Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead Study Guide

Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead by Andrew Hudgins

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Introduction

"Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead" was published by Houghton Mifflin, in 1991, in *The Never-Ending,* Andrew Hudgins's third volume of poems. The poem calls itself an "elegy" in the first half of the title, and thus we expect to hear a poetic lament for someone who has died. But Hudgins puts a strange twist on the ancient genre, *elegia* . This poem is an elegy for someone who is not yet dead, namely, the poet's father. In the first two lines, Hudgins voices for many readers that secret dread of hearing that a parent has died. The poem anticipates mourning for his father, but because he is "not dead," another kind of elegy is also at work. Death will be one sort of distance eventually separating father from son; meanwhile, there are vast distances between them in life. His father, "in the sureness of his faith," is "ready . . . to see fresh worlds." The son is clearly not so sure and is instead "convinced / his ship's gone down." The poem is thus a kind of double elegy. It mourns both what is and what is not to be.

"Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead" witnesses what numerous other poems and memoirs tell of Hudgins's relationship with both his father and his faith. When Hudgins speaks elsewhere of his father, it is with a complex mixture of fear, admiration, exasperation, awe, and sadness. An essay published in *The Washington Post* reconstructs a childhood that "belonged in some fundamental way to my father and the U.S. Air Force, not me." In his uniform, Hudgins's father "radiated authority, presence, a forceful place in the world"; in a suit, "he looked strangely diminished." But for all its "authority," the uniform also became a symbol of the essential distance from his sons, none of whom Hudgins believes would have "flourished" in the military, "least of all me," he says. The pattern of "not following" his father is traced along yet another painful path in this quirky "elegy." This son has followed neither his father's path in life nor his contemplated route to death. The disjunctions between father and son, to borrow the book's title, appear "never-ending."

This poem is also characteristic of Hudgins's preoccupation with matters of religious faith. Biblical language, imagery, and characters appear frequently in Hudgins's writing, both poems and prose. But his expression of religious matters is hardly pious and never sentimental. On the contrary, his work has been called "grotesque," "violent," and "bawdry." The "stained glass" of his religious sensibility is more likely to be stained with compost, clay, and tobacco than with the usual jewel colors and pious figures of church windows. "Elegy for My Father" confesses his doubt that the hereafter is an adventure cruise and that the ultimate good-bye should be a cheery affair.

Like many Hudgins poems, this one locates death at the center of its verbal energy. But it is also characteristic of his style: short lines, accessible language, indelicate tone. It makes little difference whether one has a religious sensibility or shares Hudgins's southern or military upbringing; there is little distance, ultimately, between Hudgins and his readers. It is easy to recognize ourselves somehow in his poems' painful family scenes, humorous predicaments, and accounts of "sins" both contemplated and carried out. In the words of his first title, Hudgins emerges neither as "saint" nor "stranger" in the light of his earthy, accessible poems.

Author Biography

Andrew Hudgins was born in Killeen, Texas, on April 22, 1951. Between his birth and his entry into Sidney Lanier High School in Montgomery, Alabama, Hudgins and his family followed his father, a career Air Force officer, to New Mexico, England, Ohio, North Carolina, California, and France. Despite this apparent rootlessness, typical of the military lifestyle, Hudgins considers himself a Southerner and derives much of the material for his poems from the images, idioms, and folkways of the Deep South. The poet's parents, Andrew L. and Roberta Rodgers Hudgins, both grew up in the cotton-mill town of Griffin, Georgia, and returned there often to visit their large, extended family. Hudgins's father, a West Point graduate and a man of uncompromising moral uprightness and religious discipline, is an important influence on his son's work. He looms large in Hudgins's childhood memory and in numerous poems as a rather fearful figure, who "raised my three brothers and me as if we were recruits."

Hudgins's father was also a devout Christian, who grew up Methodist but "converted" to the Baptist church. The elder Hudgins required his sons to be present for nightly Bible readings and prayers, not to mention attendance at church on Wednesdays and Sundays. While the younger Andrew squirmed through the enforced devotionals, he nevertheless absorbed biblical language, images, and stories that his poems transform in often startling ways.

Hudgins's father, however, was not one to encourage his son's voracious reading habits, much less offer any aesthetic sympathies. He had no relationship with literature, per se, and only the most pragmatic attitude toward books. In his mind, the "good book," the Bible, was a guidebook for right living and devotion. For his son Andrew, the Bible became a rich source of stories and images for an art that strips away, poem by poem, every possible vestige of religious sentimentality and cliché. By the time Hudgins was a teenager, his father "didn't want us to be uprooted once we entered high school," so he settled the family on the Air Force base near Montgomery, Alabama, in 1966, and then left for a year of duty in Vietnam. Hudgins says that his identity as a Southerner evolved from his high school and college years in Montgomery during a time when the city was the backdrop for critical events in the civil rights movement. Hudgins attended Sidney Lanier High School, the local public school named after the nineteenth-century, Georgia-born poet.

After completing a bachelor's degree in English at Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Hudgins married and earned a master's degree in arts at the University of Alabama. He never completed the Ph.D. in English that he began at Syracuse University, despite being the recipient of a fellowship and the Delmore Schwartz Award for Creative Writing. Instead, he returned to Montgomery to teach at a junior college. A divorce soon followed. Hudgins then applied successfully to the famed Iowa Writer's Workshop, receiving a masters degree in Fine Arts in 1983. His appointment to the faculty at the University of Cincinnati in 1985 coincided with the publication of his first volume of poetry, *Saints and Strangers,* a runner-up for the 1986 Pulitzer Prize. Hudgins has continued to receive awards for his writing: five volumes of poetry, a volume of essays,

and numerous articles, short stories, and memoirs. *The Never-Ending* (1991), in which "Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead" appears, was a finalist for the 1991 National Book Award in Poetry and received the Texas Institute of Letters Poetry Award. *After the Lost War* (1988), a poetic chronicle of the life of Sidney Lanier, received the Poets' Prize for the best book of poetry published in 1988. His most recent volume of poems is *Babylon in a Jar* (1998). Hudgins's work has been anthologized in such diverse collections as *The Best American Poetry, 1998, The Made Thing: An Anthology of Contemporary Southern Poetry,* and *Upholding Mystery: An Anthology of Contemporary Christian Poetry* . Hudgins remarried in 1992 and continues to teach in the English department at the University of Cincinnati. The University recently awarded him the title "Distinguished Professor of Research," broadening the usual notion of "research" to embrace the poet's searches and re-searches into the work and power of words.

Poem Text

One day I'll lift the telephone
and be told my father's dead. He's ready.
In the sureness of his faith, he talks
about the world beyond this world
as though his reservations have
been made. I think he wants to go,
a little bit□a new desire
to travel building up, an itch
to see fresh worlds. Or older ones.
He thinks that when I follow him
he'll wrap me in his arms and laugh,
the way he did when I arrived
on earth. I do not think he's right.
He's ready. I am not. I can't
just say good-bye as cheerfully
as if he were embarking on a trip
to make my later trip go well.
I see myself on deck, convinced
his ship's gone down, while he's convinced
I'll see him standing on the dock
and waving, shouting, *Welcome back* .

