deep image here, the surprising, imaginative, strange image that becomes the focus of the poem is a dog, or, more accurately, a man who becomes a dog. As if turning the tables on Breton's own dismissal of dogs as totally unimaginative, Strand, in this poem, becomes a dog and in so doing creates a deep image for a wild, even revolutionary masculine energy.

"Eating Poetry" was published in Strand's second book, *Reasons for Moving* (Atheneum 1968), a book notably dark and violent. The poems of that book, however, and especially this poem invoke such imagery in order to make a case for the violent, transformative emotional power of poetry itself. In the late 1960s, this was an especially important message to make, and it was a continuation of the point Bly had made in his famous essay. The late 1960s, after all, were a time of great social unrest, of violence associated both with the African-American struggle for Civil Rights and with opposition to the war in Vietnam. In "Eating Poetry," which was published in perhaps the most violent year in the domestic history of the United States after World War II, Strand charts the dangerous power imaginative poetry can have on those who, metaphorically speaking, "eat" it.

The poem's scene, while strange, is easily summarized. In a library, a female librarian is confronted with someone who insists on eating the poetry contained there. Not only does the narrator eat the poetry but he also is joined by a pack of dogs.

In 18 lines, the poem, written in the first person as if spoken by the poetry eater, charts the terror felt by the librarian. It also records the transformative joy felt by the eater, a joy released in part by the fear of the librarian.

Examining the details of the opening lines one realizes that the eating, in an odd way, could easily refer to the sacred eating ceremony of communion in Christianity. In other words, poetry, in Strand's poem, becomes the sacred body, the wafer of Being, the essence of all that is holy. After all, both the Deep Image poets and the Surrealists argued that poetry was a shamanistic, supernatural art. To eat it, then, would be to participate in a spiritual renewal that might very well overthrow the mundane boring world of routines, fixed ideas, of what Coleridge labeled "the fancy," and what Breton called "realism."

In a weird (or, surreal) version of the communion ritual wafer and wine in Strand's poem are now paper and ink: the material body of a printed poem. With this allusion to Communion in mind look again at the language of the first stanza:

Ink runs from the corners of my mouth. There is no happiness like mine.

I have been eating poetry.

While these lines do not yet include any explicit terror, or fear their aggressive tone, and the violence of the eating□a kind of ravenous attack□ does stand in striking contrast to the happiness, love, and peace one finds in so much other Deep Image poetry of the time. Also, one cannot help but notice that, in the violence of such eating, this speaker is happy. In this communion, a kind of savage beast is born. In the Surrealism of Breton, the awakening of the beast within, the liberation of the inner animal, was often a goal for poetry. Here, in Strand's poem, one sees that aspect of Surrealism dramatized.

The animalistic energy is depicted in contrast to the other principal character in the poem, the librarian. In the second stanza, we meet her and she is depicted as a conventional, institutional type□a stereotypical librarian. These first two stanzas, then, establish a symbolic story where the man who feeds on poetry grows wild with rebellion against the conformist rules of a book-controlling culture. The man, liberated through poetry, can now rebel and find the true source of his individuality. No one else, no librarian, will any longer control his access to information about his own life□the very stuff of poetry.

In fact, the pack of running beasts are let loose only after the opposition is established. The dogs, in other words, run up the stairs and are set free only after the man eats his poetry:

The poems are gone. The light is dim.

The dogs are on the basement stairs and coming up.

So far, however, as odd as the speaker's behavior has been, it is not necessarily Surreal in that it is not necessarily impossible in the way that imaginative Surreal images are often impossible. Nothing here defies the laws of physics for example. The poem, so far, merely contrasts a man with a woman and introduces a pack of dogs.

In the fourth stanza, however, the speaker becomes a dog. As both Surrealism and Deep Image poetry would have us read, the speaker here literally becomes a dog; he does not merely act dog-like. From the fourth stanza to the conclusion of the poem, then, we enter the Coleridgean terrain of the imagination through the bizarre imagery of Surrealism. The poem, in other words, becomes decidedly outlandish.

