Ethics Study Guide

Ethics by Linda Pastan

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Introduction

"Ethics" appears in Linda Pastan's sixth volume of poetry, *Waiting for My Life* (1981), a title that hints at the tensions for which the New York-born poet is best known: the challenges of living in that "waiting" place between the magic and the tedium of the ordinary; between the artistic and the domestic life; between the rewards and the losses of aging and death. A kind of "aesthetic ethic" itself emerges from the body of her poems, one proclaiming that simple language and images of the ordinary are especially capable of bearing mystery and of resisting easy answers.

"Ethics" itself embodies this resistance. The poem takes shape first in a memory from school days and is then bridged, through images of frames and fire, to an understanding acquired in the poet's older years. The question the ethics teacher poses "so many years ago" is unanswerable partly because it is not "real"; the students answer it "halfheartedly," at best. Having posed a hypothetical fire in a museum, the teacher wants the students to make a clear choice, between saving "a Rembrandt painting / or an old woman who hadn't many / years left anyhow." The surprising answer for the poet arrives years later, in a "real museum," as the poet stands "before a real Rembrandt."

Several readers have noted Pastan's similarity to the nineteenth-century poet Emily Dickinson. Both share an ability to express complexity and mystery in the language of domestic life. However, unlike Dickinson, Pastan has struggled with the issues of raising children and being married. Pastan is a poet of the home even while she is clearly in the world. "Meditation by the Stove" shows she has trained her eye on the realities of her own life:

... I have banked the fires of my body into a small domestic flame for others to warm their hands on for a while.

However, she has also looked up and out of her home into the "darkness of newsprint." In "Libation, 1966," the sacrifice of young men to the Vietnam War reminds her of cruel, ancient rituals:

They dance as delicately

as any bull boy

with bayonet,

in a green maze,

under a sky as hot as Crete.

The ethics of being an artist in the world is of concern to Pastan, a world where what one "saves" is crucial, but not simple.

Author Biography

Pastan was born in New York, New York, on May 27, 1932, the only child of Jacob and Bess Schwartz Olenik. A melancholy poem about her parents, "Something about the Trees," records Pastan's childlike faith that her father would "always be the surgeon," her mother, "the perfect surgeon's wife," and that "they both would live forever." She began writing, she says, around age ten or eleven: "As a very lonely only child, reading and writing was my way of being part of the world." The world of her poems is a peopled world, inhabited by parents, grandparents, husband, children, and lovers. It is also inhabited by mythic figures□Eve, Adam, and Noah, Odysseus, Penelope, Circe, and Achilles. These people, mythic and real, are often connected by Pastan's ability to tell stories of loss and change. They are also connected through metaphors from ordinary times and common places, images of "ordinary weather / blurring the landscape / between that time and this." Pastan writes many of the poems in *Waiting for My Life,* including "Ethics," from this landscape of "between"□between past and present, youth and age, home and world. Metaphors from kitchens, closets, gardens, and porches inform the sense that Pastan's life is rooted in the home, but that home is not necessarily a safe haven:

I tell you household gods

are jealous gods.

They will cover your windowsills

with the dust of sunsets;

they will poison your secret wells

with longing. ("Who Is It Accuses Us?")

The "between" places are at once familiar and strange, irreducible, and resistant to cliche.

The longing for a life of creative passion and fulfillment in the midst of domestic demands is palpable in *Waiting for My Life.* "There are poems / that are never written," laments one poem in the book, but the ones that fill this volume and eleven other books counter the claim that her art has truly had to wait. In fact, Pastan has been the recipient of numerous awards for her poetry, beginning with the *Mademoiselle* poetry contest, which she won during her senior year at Radcliffe. Honors have followed nearly all of her major publications, including the De Castagnola Award in 1978 for *The Five Stages of Grief,* an American Book Award poetry nomination in 1983 for *PM/AM, Poetry* magazine's Bess Hokin Prize in 1985, *Prairie Schooner's* Virginia Faulkner award, a Pushcart prize, and appointment as the poet laureate (1991-1995) of Maryland, the state where she currently lives.