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2

As though the reader were a listening friend, Hudgins's first two lines declare a personal "fact" in a simple sentence with plain words. "One day," he surmises, someone will call, and he'll hear that his father has died. It will be somewhat expected, however, because his father is elderly, and "he's ready." It's not unusual to hear aging or seriously ill people claim they're "ready" to die. The poem begins in familiar language with a familiar situation.

Lines 3-6

It is Hudgins's habit, however, to peel the layers off the familiar until it yields something more pungent and particular. In these lines, he begins to explore more precisely, and individually, just what "he's ready" means to his father. Here we learn that his father's religious faith is what enables this readiness to die. His faith has assured him that there is a "world beyond this world." Beyond death, there is something, not nothing. And the way his father talks about that next world has the tone of someone excited about a trip, a travel adventure. At least that's the way it strikes the ear of his son, and in the poem, it becomes a simile: "he talks . . . as though his reservations have / been made." It even sounds as though "he *wants* to go."

Lines 7-9

But after all, this is death, a serious sort of trip, so "I think he wants to go" is quickly qualified in the next line with "a little bit." The poem is written from the doubting son's point of view, and we can know about the father's attitude toward death only through the filter of what the son thinks and feels. Perhaps this qualifier emerges from the son's own position of doubt. Perhaps he reads into his father's "sureness" an occasional tentative undertone. Nevertheless, the travel metaphor continues as the son notices his father's desire to go elsewhere "building up," a kind of "itch," the poem calls it, colloquially. The son speculates that his father is looking forward to an eternity of "fresh" worlds, where all things are new, innocent, untainted. On the other hand, perhaps the landscape of the hereafter will be "older," akin to those times and places more proximate to Paradise. One thing seems sure: the aging man's vision of heaven scarcely resembles this present world.

Lines 10-13

Until now, the poem has spoken almost solely of the father's attitude toward his own death. At this point, the son enters, and the differences between their understandings of the "next life" emerge clearly. The father expects the son to "follow him" to that place, where their reunion will be full of affection and good humor. In fact, death will be much

like birth, the poem implies. The son followed the father into life. Likewise, the assumption goes, he will follow him in death, another kind of passage like birth, to a new world. At least that is the optimism the father holds out. The son, in line 13, has a different position: "I do not think he's right."

Lines 14-17

In short bursts of contrast, line 14 declares simply: "He's ready. I am not." It is neither a simple, nor a "cheerful" matter for the son, this saying "good-bye." And he certainly feels no assurance that his father can make his own passage from life to death more comfortable simply by preceding him. The father's earlier "trip" will not of itself "make my later trip go well."

Lines 18-21

The "trip" metaphor culminates in the last lines with the image of both son and father traveling by sea. In the process, "sinking ship," a cliché for doom and death, recovers its original metaphoric freshness through the particulars of this father-son relationship. The son sees himself "on deck" of his own ship, making his own journey in this life. But the poem clearly implies it is not the same ship as his father's. In fact, from his vantage point "on deck," the son is "convinced" his father's "ship's gone down." His father is not safe; he's submerged in something vast, cold, and deep.

Hudgins's father, however, is convinced of something quite different: in the next life, he'll be safely docked, and his son's ship will eventually arrive at the same port. "I'll see him standing on the dock," says the son, exuberant in his " *Welcome back* ." The phrase could have ended simply in a *Welcome,* but the presence of *back* implies something of a return that cannot be ignored. What is it that the father believes his son will be returning to? His presence? That pure relationship that accompanied his birth? Or is it more complex, theologically speaking? Is he welcoming him "back" to something prior to both of their lives on Earth, something both fresh and old, something like heaven?

Themes

Parents and Children

Hudgins's elegy for his still-living father is certainly not the only poem that blends his preoccupation with his parents' death and dying. "My Father's Corpse" humorously reconstructs a memory from early childhood:

[my father] lay stone still, pretended to be dead.
My brothers and I, tiny, swarmed over him
like puppies. He wouldn't move. We tickled him
. . .
. . . . We pushed small fingers up
inside his nostrils, wiggled them, and giggled.
He wouldn't move.

It wasn't until the little boys became alarmed that young Andrew himself aggressively tested the limits of his father's pretense:

[and] slammed my forehead on his face. He rose,
he rose up roaring, scattered us from his body
and, as he raged, we sprawled at his feet□thrilled
to have the resurrected bastard back.

It would be unfair to say that Andrew Hudgins is "obsessed" with his relationship to his parents and kin but not unreasonable to say that it occupies much of what we would call his "psychic space." Numerous poems throughout Hudgins's work recover some detail of clothing, a gesture, verbal habit, a scene or event from life, or death, for which his family, parents most often, are the focus. *The Never-Ending* contains unorthodox elegies for both father and mother, one for a father "Who is Not Dead" and one for a mother long ago "gone underground," mingled with the images of stubborn, dry flowers in "November Garden." Hudgins's autobiographical poems in *The Glass Hammer: A Southern Childhood* (1994) supply numerous family stories and images that help put the sad distance between father and son in "Elegy for My Father" in context.

The Glass Hammer opens with a passage from the Old Testament prophet Nehemiah: "both I and my father's house have sinned" and then begins immediately with a poem recalling a particular "sin" he commits as a curious child against his mother and her prized knickknack, a crystal hammer. The adults in Hudgins's life□father, mother, grandmother, aunts, uncles□appear in his poems as profoundly authoritative: "PUT THAT THING DOWN!," " *Shush, boy,*" " *Calm down! Sit still!,*" "Quit sniveling!" Constantly accountable for his behavior, the young Hudgins also feels completely accountable to his kin for what he does, and is. According to "Begotten":

I've never, as some children do,
Looked at my folks, and thought, I must Have come from someone else
I never had to ask, What am I?
I stared at my blood-kin, and thought,
So *this,* dear God, is what I am.

One has the sense that Hudgins has continued to "stare" at his kin and that poems are the result. He stares at them in all sorts of circumstances, letting the reader intimately into the four walls of a childhood that was less than ideal, sparing little of the daily cruelties and crudities that textured his family life. In "Dangling," Hudgins's father swings Andrew off the roof upside down, ankles cinched with rope, to paint the house. He also dangles his oldest son into "the darkness of the well," where Andrew recalls:

[I] grabbled in black water till I found
the rotting body of a cousin's dog.
I hugged it to my chest and Daddy hauled
the wet, gray rope. I vowed I'd always hate him.

There are poem-stories of raunchy joke-telling, ignorant, racist cousins, cursing uncles, and disheartening criticisms. Andrew announced at dinner one night:

I'd like to be a tree . My father clinked
his fork down on his plate and stared at me.
"Boy, sometimes you say the dumbest things."
You ought to know, I muttered, and got backhanded
out of my chair.

Even as Hudgins tells these stories, says the poetic "Afterword" to *The Glass Hammer,* he realizes that "all telling's betrayal," not necessarily of his family in their unflattering portraits but of something larger a betrayal of truth, which has been subject to his autobiographical "selection, rounding off, / interpretation and my failure / to stay as angry as I'd vowed." In the title essay of his most recent prose volume *The Glass Anvil* (1997), Hudgins remembers vowing as a fifteen-year-old with "plentiful rage and gravity" that "if I ever wrote about my life I'd do it while I was still angry and that my book would be brutal, ruthless, scorchingly honest. I'd blow the lid off the pot, dammit." "The Glass Anvil: 'The Lies of an Autobiographer'" confesses, describes, and ultimately accepts each of the eight "lies" that he had to tell in order to express what he "thinks his life means and how that life felt to the one who lived it."