As the stanza develops, the intensity, fear, and even horror of the scene builds. First, the dogs are described as they enter the room. Then, we are told that "the poor librarian begins to stamp her feet and weep." This scene exaggerates the contrast between the savage instinctive truth of poetry and the decorum and safety of cultural institutions. Faced with such wildness, we are told, the librarian "does not understand." Just when reason is destroyed, just when it is impossible any longer to understand, the poem's most incredible moment occurs: "When I get on my knees and lick her hand, / she screams." It is one thing for a pack of running dogs to invade the library and quite another for this man, himself, to become one of those dogs.

In the final three lines of the poem, Strand celebrates the liberated masculine energy that eating poetry has set free:

I am a new man.

I snarl at her and bark.

I romp with joy in the bookish dark.

These lines encourage a reading of genuine surreal, dreamlike transformation. The man who ate the poems here becomes a dog "romping," "snarling," and "barking." The bookish dark, the silent home of a culture of repressive rules, has now been successfully overcome. The strange communion that began this poem, the eating of the poetry, has now allowed for this incredible transformation, for the liberation of the animal within, to occur. The speaker is, by the end, a new man, a dog.

At this point, it might well strike most readers that an implicit sexism pervades the imagery of this poem. Repressive institutional culture is depicted as a female librarian while the wild freedom of art is depicted in terms of men and male animals. It may well be that this is the fundamental premise and assumption behind the poem. On the other hand, the tone of this poem is so arch that it is equally possible to read it as a mockery, a send up, of the very sexism so common to those who argued on behalf of the animal within□which usually meant liberating the male to further oppress women. In other words, one can easily read this poem with an ironic smile as a satire on an implicit sexism latent in the seemingly more gentle deep image poets.

However one chooses to read the politics of this poem's imagery, however, one cannot help but admire that imagery's force, and the claims it makes on behalf of the transformative power of poetry.

Source: Jonathan N. Barron, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Aviya Kushner is the Contributing Editor in Poetry at BarnesandNoble.com *and the Poetry Editor* o/Neworld Magazine. *She is a graduate of the acclaimed creative writing program in poetry atBoston University, where she received the Fitzgerald Award in Translation. Her writing on poetry has appeared in* Harvard Review *and* The Boston Phoenix, *and she has served as Poetry Coordinator for* AGNI Magazine. *She has given readings of her own work throughout the United States, and she teaches atMassachusettsCommunications College in Boston. In the following essay, Kushner discusses the sensory qualities of the poem.*

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mark Strand is known for both his love of language and his love of food. An outstanding cook and a colorful conversationalist, he often uses culinary references in his attempts to explain the uncontrollable urge to write and perfect a poem. Food, like language, has texture, color, and weight. In fact, for Strand, poetry□like food□is a basic need.

Strand likes to say that poets "eat poetry, not meat loaf." He is a voracious reader of poetry in several languages, and is known to encourage his students to read widely and incessantly. He began to explore the idea of poems as almost physical sustenance in the fantastical poem "Eating Poetry," written in 1968 and included in his very first book. Throughout the poem, the speaker flips between mentions of food and mentioned of words. Beginning with the title, the speaker uses verbs associated with meals to describe his joy in reading and in fact, devouring poetry.

The opening line□"Ink runs from the corners of my mouth" □blurs the border between reading and eating. The first line also sets up a surreal, dream-like mood, which Strand employs in many poems. An avid reader and translator of South American poets who write about unlikely, outlandish, and absurd possibilities, Strand thrives on bringing the very strange into English. He has lived in Brazil and Italy, and he incorporates those literatures' focus on dreams and elaborate fantasy to his own writing.

Strand began his career as a painter, and earned an MFA from Yale's School ofArt. He's also written extensively about art, especially on the mystery-laden paintings of the American artist Edward Hopper. Even in his taste in painting, Strand is drawn to the possibility of a surreal occurrence, a sudden drift into a dream.

Of course, dream sequences and riffs into fantasy can be a bit confusing for the reader. The first line here is a bit puzzling, but that is part of the dream set-up. The poem wants the reader to ask questions. Has the speaker eaten ink? Has he eaten a pen? Is he deranged?