Pastan's gift was recognized early. When she was a senior in high school, one of her poems was chosen to be printed on the back of the graduation program. She recalls that her English teacher tried to make editorial suggestions and persuade her that a tree couldn't have both "antlered branches" and "summer-scented fingers." But the young poet refused to change a word. "My infatuation with metaphor has remained with me, though of course, my teacher was absolutely right," admits Pastan today. Her childhood love of reading and writing was nurtured at Radcliffe where she was an English major, and "constantly amazed to be given college credits for what I would have chosen to read anyway." She claims no particular influence on her writing, rather that her wide reading from childhood on has given her "the models of great poetry to love and to strive towards."

Linda Olenik married Ira Pastan, a molecular biologist, in 1953, a year before she finished her degree at Radcliffe. She temporarily "relinquished" her writing, Pastan tells Michael Kernan of the *Washington Post,* for the "whole '50s thing, kids and the clean floor bit." Yet, she confesses, "I was unhappy because I knew what I should be doing." Once her children reached school age, Pastan began to devote her "free" hours and energy again to poetry. Soon she found that family, marriage, and home had put their indelible mark on her material, and that they had the power to shape her work "by allowing themselves, albeit reluctantly, to be subjects of my poems." The Pastan children, Stephen, Peter, and Rachel, often show up in poems that express with both tenderness and anguish the struggle between raising children and tending to one's art. Pastan established the habit in those years of rising earlier than the rest of the household to write, and often stayed up late to draft or revise, hence the title of one book, *PM/AM.* For twenty years, she was a teacher at the renowned Bread Loaf Writer's Conference in Vermont. Being on staff at Bread Loaf "gave me a feeling of belonging to the community of writers," says Pastan. "And I loved teaching for just twelve days a year. I could enter the class with enthusiasm and leave it before I became weary." Pastan continues to write from her home in Potomac, Maryland. Her latest volume is *Carnival Evening: New and Selected Poems, 1968-1998.*

Poem Text

In ethics class so many years ago
our teacher asked this question every fall:
If there were a fire in a museum
which would you save, a Rembrandt painting
or an old woman who hadn't many
years left anyhow? Restless on hard chairs
caring little for pictures or old age
we'd opt one year for life, the next for art
and always half-heartedly. Sometimes
the woman borrowed my grandmother's face
leaving her usual kitchen to wander
some drafty, half imagined museum.
One year, feeling clever, I replied
why not let the woman decide herself?
Linda, the teacher would report, eschews
the burdens of responsibility.
This fall in a real museum I stand
before a real Rembrandt, old woman,
or nearly so, myself. The colors
within this frame are darker than autumn,
darker even than winter□the browns of earth,
though earth's most radiant elements burn
through the canvas. I know now that woman

and painting and season are almost one

and all beyond saving by children.

Plot Summary

Lines: 1-2

"Ethics" begins with the memory of an ethics class that Pastan herself attended. The focus of this memory is a question the teacher posed, and the rest of the poem is given to unfolding its answer. The poem's language is specific. The question was asked, not simply every "year," but "every fall," and the image of autumn also unfolds in important ways as the poem proceeds.

Lines: 3-6

In these lines, the question is put forth as the poet recalls it, in concrete, straightforward language that gives the past a sense of immediacy. It is a typical "values clarification" question, designed to stir a conversation about the relative value of life and art: which is of greater worth in "saving," a famous painting or an old woman? The choice is obviously difficult and contains the seeds of several large ethical issues. However, the students are not engaged. So, instead of providing their response, the poem instead suggests their restless unreadiness to answer with any sort of conviction.

Lines: 7-9

A clear sense of the students' apathy is extended in these lines. As the poet remembers it, neither art nor old age seemed particularly worth their passion or time. Choosing life one year and art the next has little to do with authentic engagement in the question.