Perhaps Hudgins has "betrayed" his anger in "Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead." It is not an angry poem. On the other hand, the Hudgins, in this poem, is grown up and has admittedly learned a few things about forgiveness: "How can you forgive your family?" he is asked at a reading. "By asking them to forgive me," he answers. This is the Hudgins who struggles in his weekly calls to his aging father "to say *I love you,* although it's true / and gets a little truer with each saying." There is less anger at his father in "Elegy" than sadness, for the inevitability in death, as in life, of absolute divergence. Hudgins's father would have liked his sons to follow his military career. They didn't. He would have liked them to follow his devotion to the Bible and the church in the way he did. They didn't. This elegy mourns a son's inability to "say good-bye as cheerfully / as if he were embarking on a trip / to make my later trip go well." There are no illusions of being ready to follow his father in life, or death.

Together, *The Glass Hammer* and *The Never-Ending* perform as a kind of poetic *bildungsroman* . A *bildungsroman* is a German term used for novels which reveal a character's trials in growing up, such as Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* . Hudgins's poems tell the story of a boy who becomes a man as he awakens to the truth of his upbringing and struggles to make sense of what's left in the wake of his necessary disillusionments. By the time Hudgins has written this poem, the energy once devoted to anger has found a better direction in the painful work of understanding, forgiveness, and acceptance. Although "convinced / his ship's gone down," the son has found ways to love his father anyway.

Death

According to its classical definition, an *elegy* is a poem written in honor of some loved or esteemed person who has died. John Milton's pastoral "Lycidas" is a good example of the classic elegy. John Donne, a contemporary of Milton in the seventeenth century, took more liberty with the genre. His elegies address matters of human love that, to his metaphysical bent of mind, often resemble death. In the hands of modern poets, the elegy has been re-imagined in both the subject and form. J. V. Cunningham, for instance, wrote a satirical "Elegy for a Cricket," and Alan Dugan, "the clown of nihilism," composed "Elegy for a Puritan Conscience." Both poems stray well outside the subject and form of a classical elegy. Yet there are also plenty of modern poems with traditional aims, such as William Carlos Williams's elegy for D. H. Lawrence, and W. H. Auden's elegiac memory of Irish poet William Butler Yeats.

Andrew Hudgins's curious elegy mourns the lonely gap that exists in the present between him and his still-living parent. In the original sense of the Greek word *elegeia,* the poem is a lament, in this case, for an irreparable disjunction in their belief in the hereafter. Father and son diverge in life; they will likely diverge in death. That emotional certainty is the cause for lament. The poem is full of the contrasts between the father's quite hopeful vision of life after death and the son's sad resignation to something more final. The elder Hudgins's firm orthodox Christian belief in the resurrection creates a happy prospect for this next journey, a continuation of life, not an end. The son is not so sure: "He's ready," but "I am not." According to the poem's final image, both father and son are on ships, but not aboard the same one. Their journeys may not bring them into the same port, finally, the last lines imply. The younger Hudgins is still working out his relationship to the eternal and the hereafter, largely through poems. At the moment, he is unable to greet the prospect of death, his father's or his own, with an "itch / to see fresh worlds."

Style

"Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead" is written in free verse. Instead of adhering to an overtly formal pattern of meter or rhyme, it follows the path of the human voice. Hudgins's poems in general are quite conversational in tone and simple in word choice. He frequently includes snatches of overheard dialogue in his poems, capturing the raw, sometimes raunchy language of those around him. While "Elegy" contains no such dialogue, it does witness and interpret in contemporary language the almost childlike conception of eternity his father holds: "he talks about the world beyond this world / as though his reservations / have been made."

This poem, like many others in *The Never-Ending* and his other volumes, consists of one long stanza and medium-length *enjambed* lines, lines that run on from one line into the next without punctuation or formal capitalization. Take lines 7-9, for example: "a new desire / to travel building up, an itch / to see fresh worlds." In free verse, the line breaks are quite important, not only because they help establish the poem's "melody," but also because they give special weight to the first and last words of the lines. In lines 7 and 8, "desire" and "itch" end the lines and thereby subtly offer themselves as synonyms. Together they intensify the impression of hope the father has in the "never-ending."

Within the twenty-one lines of this poem are eleven sentences, many of them quite short. Line 14 consists of two very short sentences and the pointed beginning of a third: "He's ready. I am not. I can't." Every sentence in the poem is declarative, stating a perception or a fact. There are no commands, questions, or exclamations. As a result, the poem speaks itself quietly and resignedly, as though there's nothing to rage about or praise, nothing to exhort or admonish, nothing to question or plead for. Furthermore, the words within these sentences are short themselves, consisting of only one or two syllables. These short words and spare sentences convey a simple grief, undecorated by pious words or euphemisms, undistracted by formal techniques. The textures of syllables, words, and lines work together to support the simple, stark realization at the heart of the poem that a separation has already begun.

Free verse is indeed free from the strictures of formal pattern, but it is not free of form. Hudgins's poems are often "formed" by an *iambic* meter. The *iambic foot* consists of an unstressed syllable, followed by a stressed syllable, as in line 4: "a *bout* the *world* be *yond* this *world* ." The iambic foot comes closest to the natural rhythms of human speech. A scansion of "Elegy for My Father" reveals that the typical number of iambic "feet" per line is four, that is, *iambic tetrameter* . Iambic tetrameter is one foot shorter than the more common free verse meter, *iambic pentameter* . Poet Mary Oliver observes that iambic pentameter is "suitable to the construct of meditation," but that iambic tetrameter sustains the sense of strong emotion. We speak more briefly, breathe more quickly, "when we are pitched to some emotion sharper than contemplation," when, she says, "we reach, in emotion, for the succinct." Such is the emotion conveyed succinctly but urgently in Hudgins's elegy for his father. "Something wants to be resolved," says Oliver of poems written in iambic tetrameter. The meter of Hudgins's

elegy is a revelation, in form, of the profound distances unresolved between father and son.

Historical Context

Andrew Hudgins's complex identity as a Southerner was formed primarily during his high school years in Montgomery, Alabama. Montgomery is often called the "cradle of the Confederacy" because it served, through 1861, as the first capital of the provisional government known as the Confederacy, the alliance of southern states that seceded from the Union. It was in Montgomery that the Confederacy's first constitution was drafted, which, while resembling the U.S. Constitution in many ways, also made provisions for states' rights and slavery.