These questions create mystery, and make the reader want to read on. The questions propel the poem, and the unanswered functions like gasoline, moving things along. The speaker only reveals a bit of what is going on, trying to hold on to as much suspense as possible:

There is no happiness like mine. I have been eating poetry.

"There is no happiness" signals that this is a unique experience, and a very joyous one. Whether it is actual or imagined is unclear. But the ink running down the mouth is the remnant of the eaten poems. There is physical evidence of the happiness. Of course, as the reader reads this particular poem, he is also "eating poetry." And so, the experience is mutual□the speaker is letting the reader share in the joy.

What's more, this is a forbidden joy, since these poems belong in the library. The librarian is in shock, and "she does not believe what she sees." Unlike the speaker, elated from his meal of words, the librarian is sad. She walks "with her hands in her dress," an allusion to her loneliness□the loneliness of those who do not have poems.

The next stanza presents another turn:

The poems are gone. The light is dim.

The dogs are on the basement stairs and coming up.

Suddenly, the poems have disappeared. This is another standard Strand feature□removing the subject. Strand is a poet who likes to think about absence, whether of other people or objects, or of himself. He has written long poems about loved ones who have died and the space they have left in his lives. Very early on, in "Keeping Things Whole," also written in 1968, he wrote:

Wherever I am I am what is missing.

Here, the jolting absence coupled with "the light is dim" weaves the dream possibility again. Maybe the ink is not real, maybe the dogs are imagined, and the librarian just a made-up character.

In the next line, there's an even bigger leap toward strangeness. In this library where poems are eaten and a sad librarian stares in disbelief, dogs appear, and they rush up the stairs. The librarian is at a complete loss as the dogs get closer:

Their eyeballs roll. Their blond legs burn like brush. The poor librarian begins to stomp her feet and weep.

The dream may be turning to nightmare, since "their eyeballs roll" and "their blond legs burn like brush" do not indicate the friendliest of dogs. The librarian, now referred to as "the poor librarian," is besides herself. She stomps her feet and weeps.

In this stanza, Strand lets sound propel the action "Blond legs burn with brush" uses the alliteration of the repeated "b"s to create a menacing sound which blusters forward. In the next line, the words "feet" and "weep" use assonance to emphasize the passage.

What is going on here? The librarian doesn't have a clue, and her bafflement may mirror the reader's. "She does not understand," the speaker says, and he proceeds to try and make her understand by touching her.

The speaker "gets on his knees and licks her hand," perhaps imitating the dog. She screams. But this speaker is not a dog. Instead, he states rather clearly in the last stanza:

I am a new man.

I snarl at her and bark.

I romp with joy in the bookish dark.

The speaker states that he is a new man, and the seventeen one-syllable words in a row add crisp authority to his claim. But is he really a new man? The next line explains how this "new man" acts:

I snarl at her and bark.

I romp with joy in the bookish dark.

"Snarl" and "bark" again use sound to create power, and the final "dark" capitalizes on this repetition. The snarling, barking man has something in common with the crazed dogs. He "romps with joy," returning to the earlier statement that "there is no happiness like mine."

The final description of the scene□"bookish dark"□brings everything together. This is a special kind of darkness, a new kind of dim space. It is the odd and promising darkness of books, the possibility presented by poems and the words in them. Those words can create eyeball-rolling dogs, and a romping snarling man out of a reader in some musty stacks. Poetry is not ordinary stuff, and it changes its readers into "new men" and new women. In order to transform, however, poetry's readers must realize that poems are not meant to be read. They are meant to be eaten, and eaten with gusto.

Source: Aviya Kushner, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Adaptations

In 1978, Mark Strand recorded a 60-minute cassette containing the poems "From the Long Sad Party" and "Shooting Whales." He is introduced by fellow poet Gregory Orr.

If you have audio access on the Internet, you can hear Mark Strand read his poem "From the Long Sad Party" on "The Academy of American Poets" website at http://www.poets.org/.

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Strand, Mark, introduction to *Ploughshares,* Winter, 1995-96.

--------, *Reasons for Moving,* New York: Atheneum, 1968.