Lines: 10-12

A sudden shift from the external classroom scene to the poet's private thoughts occurs in lines 9 and 10. The poet lets the reader into her imagination of that hypothetical old woman, who is no longer anonymous; she has "borrowed my grandmother's face." The kitchen is the site of many images, if not whole poems, in Pastan's corpus. Here, the grandmother leaves "her usual kitchen" in the poet's internal reverie, and is relocated in a vague, rather unappealing museum. Leaving the "usual" is clearly uncomfortable for the old woman; she can only "wander" around the museum. This interior picture shows how unacquainted the young "Linda" really is with both art and old age. In her mind, the two prongs of the question are still determined by stereotypes, by the "usual."

Lines: 13-16

At the middle of the poem another shift occurs, from inside back to outside, as the poet herself actually replies to the teacher's question. The "usual" gap between professor

and student is dramatically rendered in these spare lines. The poet-student makes a sophomoric suggestion that the old woman should "decide herself." In rather pedantic language, the teacher replies to the class that this response is an evasion of moral responsibility, that "Linda ... eschews" its burdens. Line 15 leaves little doubt that the poem's point of view and experience are Pastan's own.

Lines: 17-19

With line 17, the poem is lodged no longer in the past, but in the here and now. The verb tense is simple present, and the "every fall" of past years has become "this fall." The hypothetical museum and painting have vanished, and in its place is a "real Rembrandt" in a "real museum." However, this view is now framed through the eyes of someone "nearly" an old woman herself, and autumn obviously means more than calendar time. It is the season of her life.

Lines: 20-23

However, lest the correspondence between autumn and aging devolve into a cliche? the poet observes that the colors she sees in the painting are actually "darker than autumn." In fact, they are "darker even than winter," the darkest of seasons. The poet is seeing both painting and experience with the inner eye, led by the painting's radiant darkness to a kind of mystical vision. In the process, the "browns of earth" become much more than paint and color. In an image echoing the fire that frames the teacher's question, those elements "burn" beyond the frame of the Rembrandt to impart a knowledge unattainable during the poet's restless youth.

Lines: 24-25

The last two lines tell us what the poet has learned, and it appears to be larger than "ethics," larger, at least, than the academic question posed by the teacher. It is not unusual for a mystical experience to impart a sense of unity where once there was division. Thus, what the poet knows, with a knowledge greater than either her senses or reason can provide, is that there is "almost" oneness among "woman / and painting and season." This mysterious unity makes rescue or salvation almost irrelevant. Even so, that subtle word "almost" keeps such knowledge away from any easy absolute, even that of "oneness." Neither woman nor painting nor season loses the force of their particular existence, to which the poet, through language, must be responsible. Therein lies the "ethics" of the poem.

Themes

Ethics

Besides being a memoir and a reflection on art, this poem is the story of its title, "Ethics," in the life of one woman. It not only tells a story about the passage from youth to old age, but also about a maturing morality that perceives the unity among all things and takes responsibility for the "real." To put it in the language of the poem, it is about making the passage from "half-hearted" and "half imagined" to an ethical landscape that has features that are "almost one."

At the beginning of the poem, the poet-speaker and her classmates are equipped with partial knowledge, producing their "half-hearted" response. The typical strategy of a philosophy teacher is to introduce students to a variety of moral theories and posit situations that test their implications. An ethics class might examine the conduct of an individual or group in light of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophy of innate goodness, for example, or its opposite, in the writing of Thomas Hobbes, who declared the human life is "short, brutish, and nasty." They might explore the "instrumentalism" of John Dewey, who held that truth is a tool for solving problems, and therefore "truth" changes as the problems change. Such moral relativism could be contrasted easily with Plato's idealism, an understanding of virtue as inseparable from knowledge and happiness, and rooted ultimately in an absolute good. "Every year" this ethics teacher offers the same moral dilemma, and presumably looks for an increasing sophistication in the students' response.