A hundred years or so later, the city became nearly synonymous with the civil rights movement because so much of its tensions were embodied there. It was in Montgomery, on December 5, 1955, that Rosa Parks, a black woman, refused to give up her seat in the front of a bus to a white man and was arrested. Her individual protest rippled into a yearlong boycott of the Montgomery bus system and eventually into radical transformations effected by the civil rights movement and its leaders, foremost the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Inspired by India's Mohandas Gandhi, King urged African Americans to protest the infringement of their rights peacefully. King himself participated in countless nonviolent protests and marches, even though many demonstrations were met with anger and violence on the part of their white detractors. It was during the peaceful march on Washington in 1963 that King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King asserts that "We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive." Tensions were quite high and alive in Alabama in 1965, just one year before Andrew Hudgins and his family moved to Montgomery. In February of that year, Rev. King and 770 others were arrested in Selma, Alabama, for protesting unjust voter registration laws. Another 2,000 were arrested in early March, prompting a march from Selma to Montgomery, the state capital. On their way, Alabama state police attacked marchers with tear gas, whips, and clubs. When Governor George C. Wallace refused to offer protection for another march, President Lyndon B. Johnson stepped in to provide three thousand National Guard members and military police. King then led the now-famous, five-day march from Selma to Montgomery, which began with 3,200 participants on March 21, 1965, and ended on March 25 with over 25,000 gathering in front of the state capitol building, further galvanizing the civil rights movement both in body and spirit. Meanwhile, the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist group, escalated their violence not only against blacks but against white civil rights activists.

The atmosphere of racial tension, human rights violations, and violence had a deep impact on the young Andrew Hudgins, who witnesses its horrors in many poems, especially from *The Glass Hammer: A Southern Childhood* but also in *The Never-Ending* . The first poem of that book, which also contains the elegy for his father, is called "How Shall We Sing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land?" The words of the title are taken from Psalm 137, in which David laments his people's captivity in Babylon: "there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion." In Hudgins's poem, a

childhood memory of a black man who was lynched and hung is jarringly juxtaposed with a scene of his cousin's maternal tenderness. We dwell in a world that "is home. But it / will never feel like home," the poem concludes.

Such images and memories helped form Hudgins's complex relationship with the South and civil rights, but so did his own father's "stubborn sense of rectitude" or justice. While that unwavering rectitude was often aimed at his sons in disciplinary actions, it also led the elder Hudgins into wider conflict on occasion. In one instance, son Andrew found his father's "mulish rectitude" especially "inspiring." The reporter who broke the story of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam to the nation was Wayne Greenhaw of the *Montgomery Advertiser* . In March of 1968, Lt. William Calley led U.S. troops into the South Vietnamese town of My Lai, an alleged Viet Cong stronghold, and shot 347 unarmed civilians, including many women and children.

Following special investigations, Lt. Calley and four other soldiers were court marshaled, and Calley was convicted and imprisoned. (His conviction was later overturned, and he was released in 1974). As Hudgins remembers it, "Alabama and the South rallied to Lt. William Calley's side," and letters to the editor excused Calley's action with such comments as "'Sure, it's sad, but collateral casualties just happen.'" Hudgins's father was outraged. In his father's own letter to the local paper, recalls Hudgins, his father said:

. . . that he had served in the military for three decades, including a tour in Vietnam, and that as far as he was concerned there was never any reason for machine-gunning unarmed women and children in a ditch. William Calley . . . deserved to be court-martialed.

The letter created a "big stink in our small, conservative military town," and "the paper was flooded with letters calling my father every kind of traitor and coward," writes Hudgins. But to his son, this father's sense of service to a higher authority with its unassailable justice was "inspiring" in the midst of daily violations, both local and global, of human worth, rights, and dignity.

Critical Overview

Andrew Hudgins's poems appear in such diverse anthologies as the annual volume *The Best American Poetry (1995, 1998), The Literature of the American South: A Norton Anthology, The Columbia Book of Civil War Poetry,* and *Upholding Mystery: an Anthology of Contemporary Christian Poetry* . David Impastato, editor of the latter volume, notes Hudgins's "use of an iambic line . . . to sustain his intimate, colloquial voice" as well as his "link with a Southern Gothic tradition." However, Impastato's introduction gives a less compelling reason for including Hudgins in his collection of religious poetry than Richard Tillinghast does in a review of *The Never-Ending,* the volume in which "Elegy for My Father" appears. Tillinghast describes Hudgins's poems as "clear and accessible," humorous and bawdy, but that underneath the "disarming personal frankness [lies] a religious sensibility. . . . He may be praying drunk," comments Tillinghast, "but he is praying." To some, Hudgins may appear irreverent toward many hallowed religious images and figures, as one can see in numerous poems such as "Mary Magdelene's Left Foot," "Praying Drunk," "The Liar's Psalm," "An Old Joke," "Funeral Parlor Fan," and "Psalm Against Psalms," which begins:

God had Isaiah eat hot coals,
Ezekiel eat s□, and they sang
his praises. I've eaten neither, despite
my childhood need to test most things
inside my mouth. My brothers and I
would pop small frogs over our lips.

Tillinghast sees Hudgins's very earthy, candid approach to such matters as a sign of a sincere faith, the mark of one who will not separate his faith from the ordinary stuff of life.

Critic Clay Reynolds observes Hudgins's technique of bringing "the apparently insignificant elements of life" into the reader's awareness through a startling image of the ordinary, the shock of the commonplace. Hudgins studies intensely "how people react to experience," notes Reynolds. "Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead" is the first-person study of a son's divergence from his father in matters of death, and life. In quite ordinary language, the relationship of an aging father and middle-aged son is evoked with simplicity and honesty. Though no mention of "Elegy" has been made specifically in reviews or criticism, its twist of wry humor in the title, its image of travel reservations as a way to speak of dying, and its frank expression of a universal emotion□grief□are the sorts of things critics find to praise in Hudgins's work. "It breathes," says reviewer Kevin McGowin of Hudgins's most recent book of poems, *Babylon in a Jar* (1998), because "he speaks our language," and this, McGowin says, "is why we bother to still read poetry."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Blevins is a poet and essayist who has taught at Hollins University, Sweet Briar College, and in the Virginia Community College system. She has published poems, stories, and essays in many magazines, journals, and anthologies. In this essay, Blevins views Andrew Hudgins's poem through a lens of what Donald Hall calls an "ethic of clarity."

In "Risk and Contemporary Poetry," Andrew Hudgins measures the success of eight volumes of poetry by focusing on what he calls "the risks of content," saying that "it is content that gives significance to form, that justifies form, and makes form worth looking at to see how it contributes to meaning." He also says that "like any performer the writer to some extent, large or small, puts himself or herself in jeopardy: a feat is worth praising only if it runs the risk of failure too." Since it truly is a small accomplishment to succeed in writing an unambitious poem, we might also ask in our evaluations of poems about the risks the poet is confronting. Does the poet risk sentimentality by overstating his emotional response to a memory or observation that the memory or observation doesn't seem to warrant? Is he risking inscrutability by making associations he keeps private or by linking unrelated objects and impressions for reasons that seem to serve no aesthetic purpose? Is he exhibiting too much of his ego? Is he confessing so much that his lines embarrass rather than enlighten and surprise and delight? Or is the poem too accessible? Is it too easy to enter and process? Does it fail to defamilarize the reader from the known world, to make the known world new and strange again? Has the poet missed his opportunity to deepen his meaning, to piece together the potential verbal layers like the various elements in one of the more exotic desserts?

While it is possible to argue that our more accessible poets are able to reach larger audiences because they are willing to risk appearing simpleminded, it is also true that our more *in* accessible poets□Jorie Graham and John Ashbury come immediately to mind□have been able to find readers and augment their reputations despite their antagonizing vagaries. Still, since Americans generally favor the plain-spoken over the obtuse, both in their poetry and their prose, it might be worthwhile to view Andrew Hudgins's "Elegy For My Father, Who Is Not Dead" through the lens of what Donald Hall, in the Introduction to his 1968 anthology *The Modern Stylists,* calls "an ethic of clarity."