Thomas, Bill, Interview with Mark Strand, *Los Angeles Times Magazine,* January 13, 1991, p. 14.

Compare & Contrast

1961: American psychologist B. F. Skinner published his highly acclaimed book *Walden Two.* In it, Skinner advanced the theory of "behaviorism," which rejects the unobservable and the unconscious in favor of actual responses to actual events.

1966: French writer and so-called founder of surrealism Andre Breton died at the age of 70. Breton wrote three manifestos on surrealism and opened a studio for "surrealistic research."

1989: Spanish painter Salvador Dali died at the age of 85. Dali was a leader in surrealist visual art, using a precise style that enhanced the dreamlike effect of his work.

1990: President George Bush and the 101st Congress declared the 1990s to be the "Decade of the Brain." Throughout the decade, scientific information and research about the brain has amassed at an enormous rate, thanks mostly to technological advances in computer imaging and brain mapping.

Topics for Further Study

Explain your opinion on whether a poem with surrealistic imagery is more interesting or less interesting to read than a one with conventional images and scenarios.

Write about a scene you have witnessed or an experience you have had that was bizarre and seemed both real and unreal at the same time.

Explain some of the similarities and differences between surrealist writing and surrealist art, using examples from both genres to support your points.

If you saw a man sitting in a library shoving pages from a book into his mouth, what would your reaction be and how do you think other people around him would react? In answering, consider such particulars as social expectations and current laws.

Compare and Contrast

1961: American psychologist B. F. Skinner published his highly acclaimed book *Walden Two.* In it, Skinner advanced the theory of "behaviorism," which rejects the unobservable and the unconscious in favor of actual responses to actual events.

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What Do I Read Next?

Surrealist Women: An International Anthology is a wide-ranging and delightful collection of essay s compiled by editor Penelope Rosemont and published in 1998. The writers explore such diverse topics as racism in the 1930s, French poetry, and the tale of "The Golden Goose," all with a surrealistic twist.

The question is whether creativity is a therapeutic, culturally enriching pursuit or only an outpouring of a dark unconscious full of dangerous, neurotic thoughts. An answer is offered by Kevin Brophy in *Creativity: Psychoanalysis, Surrealism and Creative Writing* (1999). Brophy uses theory, history, autobiography, and fiction to make his intriguing point.

Little publicized in America, the poets and writers in *Another Republic: 17 European and South American Writers* provide a wonderful overview of international poetry that many Americans do not otherwise have the opportunity to read. This 1985 collection is edited by Mark Strand and Charles Simic.

Whether you are already experienced in dream interpretation or haven't given it much thought, Anthony Shafton's *Dream Reader: Contemporary Approaches to the Understanding of Dreams* (1995) offers an interesting, intelligent, and accessible overview of the field of dream studies. This book is not a far-out, New Age diatribe, but a thoughtful and serious look at a some very odd phenomena.

Psychiatrist J. Allan Hobson takes an unusual look at the human mind, using illustrative stories from his own life and the lives of his patients in *Dreaming as Delirium: How the Brain Goes Out of Its Mind,* published in 1999. Among other controversial theories, Hobson argues that there is a close similarity between the brain's chemical characteristics during the states of dreaming and psychosis.

Further Study

Dali, Salvador and Haim Finkelstein, eds., *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dali,* London:Cambridge University Press, 1999.

While Salvador Dali is remembered mostly for his surrealist painting, he was also a prolific writer. The essays in this book fall into the surrealist category as well (one review calls them "weird, wonderful, and poetic") and help us to understand the connection between dreamlike painting and dreamlike prose.

Strand, Mark, *Blizzard of One,* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.

Strand's most recent collection continues to display his ability to provoke and amaze with short poems and everyday language. Many of the poems in this book relay a sense of happenstance in much of our lives□that most things just come and go regardless of our striving.

--------, *Hopper,* Hopewell, New Jersey: Ecco Press, 1994.

Strand's interest in painting continued even after he turned his career attention to poetry. In this book about the artist Edward Hopper, Strand explores the geometry of his paintings, showing how Hopper used negative space to elicit emotion much the same way Strand uses it in his poetry.

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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