However, as the poem proceeds, we learn that such an outcome is not feasible due to the apparent apathy of the young people, not only toward "pictures" and "old age," but more fundamentally, for the question itself. For reasons the poem refuses to judge, the heart and the imagination come to class incomplete. It takes the very "real," personal experience of aging, and the contemplation of a "real" Rembrandt to bring the poem's speaker, Pas-tan herself, to a knowledge of wholeness, which both includes and surpasses moral theories and systems. The repeated use of the word "real" is no accident in the latter part of the poem, as "real" becomes a temporary antonym, or opposite, for "half." The "real" is whole and complete. It embodies an inseparable totality of thought and experience, mind and body. The implications of the last line are not that the "real" lies beyond human responsibility, only that its "salvation" is beyond those still "restless on hard chairs."

Art and Experience

Pastan' s interest in art shines through her work. In fact, the question that is central to "Ethics" concerns the value of a piece of art in relation to human life. Pastan's passion for the arts influenced her writing throughout her career. Ten years after the publication of "Ethics," Pastan began an essay with a group of painters who were engaged in serf-

portraiture□Rembrandt, Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Diego Velasquez, and Jan Vermeer. At that time, she was quoted as saying, "This has been a year of looking at pictures for me," confessing that her "obsession" with artists' serf-portraits is akin to her interest in "writers writing about writing."

Whether it is poetry, painting, music, sculpture, or dance, there is hardly an art form of any place or time that has not drawn attention to its own materials, making, and reception. As a particularly good example of this aesthetic "self-reference," Pastan points to Picasso's *The Painter and His Model,* wherein Picasso "almost as nude as the model herself, is at his easel hard at work." Her own poem "Ars Poetica" draws attention to the process of writing a poem through a series of surprising metaphors. In Pastan's experience, the Muse is not the elusive goddess of many cliches, but more often "just / a moth"; writing is a battle whose warhorse "would rather be / head down, grazing"; and a poem should be offered, finally, as "a chair / on which you've draped a coat / that will fit anyone."

Within the body of modern poetry, examples abound of poets, like Pastan, who have looked to painters, sculptors, and musicians for guiding both the depths and surfaces of their own aesthetic. The work of poets Denise Levertov and William Carlos Williams pays homage to the painter Paul Cezanne, that of Langston Hughes to jazz-man Charlie Parker, and Rainer Maria Rilke to the sculptor Rodin. Likewise, Pastan's garden and kitchen are not the only sites of inspiration; there are also the landscapes of feeling she enters standing before Rembrandts, Rousseaus, and Magrittes. Her focus on "woman / and painting and season" is not unique to "Ethics."

As early as 1975, there is poetic evidence that Pastan had been looking at pictures in "real" museums, for her work is filled with references to paintings. Masaccio's fresco *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* provides the loci for reflection and memory that becomes the poem "Fresco." Much like "Ethics," "Fresco" is about the contrast between knowledge learned at school and knowledge gained from life experience. In both cases, a "real" work of art provides the pivot point. In "Fresco," Eve loses her innocence and awakens to the painful recognition that both good and evil, Abel and Cain, will be nourished at her breasts.

In Pastan's most recent writing, there are numerous art-inspired poems which, like "Fresco," mark a subtle, but certain shift from the "usual" kitchen of earlier work. Gustave *Courbet' s Still Life with Apples and Pomegranate* makes the poet grieve for her father. "Le Sens de la Nuit," named after a Magritte oil painting, explores the meaning of night. "Still Life" and "Nature Morte," titles that come from a particular genre of painting, lament that both Eden and the "actual" have been lost somehow, "cut off / at the stem or wrenched / from the earth." Her most recent collection, *Carnival Evening,* takes its title from an oil painting by Henri Rousseau.

Like Picasso, Pastan engages in artistic serf-portraiture in "Woman Holding a Balance." In the process of describing a Vermeer painting, the poem draws attention to the essential character of Pastan's own work:

It is really the mystery of the ordinary we're looking at□the way Vermeer has sanctified the same light that enters our own grimed windows each morning, touching a cheek, the fold of a dress, a jewelry box with perfect justice.

In another recent poem, "Lost Luggage," the theme of "waiting for my life" is once again taken up, this time inside a museum where the aging poet is "in transit" from one landscape to another. The poem eventually confesses that the "real" woman behind the "tourist" disguise is "merely myself and the art she would lose herself in becomes, instead, the mysterious agent of redemption:

... ghosts clothed in tempera

follow me everywhere, as if art itself were a purpling shadow whose territory I must step back into, a place where I can hide myself over and over again, where what is lost may be found, though always in another language and untranslatable.