Hudgins's poem "Elegy to My Father, Who Is Not Dead" comes from *The Never-Ending,* his third collection. "Elegy" is not a narrative: it does not tell a story. It is also not a dramatic monologue: it isn't written from an imagined point of view. Although it concerns itself with the differences between Hudgins's view of the afterlife and his father's view, it is not a prayer, as are many of the best poems in *The Never-Ending* . "Elegy" also makes no overt religious allusions; it uses no common Christian symbols, such as Christ or Mary Magdalene, as launching points for meditations that often bring these characters back to life in very stunning ways. For these reasons, "Elegy" is not as representative of the full body of Hudgins's work to date as are other poems in *The Never-Ending* . Yet there are a few constants□themes in the poem that were

foreshadowed in *Saints and Strangers,* Hudgins's first book□that become downright preoccupations in *The Glass Hammer*, Hudgins's fourth.

The conflict Hudgins expresses in "Elegy" between his father's view of heaven and his own view of it is, in the poem, stated very directly: "He thinks that when I follow him / he'll wrap me in his arms and laugh, / the way he did when I arrived on earth." Then immediately he says: "I do not think he's right." At first it seems that "Elegy" works simply to reveal the tension inherent in a son's skepticism about his father's traditional view of the afterlife, striving merely to express the tension borne of the speaker's inability to accept his father's rather picturesque and even unimaginative belief in heaven. But a closer reading of the poem reveals that there are meanings beyond just this surface one, implications that do work to deepen a poem that risks□but overcomes□being one-dimensional or too accessible.

The speaker says he cannot "just say good-bye as cheerfully / as if he's embarking on a trip," revealing as a second tension the poet's fear of his father's death. When the speaker of the poem says he's not ready, he is telling us that he is not ready to let his father go, that he cannot accept his father's willingness to die. A third tension might be found in Hudgins's decision to use analogies to make more visible the differences between his views and his father's. Thus, "Elegy" articulates not only differences in belief but also an obvious difference in mood or inclination, and this difference might work to separate the two men even more than the religious difference we see on the poem's surface level. A desire to confess and then to mend this sense of being other than the people who "got me born and [taught] me how to read / and how to hold a fork," as he says in "Oh, Say, Can You See?" in *The Glass Hammer* is one of the most predominate struggles in the work of Andrew Hudgins.

Hudgins says that his father "talks / about the world beyond this world / as though his reservations have / been made." He says that his father is convinced he'll see Hudgins "standing on the dock / and waving, shouting, *Welcome back* ." The father's attitude toward death is obviously, thus, a positive one. Hudgins even tells us that he thinks his father "wants to go, / a little bit," that he's got a "new desire / to travel building up, an itch / to see fresh worlds." In comparison, Hudgins sees himself "on deck, convinced / [his father's] ship's gone down." Thus we can see a third tension in this relatively short poem: Hudgins has expressed in twenty-one lines not only the differences in religious views between his father and himself but differences in disposition, as well. He's also given us a sense of the grief that he knows accompanies a parent's death, but he has contained and controlled this grief, thus depersonalizing his subject matter for us, avoiding the risk of sentimentality inherent in any poem taking as its theme death and the afterlife.

Kevin McGowin, in a review of *Babylon in a Jar,* Hudgins's fifth collection of poems, says that the poems in *The Glass Hammer* "were at times flat, making an otherwise brilliant collection uneven and less passionate than I'd come to expect from his earlier work." "Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead" is more closely akin in this way to the poems in *The Glass Hammer* than to many of the poems in *The Never-Ending* . But though it risks being too accessible, it does, in the end, work on more than one level.

In *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry,* Kenneth Koch says:

Along with its emphasis on music, poetry language is also notable for its predilection for certain rhetorical forms such as comparison, personification, apostrophe (talking to something or someone who isn't there), and for its inclinations toward the imaginary, the wished-for, the objectively untrue. Music either simply comes with these predilections or is a main factor in spiriting them. The sensuousness of music arouses feelings, memories, sensations, and its order and formality promise a way possibly to make sense of them.

A good poet's interest in the music of language comes, then, not from a desire to be obtuse or obscure or difficult, but from a knowledge of the ways in which the music of language inspires and approximates human emotion. But un-contained grief that seems either out of step with the circumstances that has inspired it, as one might find in soap operas, or embellished by a trite, contrived, or predictable use of the language, as one might find in a Hallmark card, is both unbelievable and embarrassing. Poets must thus work very hard to contain not only this emotion but all emotion. Indeed, it's possibly even more risky to express wonder or love in a sincere way than sorrow or grief. Hudgins's choice in using the analogy rather than the image for a main method of comparison and his generally iambic cadence□that slow, steady heartbeat in many of the lines in "Elegy"□both work well to contain the grief at the heart of "Elegy," saving it from the sentimental risks it must naturally assume from the outset.

Other poems in *The Never-Ending,* though they are as accessible as "Elegy," adopt more musical devices: there are stunning images, emphatic repetitions, stories, alliterative accelerations, comparisons in neatly-packaged trinities, associative leaps, and gorgeous moments of imaginative fancy in which even Christ appears, wearing a "broad-brimmed hat / and muddy robe." For example, the first few lines in "The Liar's Psalm," one of the more complex poems in the book, illustrate this:

Let us make homage to the fox, for his tail is as
lush
as Babylon. His eyes, all glitter and distrust,
are cruel as a Spanish crucifixion, and his paws so
subtle
they can empty your refrigerator without the light
coming on.

These lines show that Andrew Hudgins is in complete control of the devices at his disposal, further revealing that he is conscious of his own technique in each of his poems. If a reader thinks of "Elegy" as understated at first, or even as unmusical, it is only because the reader has not yet realized how the poem achieves its ambiguities or how its tone works to package and contain its emotion. "Elegy" is a statement of fact that becomes an unsentimental expression of sorrow. This sorrow, resting inside the incurable gap between two men's opposing views and moods and modes of being, succeeds in sidestepping the potential dangers it had to confront to get there.

In *Some Notes Towards the Definition of Culture,* T. S. Eliot says that "to be educated above the level of those whose social habits and tastes one has inherited may cause a division within a man which interferes with happiness." And, in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing,* Hélène Cixous says that "the author writes as if he or she were in a foreign country, as if he or she were a foreigner in his or her own family." "Elegy For My Father, Who Is Not Dead" works beautifully to reveal in an unsentimental way the grief that may come when a man must move beyond the beliefs of the people who have loved and raised him. Other notable examples in *The Never-Ending,* such as "Hunting With My Brother," "The Adoration of the Magi," "In The Game," and "Suffer The Children," express the poet's recognition of the differences between himself and many of the members of his family. What is exceptional about this awareness is that, despite the differences, Hudgins has been able to stay connected with his family. He does not write as though he were a foreigner in his own family; he writes, rather, as though he were his family's very own personal scribe. For many a gorgeous example of the way he's managed to keep his heart affixed to the people and place that produced him, all interested parties should look further into the work of Andrew Hudgins.