The conviction behind Pastan's art is that the ordinary is almost always extraordinary, that behind the familiar lies an unnamable terrain, and there "earth's most radiant elements burn / through the canvas."

Style

"Ethics" is written in the form called "free verse," which depends on images and the natural rhythms of speech for its expression, not on meter or rhyme. Many modern and contemporary American poets in the last two centuries have written in free verse, revealing the range of its powers in the relative absence of "formal" patterns. Walt Whitman, for example, drew upon the "music" inherent in free verse, Robert Frost explored its capacity for drama, and William Carlos Williams explored the power of the image to provide meaning and design.

Pastan's free verse poem tells a story about knowledge, beginning in a classroom in one kind of institution, and ending in another, a museum. However, the experience is not expressed academically or in institutional jargon. Most of the poem-story is told in the simple language, rhythm, and tone of a conversation. Pastan's diction, or word choice, comes from accessible, everyday language. The first person pronouns I, *we, my,* and *our* increase the sense of intimacy by drawing the reader-listener into the poet's experience. There are no stanza breaks, and the line breaks follow a natural breathing or pausing pattern. Punctuation is sparse, increasing the sense that this memoir is being spoken *sotto voce* to a listener close-by. Only the essential commas are retained, and there are no quotation marks to set off the spoken lines. Punctuation in a poem is analogous to the rhythmic markings and rests in music. Thus, if this poem were to be sung, it would probably be marked *rubato* or "freely."

Writers of free verse often create design in their poems through patterns of images. The images of fire and autumn in "Ethics" frame the speaker's growth of conscience and wisdom□from a hypothesized fire to a real Rembrandt aflame with the elemental power of art, from a routine September question to the darkening autumn of age. Pastan's poem derives much of its vitality from the inflections of these images.

Historical Context

"Ethics" was published in the early 1980s, when the U.S. economy experienced a decided upturn after two decades of civil unrest and an uncertain position in the global market. Perhaps it is no accident that an economics of worth is what drives the poem's ethical question, "which would you save, a Rembrandt painting / or an old woman who hadn't many years left anyhow?" When Republican Ronald Reagan became President in 1980, the country was ripe for economic reform. The former actor's plan, later dubbed "Reaganomics," involved drastic cuts in taxes and social spending, and resulted for a while in steep declines in interest and inflation rates, and the appearance of millions of new jobs.

In retrospect, however, that economic prosperity benefited only a few. The wealthiest five percent of Americans celebrated twenty percent gains, while three-fifths of the population, at the lower end of the economic scale, watched their income fall by nearly eight percent. Child poverty and homelessness increased exponentially. Not until October 19,1987, the date of the biggest stock market crash on record, did Wall Street end its eight-year-long "party." The nation's apparent prosperity had thinly veiled its enormous trade and federal budget deficits, and there were signs that inflation and high interest rates were making a comeback. These trends were blamed for "Black Monday," as it was called, when total share values plunged half a trillion dollars. Some 37,000 Wall Street employees were laid off in its wake, and it wasn't until the end of the decade that the state of the U.S. economy improved.

Meanwhile, those who rose high on the wheel of fortune in those years composed lives and "lifestyles" that have given history permission to call the 1980s the "the decade of greed," inhabited by the "me generation." Where "hippies" had been a prevailing stereotype of the radicalized sixties and early seventies, the "yuppies," or "young urban professionals," of the eighties were characterized by their liberal spending on clothes, entertainment, travel, transportation, fitness, and housing. While poverty among the nation's children rose alarmingly, one in every five, and increasing numbers of homeless men, women, and children found shelter under bridges in cardboard lean-tos, many of the nation's upper-middle class, according to the stereotype, sat in chic cafes debating where to spend their "discretionary income."

The world of entertainment and sports were clearly among the benefactors of such prosperity. Steven Spielberg's *E. T: The Extra-Terrestrial* made movie history in 1982 when it grossed more than a billion dollars. By 1987, the sports industry had garnered an unprecedented 1.1 percent of the nation's gross national product (GNP). The fine arts also felt the results of new spending trends. Not to be outdone by the sorts of world records being achieved in other cultural arenas, brokers and collectors of fine art set the bars for purchases ever higher: a Picasso that sold in 1981 for $5.8 million was sold nine years later for nine times that amount. Van Gogh's *Irises* achieved fame overnight in 1987 when it sold for the highest price ever paid for a work of art, $53.9 million.

It is in the context of this "prosperity phenomenon" that "Ethics" resonates beyond Pastan's story and its personal conclusions. The poem is not only about growing older and wiser about some things; it is also about the necessity of becoming *dis-illu-sioned.* The 1980s in the United States left in its wake an increasingly polarized economy, proving it an illusion that any one strategy, economic or otherwise, can unlock the American dream for all. To put it in the intellectual language of the decade, the American dream itself is being "deconstructed" along with its illusions of privilege and power. In the terms of "Ethics," it is an illusion that the worth of a life can be pitted, with any validity, against the worth of a famous painting. Pastan's poem suggests that a "real" ethics can never be rooted in anything but a "real" life in the world, that part of the task of being human is to become disillusioned without growing cynical, awakened to what is both worth saving and "all beyond saving."

Critical Overview

Beyond reviews of her books, there is relatively little criticism of Pastan's poetry, despite the fact that she has been widely and steadily published for thirty years, and has received numerous awards. In **his** review of *PM/AM: New and Selected Poems* (1983), critic Peter Stitt of *The Georgia Review* may have suggested the simplest reason for this phenomenon: "Pastan does not write about ideas nor about things."

Pastan writes about people□their bodies and their minds□and because of the nature of her cen-teredness, she offers less for critics to talk about; these poems are more readily accessible to the reader. Pastan is "accessible" because she writes about people going about their "dailiness," a subject that is presumably uninteresting to the average critic. Stitt's comment (and his review in general) may ultimately have more to say about the perceived difference between "reader" and "critic" than it does about the substance of Pastan's poetry.

The content of Pastan's poetry is frequently concerned with the life of a woman trying to be an artist amid the demands of home and family. Feminist critic Sandra Gilbert is generally unsympathetic and, in an article for *Parnassus: Poetry in Review,* **finds the author of** *Waiting for My Life* **to** be a poet not only of the "melody of the quotidian" but of its "malady." Writing in *Washington Post Book World,* Mary Jo Salter finds Pastan's poems "sometimes simple to a fault." Amidst these criticisms, Gilbert discovers Pastan's strength in those moments when, like Emily Dickinson, "this artist of dailiness stresses the mystery of the ordinary." Fellow poet Dave Smith, writing in *American Poetry Review,* goes as far as to suggest that "Dickinson is Pastan's ghost," and celebrates her ability to depict "those moments spent at windows in kitchens or gardens where we are astonished at the speed and movement that is all the not-us."

Smith and others□L. M. Rosenberg, Edward Morin, Hugh Seidman□stress that as Pastan's work has matured, the "low heat" she has banked "into a small domestic flame for others" has become, in Smith's words, "a radiant heat nonetheless." Donna Seaman, a reviewer for the American Library Association, finds Eve, not Emily Dickinson, Pastan's alter ego in her most recent collection *Carnival Evening: New and Selected Poems, 1968-1998.* New poems and old from nine previous volumes, culminate, says Seaman, in a portrait of domesticity that is "both a temple and a prison," an Eden which Eve herself likely found "too confining, too orderly." Pastan's more mature art and its resistance to cliche has made earlier charges of her poetry being too "simple" more difficult to sustain.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Alice Van Wart teaches literature and writing in the Department of Continuing Education at the University ofToronto. She has published two books of poetry and has written articles on modern and contemporary literature. In the following essay, Van Wart discusses the mode in which Pastan writes, examines the oppositional nature of the poem, and discusses the moral issues presented in "Ethics."