Source: Adrian Blevins, Critical Essay on "Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English literature. In this essay, he considers "Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead" in terms of many levels of gaps or distances: between the generations, between faith and doubt, and between belief and agnosticism or atheism.

Hudgins's reputation as a poet has been built in part on his concern with religion, especially the kind of fundamentalist Protestant Christianity that has a strong hold in the southern United States, where Hudgins spent much of his adolescence and early adulthood. Many of his most admired poems contain what Clay Reynolds describes in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* as a "sense of the grotesque," in which the reader is often shocked by horrific, morbid, or bizarre images intended to point attention to "the relationship between real behavior and religious conviction."

In many of Hudgins's poems, the poet steps outside accepted attitudes to biblical characters or objects of religious veneration (the figure of Christ as depicted in art, for example) and presents these objects in a fresh light. Often this is done through the eyes of a child who is contemplating them for the first time, without long years of religious training or indoctrination. In such poems, the poet stands outside the faith that he is examining. He sees it differently from its more enthusiastic and less reflective believers.

It is in this respect that "Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead" reflects Hudgins's characteristic concerns. In many other respects, the poem is not typical of his work: the imagery is neither disturbing nor violent, and the poem does not shock or make the reader reflect with a sudden twist of thought at the end. The simplicity and apparent artlessness of the poem's language, scarcely distinguishable from prose, also mark it as different from much of Hudgins's other work. But the poem is clearly linked to Hudgins's favorite themes in that it presents widely different, irreconcilable points of view on matters of religion, especially relating to issues of life and death. The poem can be understood as a poem of gaps, of distances, of chasms, at a number of different levels, between different interpretations of life. There is the gap between father and son (although the speaker could also be the father's daughter), the gap between the generations, and the wide gulf that separates faith from doubt, belief from agnosticism or atheism.

This sense of distance is established in the first two lines: "One day I'll lift the telephone / and be told my father's dead." The speaker assumes that he will not be present at his father's death; he will receive the news from someone else, perhaps a relative or hospital official, and even then not in person but via the telephone. The hint of estrangement, of separation, is clear, although the poet offers no explanation of why he is so certain that this is the way events will unfold. Nor does he offer any information about whether his father is already ill and dying; the poet may simply be imagining what will happen at some undetermined point in the future. Certainly, the speaker does not sound concerned or distressed about the prospect; the matter-of-fact, informal, somewhat detached conversational tone sets the mood of the poem as a whole. (The tone is quite different from the emotional intensity of another poem in which a son

contemplates the death of his father, Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.")

The poem is notable as much for what it does not say as for what it does say. The nature of the father's religious faith is approached obliquely, in terms of his basic, unquestioned assumptions, which are clearly those of the fundamentalist Christian. The father believes in the Christian doctrine of an afterlife: that those who have kept the faith in this life will be rewarded by admission to the community of the righteous in heaven, a paradise ruled by Christ, in which all pain and suffering have been banished and life continues forever. This is the "world beyond this world" referred to in the poem. The fortunate souls who inhabit it are the "saved," whose names are written in the "book of life" that is opened, according to the New Testament's book of Revelation, at the time of judgment.

Christian fundamentalist belief is characterized by two more elements that are clearly part of the belief system of the father in "Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead." The first is that the conditions of salvation are unambiguous; a believer can know with absolute certainty that he is bound for heaven as long as he accepts that Christ is the Son of God and died for the sins of mankind, a doctrine that can be traced to the gospel of John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believe in him should not perish but have eternal life." It is because the speaker's father accepts this belief that he can be so confident of his destination after death. He can make "reservations" for heaven, rather like a person might make flight reservations for a vacation (at least that is how the son sees it). For the religious fundamentalist, whether Christian, Muslim or adherent of another religion, there is never any room for doubt. For the Christian, doubting is considered the devil's work, and issues of faith and morality usually divide neatly into two categories: right and wrong, good and evil, salvation and damnation. Intellectual questioning is not encouraged.

The second element of fundamentalist belief relevant to the poem is the literal nature of the father's beliefs. He expects to live in heaven in the same physical form in which he lived on Earth. No doubt he has heard this preached from the pulpit on innumerable occasions. According to Christian doctrine, there is to be a resurrection of the body after the believer dies. In the Christian heaven, individuals are not transformed into disembodied spirits; souls still need bodies, even if the body concerned is, as St. Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians (15:44), a "spiritual body." In the poem, the father clearly expects to be recognizably himself and to retain the same family ties that he had on Earth. He looks forward to the time when his son will join him and he is able to wrap him "in his arms and laugh, / the way he did when I arrived on earth." The image nicely links death with rebirth; the newly arrived soul in heaven is like a newborn baby on Earth. (There are hints here also of the fundamentalist belief that when a person accepts Jesus, he is "born again.")

The son, of course, does not believe a word of this, quietly dissenting from his father's most deeply held beliefs. He addresses his difference of opinion to the reader, rather than to his father, perhaps because the gap between the two men is so great he feels there is no point in discussing the subject directly with his father. There is no meeting

point, no possibility of dialogue, between such radically divergent views, although the son puts forward no positive beliefs of his own; he is merely unconvinced by the faith into which he was born and appears to regard the prospect of death with some unease. Unlike his father, he is no happy voyager on the ship that sails to eternity. However, his trepidation stops far short of the blank terror of annihilation that is the theme of another contemporary poem about death, Philip Larkin's "Aubade." The final four lines of the poem convey most starkly the chasm between the two attitudes being presented. These lines build on the poem's recurring image of the passage to death and beyond being like a sea voyage. Going to heaven is like being on a ship that docks in a harbor, finally safe on its journey home. This is a simple and universal image, but the speaker is clearly ready to deconstruct it. His choice of words suggests that both sets of beliefs, the faithful and the faithless, are no more than speculation in which the mind indulges:

I see myself on deck, convinced
his ship's gone down, while he's convinced
I'll see him standing on the dock
and waving, shouting, *Welcome back* .

Looking into the future, the poet is "convinced" that the ship (that is, his father's life) will go down, never to rise again, just as his father is "convinced" otherwise. To be convinced is simply to be persuaded of the truth of a certain statement or proposition. In this case, in the absence of any objectively verifiable proof□since death, as Hamlet famously said, is that "undiscover'd country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns"□neither statement can claim to be truer than the other. To adapt the ship image, father and son are like the proverbial two ships passing each other on a dark night; one is on a voyage of faith, the other on a voyage of doubt. They cannot see each other; they cannot exchange signals. They share no common language.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

France is a librarian and teaches history and interdisciplinary studies at University Liggett School in Grosse Pointe Woods, Michigan. In the following essay, he considers how Hudgins's poem is a twentieth-century American variant on the elegiac tradition that emphasizes anxiety about death rather than consolation in its aftermath.

"Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead" immediately suggests a twentieth-century tone that contrasts with earlier elegies. In previous centuries, elegies were usually meant to express lamentation, mourning, and praise for someone who had died. Like words spoken by a friend or relative of the deceased at a funeral, they often expressed sadness and feelings of loss but also provided consolation or comfort for the living. Two illustrative examples are Thomas Carew's "An Elegy Upon the Death of the Dean of St. Paul's, Dr. John Donne" (1633) and Walt Whitman's elegy for Abraham Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (1865). In Hudgins's variation on the elegy, the speaker's father, as the title immediately announces, is not dead. Furthermore, once one reads or hears the poem, it becomes clear that the speaker does not provide any direct consolation to the audience. In fact, the speaker emphatically doubts the father's consoling notions. In contrasting the speaker's anxiety about death with the father's faith and belief in a cheerful afterlife, Hudgins inspires his audience to check on their own metaphysical beliefs: Why are we here, where did we come from, and where will we go next?