Pastan received her first honor for a poem while she was a student atRadcliffe College in 1954 by winning the *Mademoiselle* poetry contest. Sylvia Path was the runner up. Though Pastan went on in school and received an M.A. fromBrandeis University in 1957, she married young and had three children. Like many other women of her generation, who put aside their aspirations for domestic life, Pastan set aside her writing to concentrate on her children and home. Yet the desire to write remained, and eventually she returned to it, publishing in 1971*A Perfect Circle of Sun,* **the first** of her many collections of poetry.

Pastan writes in what is referred to as the confessional mode, but unlike the more well-known confessional poets, her contemporaries Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, Pastan uses the personal not only to understand the self, but also as a means to understanding the nature of the world around her. Pastan's poetry is rooted in the common; it is filled with humor, passion, delight, despair, rebellion, and hope. As a woman who has lived the multiple roles placed on women, she grapples with the issues facing contemporary women, specifically the problems associated with love and domestic life. The war between desire and dealing with daily issues permeates her work as a common theme. It is, however, in the world of the everyday where she finds the small miracles in life and learns the nature of humanity.

Published in her fourth collection *Waiting for My Life* (1981), "Ethics" is a poem that is generally representative of much contemporary free verse. Told from a first person point of view in a colloquial idiom and conversational tone, the poet relates a personal experience from the past that takes on new significance in the present. It is also typical of Pastan's poetry in that the poem works around opposed elements. Written in a simple language, devoid of figurative language, the poem tells a story in two parts, the second part drawing meaning from the first. Though there are no stanza breaks, the poem works through the opposition of its two parts, defined as clear rhetorical units, parallelism, repetition, and irony to suggest that it is beyond the ability of children to determine complex moral issues.

The poem's title points to its central concern□ ethics. What is meant by ethics is a general system of moral principles, the study of which is the branch of philosophy concerned with right and wrong of certain actions and behavior. A system of ethical or moral behavior is essential to a civilized society, and we learn early through instruction many of its moral precepts. However, in the course of life people find themselves in situations in which they must decide for themselves what is the right way to act or the right choice to make. It is an individual's responsibility to make the right choice and to be

accountable for that choice. A part of growing up is learning how to make the right choices.

In Pastan's poem "Ethics" the poet, while visiting a museum and looking at a Rembrandt painting, remembers an ethics class she had taken "many years ago." Each fall the teacher posed the same question to the students: Which would they choose if they were forced by a fire in a museum to save either "an old woman who hadn't many / years left anyhow" or "a Rembrandt painting." The question had little meaning for the students, who were "restless on hard chairs" and who "car[ed] little for pictures or old age," but each year they would "halfheartedly" alternate their answers, "one year for life, the next for art." To try and make the question more relevant to her life, the poet admits she would try to picture the old woman as her grandmother, or as Pastan puts it, "the woman borrowed my grandmother's face / leaving her usual kitchen to wander / some drafty, half imagined museum."

The poet's use of the phrase "half imagined" shows her awareness of her inability as a young student to conjure up the image of a museum, let alone to understand the complex implications of the question. Much more real were hard chairs and restlessness as she struggled with the problem. One year "feeling clever" the poet responded to the question by asking the teacher, "why not let the woman decide herself?" Later, the teacher "would report" that she (the poet) "eschews / the burdens of responsibility." The teacher meant that the poet was avoiding the process of learning to make responsible choices by suggesting they let the woman decide for herself; she was placing the burden of the "responsibility" of choosing on someone else.

The poem turns on the word "responsibility" and moves to the second part. In the syntactical integrity of the poetic line, the poet puts the word at the end of the line placing emphasis on it. Though the progression in the poem moves in time from past to present, from when the poet is a child to when she is a mature woman, the action in the poem is implicit in the juxtapositioning of or opposition between the two parts of the poem.