Hudgins's speaker's father takes a positive, even pleasant view of death. He conceives of death as a point of departure, as if what comes next will be as enjoyable and comfortable and fun as a luxury cruise with good friends. His images of travel are modern because luxury travel became practical and affordable to anyone but the wealthiest only in the twentieth century. The phrase "his reservations have / been made" suggests the modern transportation system in which one can go to a travel agent or make a phone call to make arrangements for a trip to any chosen destination. Near the end of the twentieth century, this system had become so automated that the speaker's father could have connected to the Internet and, using a credit card number, made the reservations himself. He is so convinced that the afterlife will be like a pleasant trip that he is almost eager to go. The idea of wanting to see "fresh worlds" suggests that he wants to move on from this one, almost like a futuristic astronaut heading out to explore another galaxy. The speaker is not entirely sure exactly where his father wants to go or where he thinks he is going, only that it is a worthwhile place. Perhaps it is rather "older" worlds he will see□the speaker is unsure. When Americans speak of "the old country," they are usually referring to the places from which they or their ancestors came. The phrase has been most often used by people of European descent in referring to some country or area of Europe, but it could just as well be any place of origin. In this case, the father is probably thinking in terms of the mystical place from which he came before he was born.

Hudgins leaves his speaker's father's age and state of health deliberately vague: he could be old or sick, but he may just as easily be healthy. There are clues that the father

may be close to the end of his life in that he is "ready" for death, that the speaker "can't / just say good-bye." Nonetheless, "the sureness of his faith" and his belief in a positive afterlife are the most important things we learn about the speaker's father. This belief unsettles the speaker, makes the speaker anxious and gloomy. The speaker disbelieves the father's metaphysical views. The speaker takes a much more skeptical and negative view of things than the father does. The speaker sees technology, such as the telephone, as a conveyor of bad news and dwells on the image of a ship that has sunk rather than afloat and smoothly cruising along. Whereas the father is calm about death, the speaker is terrified by the thought of it. This terror is made more understandable when one considers the history of the 1900s.

Technological innovations made life both easier and more terrifying during the twentieth century. Travel has been made easier, but disasters like the sinking of the passenger ship *Titanic* in 1912, the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger* in 1986, and hundreds of airplane crashes dramatically showed that modern transportation technology did not guarantee safety. More terribly, much technology was used during the 1900s to deliberately kill civilians (as well as military personnel) on a vast scale. The use of railroads and poison gas to efficiently carry out the Holocaust in Europe and fast-flying airplanes to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the Second World War are particularly terrifying examples of how technology was used for extremely violent purposes. Over the course of the twentieth century, technology also dramatically changed the way people communicated and thought about life: it sped things up and loaded people's thoughts with huge amounts of information, leaving little time for quiet contemplation. News about disasters became harder to ignore as the century moved toward its end, giving many people a feeling of dread. This was largely due to the increasing availability, reach, and daily use of telephones, radios, televisions, and the Internet. All of these technologies changed from rare luxury items to seeming necessities. As 2001 approached, people anxiously coped with life-threatening issues such as AIDS, food-borne viruses, and random acts of terrorism. Without a calming belief system, one could easily be frightened by the thought of death in the twentieth century.

"Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead" does not reveal how or when, in spite of the scarier aspects of the twentieth-century world, the speaker's father came to faith. Some people are more naturally optimistic whereas others remain pessimistic. Is the glass half full or half empty? Is the idea of traveling in space or at sea exciting or fraught with doom? The speaker's father comes across clearly as a person who prefers to think on the bright side. He seems like a happy, loving person. The speaker strongly suggests that "he'll wrap me in his arms and laugh, / the way he did when I arrived / on earth." Yet the father's love and affection do not bring consolation to the speaker, which leaves the latter feeling sad and hopeless.

The forcefulness of Hudgins's speaker's doubts□dwelling on fearful things like an imaginary telephone call announcing the father's death or a ship that has sunk with the father on board□emphasize how uneasy the speaker feels. As long as the speaker remains anxious and haunted by death, though, there remains the possibility that the speaker will find faith and hope. Southern Catholic novelist Flannery O'Connor, in her

novel *Wise Blood* (1952), employed a protagonist named Hazel Motes to explore this theme. Like the speaker in Hudgins's poem, Hazel takes a deeply skeptical view of faith but can never shake the torment of anxiety or find happiness. The speaker becomes more anxious and tortured the more the speaker denies faith. Eventually, Hazel in *Wise Blood* comes to find faith with as much apparent conviction as the speaker's father has in "Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead." Just as Hazel finds faith, there is hope that the speaker in "Elegy" will find it as well.

Source: Erik France, Critical Essay on "Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

Poems from Hudgins's *The Glass Hammer* have been set to music by Vermont composer Jorge Martin. Renowned baritone Sanford Sylvan premiered the song cycle in a performance on March 4, 2000, at the University of Vermont to benefit Vermont CARES. One reviewer of the performance called Hudgins's recollections of childhood "human and passionate."

Numerous poems by Hudgins are presented online by the *Alsop Review,* which also reviews visual arts and fiction. "Praying Drunk" and "The Cestello Annunciation," both from *The Never-Ending,* can be read at http://www. alsopreview.com/hudgins/ (August 6, 2001).

Image: Journal of the Arts and Religion published two Hudgins poems in its special issue (#24) on contemporary Southern art and literature. "Blur" and "In the Cool of the Evening," two of his most recent poems, can be read on *Image* 's online site, http://www.imagejournal .org/hudgins.html (August 6, 2001).

Topics for Further Study

Many people find it difficult to talk about death and dying and resort to using verbal alternatives, many of which are now stock expressions. List as many clichés or euphemisms for death as can you think of. Explain the purpose these expressions serve. What effects do they have, either intended or unintended? Write a poem, story, or essay in which you "unpack" a cliché or "translate" a euphemism for death.

Do a research project in which you compare and contrast the burial rituals and attitudes toward death of two different cultures or religions. You may, for example, explore the differences between a contemporary Hindu and Buddhist burial ritual or between two ancient cultures such as the Incas and the Mayans. Or, study the differences between the practices of mainline Protestant denominations (Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, etc.) and that of a smaller group, such as the Quakers, Anthroposophists, or Nazarenes.

Study a poem-elegy, either classical or contemporary, and interpret it musically by composing an instrumental piece that conveys the essence of the lament, without resorting to the words of the poem. What instrument(s), key, mode, rhythm, and style would you work with, for instance, to explore John Milton's "Lycidas" musically? What instruments and style does Hudgins's unorthodox elegy suggest?

Write a poem in which you explore the ways in which you and one of your parents diverge, using a metaphor to express your differences, as Hudgins used a ship and a dock. Write a second poem in which you focus on some point of convergence or harmony, this time using a narrative form, a story or event that distills the essence of that meeting point.

Visit a large graveyard. Record the styles and inscriptions of a sample number of headstones in some visual medium□photography, drawing, painting, and so on. Create an artistic or expressive "catalog of elegies" from your findings.

Compare and Contrast

1951: In response to the threat of a third world war, created by tensions between the United States, communist China, and the U.S.S.R., a huge increase in taxes is proposed in the United States and universal military training urged. U.S. armed forces number 2.9 million.

1969: In the midst of the Vietnam War and the beginning of the Nixon presidency, Congress votes for a $5 billion cut in military spending.

1990: In June, President George Bush and U.S.S.R. President Mikhail Gorbachev sign agreements whereby both countries would make large cuts in nuclear and chemical weapons, including missiles, submarines, and bombers. In November of 1990, the most extensive arms control treaty in history is signed in Paris by twenty European nations, the United States, and Canada.

1993: The Pentagon ends research on the military defense program known as "Star Wars," which was begun in 1983 at a cost of $30 billion. Star Wars, or the Strategic Defense Initiative, was intended to be an "outer space" shield against enemy missiles.

Today: Under the leadership of newly elected President Vladimir Putin, the Russian parliament ratifies the START II nuclear arms reduction treaty in April of 2000. Former president Boris Yeltsin had failed repeatedly to win approval for the treaty.

1638: In Rhode Island, Roger Williams becomes the pastor of the first Baptist church to be established in America, but he actually remains in the church only a few months. Williams founds the Rhode Island colony as a haven for persecuted Christians.

1900: By the end of the nineteenth century, reformed and evangelical religious groups comprise the vast majority of Protestant denominations in the United States, with memberships of approximately 6 million Methodists, 5 million Baptists, 1.5 million Lutherans, and 1.5 million Presbyterians.

1989: In the United States, membership in the Roman Catholic Church numbers 54 million. The Southern Baptist Convention is the second largest religious denomination, with a membership of 14.8 million.

1992: Both the Southern Baptist Convention and the Roman Catholic Church make official statements of opposition to homosexuality. The Baptists vote to banish two churches that had accepted homosexuals and began the process of changing its by-laws to enable official exclusion of such churches. U.S. Catholic bishops are urged to oppose any laws that promote public acceptance of homosexual conduct.

1995: The Southern Baptist Convention votes "to repent racism of which we have been guilty," and to ask forgiveness of all African Americans. The Southern Baptist Convention was founded in 1845 in part for defense of slavery.

Today: The Southern Baptist Convention remains the largest Protestant denomination in the United States and has grown to over 18 million members. According to a *New York Times* article, the U.S. House and Senate were once dominated by a religiously liberal and moderate membership□mostly Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists. During President Bill Clinton's second term, the major government posts were, for a while, all occupied by Southern Baptists: Clinton himself, Vice-President Al Gore, House Speaker Newt Gingrich, Senate President Pro Tem Strom Thurmond, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, and House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt.

What Do I Read Next?

In response to the tragic shootings in April 1999 at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, Hudgins wrote "When Bullies Ruled the Hallways," published in the Op-Ed section of the *New York Times,* May 1, 1999. In this brief essay, Hudgins recalls in graphic detail the various strategies of domination and torture the "jock-kings" used at his own high school in Montgomery, Alabama. Hudgins admits to having "nursed revenge fantasies against the jocks who tormented me" but "never came close to acting them out." He concludes, "I valued my life and theirs too much."

"The Secret Sister" is a recent memoir in *The Hudson Review* (Winter 1999), which tells how, at age ten, Andrew Hudgins stumbles upon a well-kept family secret. An "error" on his birth certificate begins the process of revelation that ends in a startling fact: there had been a sister, Andrea, killed at age two in a car accident in which his mother, pregnant with Andrew at the time, was the driver. "The Secret Sister," like other Hudgins memoirs, radiates meaning from a central fact into many other family dynamics and incidents and even into a "bone-deep understanding" of his own life.

The religious matter in much of Hudgins's poetry is both strong and quite unorthodox. Two memoirs, "Half-Answered Prayers," published in *Southern Review* (Summer 1998) and "Born Again" published in *American Scholar* (Spring 1999), step outside the usual language and formulae of religious testimonies and into the flesh-and-blood accounts of Hudgins's own encounters with God.

A Summons to Memphis (1986) by Tennessee-born Peter Taylor is a novel that revolves around the complex family relationships in a Southern family, especially between father and son. Like many of Andrew Hudgins's poems and memoirs, Taylor's story also deals with the power of childhood dislocations and the various ways memory is summoned to come to terms with the past.

Further Study

Hudgins, Andrew, "A Sense of Service: As the Son of a Soldier . . ." in *Washington Post,* Sunday, January 2, 2000, sec. W, p. 12.

This prose memoir delivers a frank personal account both of Hudgins's relationship to his stern father and of growing up as a "military brat." Just as he does in his poems, Hudgins incorporates snatches of dialogue, details of daily life, and keen observations of character in his prose to bring the past, in all its humor and pain, candidly into the present. Although the poem "Elegy for My Father" can certainly stand on its own, this memoir supplies much biographical depth to the story of disparity so keenly rendered in the poem.

Jarman, Mark, and David Mason, eds., *Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism,* Story Line Press, 1996, pp. 102-21.

"Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead" and thirteen other poems by Andrew Hudgins are included in this anthology, which represents the first wave of young poets writing in what is being called "the new formalism." New formalist poets retrieve the traditional tools of rhyme, meter, or narrative to achieve new results. Hudgins's skillful use of iambic meter and narrative are what earned him a place in this collection. Other poets included in the volume are Sydney Lea, Brad Leithauser, Molly Peacock, Rachel Hadas, Dana Gioia, and Julia Alvarez.

Rubin, Louis, ed., *The History of Southern Literature,* Louisiana State University Press, 1985.

Andrew Hudgins was just emerging as a poet when this definitive volume of regional literary history was published. Rubin solicited essays from a wide number of critics and literary historians in order to account for the development of Southern literature from its colonial beginnings to the present. It characterizes the significant movements and writers who represent the South's "story" in prose, fiction, and poetry. Readers may be particularly interested to learn about Sidney Lanier in Rayburn Moore's essay on "Poetry of the Late Nineteenth Century" before reading Hudgins's *After the Lost War,* a narrative poem-sequence based on the life of Lanier, a Georgia-born poet.

Stokesbury, Leon, ed., *The Made Thing: An Anthology of Contemporary Southern Poetry,* University of Arkansas Press, 1987, pp. 111-14.

If Hudgins's style allows him a place among the "new formalists," his subject matter grants him a solid place in Southern literature. Poems from his first volume, *Saints and Strangers* (1985), are included in this collection of over sixty poets from the American South, both men and women, many well known, such as James Dickey, Robert Penn Warren, and Alice Walker. Others such as Vassar Miller and Margaret Gibson are perhaps less familiar but important in editor Stokesbury's aim to profile the vitality of

poetry in a region known primarily for such monumental fiction writers as Faulkner, Welty, and O'Connor.

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McGowin, Kevin, Review of *Babylon in a Jar,* in *Oyster Boy Review,* Vol. 10, January/March 1999.

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Tillinghast, Richard, "The Everyday and the Transcendent," in *Michigan Quarterly Review,* Vol. 32, No. 3, Summer 1993, pp. 477-80.

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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