The second part of the poem begins "this fall," which brings the time back to present. This fall the poet finds herself in "a real museum" as opposed to some "half imagined museum," standing before "a real Rembrandt," as opposed to just a picture. The repetition of the word "real" shows the contrast between the theoretical and the concrete and the poet's awareness of the irony of her situation as she recalls the question posed to her as a student. She is now an old woman herself, or "nearly so," in a museum, before a Rembrandt. She no longer needs to find a face for the old woman to help make the theoretical personal; she is the woman, the painting is a real Rembrandt, an invaluable work of art painted by one of the great masters centuries ago.

As she studies the painting she notices "the colors / ... are darker than autumn, / darker even than winter." The painter's colors on the canvas are those deep colors seen at the end of a season, "the browns of earth." The poet is also probably aware that the pigment in the colors has darkened over time (a particular problem in the preservation of the work of the old masters). In the next line, however, she sees that through these

dark colors "earth's most radiant elements burn." The verb placed at the end of the line accumulates with weight, placing the importance of the line on the active verb "burn," and evoking an image of a smoldering fire with deepened burnished light and heat. The syntax of line nineteen, which reads from the previous line as "old woman, / or nearly so, myself. The colors," points to the poet's awareness of the parallel she sees in the painting's frame and in her own life. In a sense the painting acts for the poet as an objective correlative mirroring the inner state of her being, suggesting that though she has reached the later part of her life she still "burns" with life.

The final lines of the poem evoke a mature awareness on the part of the poet. They suggest a wisdom and a comprehension that only comes with age. To begin with she understands the value of the painting as she could not as a young girl. She remembers how little meaning either "pictures or old age" then had for her. The question posed by her ethics teacher was merely theoretical, an abstract exercise that had nothing to do with real life, which is full of paradox, irony, and contradiction. The restless student, now a mature woman, says in the concluding lines, "I know now that woman / and painting and season are almost one / and all beyond saving by children." In the last two lines the poet's use of the coordinating conjunction "and" to link "woman / and painting and season" places equal value through parallel structure on life, art, and nature.

The final lines also attest to the poet's awareness of the complexity of the moral issue posed to her as a young and callow girl in the form of a choice between life and art. Furthermore, she understands the ironic nature of value itself. The season is at its richest in fall just before its end, and a painting acquires value with age. But what is the value of an old woman in a society that has little respect for old people, in general, and women, in particular? (In the first part of the poem the theoretical old woman "hadn't many years left anyhow.") The poet implies it is not society that makes "woman / and painting and season" "almost one," but a much stronger force hinted at throughout the poem. The season is fall; the poet is almost old; and the painting, which is "darker even than winter," is fading into blackness, and as such they are "all beyond saving by children." The inexorable, equalizing force of time is with them all. By using the coordinating conjunction to link "woman / and painting and season" the poet places equal value through parallel structure on life, art, and nature and, in effect, still refuses to play the game in choosing one over the other.

Adaptations

The Cortland Review, an Online Literary Magazine includes a new poem by Pastan, "The New Dog," in its May 1999 issue. *The Cortland Review* features poetry, fiction, and essays, and is issued monthly in both text and audio format at www.cortlandreview.com.

Pastan's poetry also appears online at several other sites, including *Poetry Daily,* www.poems .com, *andAtlantic Unbound, Atlantic Monthly*'s online site, featuring Pastan and many other poets reading their own work in RealAudio. See www.theatlantic.com/poetry.

Reader reviews of *Carnival Evening* can be found through the large online bookseller, Amazon.com. Unlike book reviews published in literary journals and magazines, Amazon's short "reviews" are unsolicited and quite varied.

Watershed Tapes recorded Pastan in 1986 reading poems about family life from several volumes of her work. The audiocassette tape, *Mosaic,* is available from The Writer's Center. For listings and ordering information on the Web, go to www.writer.org/poettapes/pac15.htm.

Topics for Further Study

Choose a painting by Rembrandt or another well-known artist and trace the path of its acquisitions, from studio to museum, private collector, or gallery, in as much detail as possible. What is its estimated worth today?

As a student "feeling clever," Pastan posed the question, "why not let the woman decide herself?" in response to the question of whether an elderly woman or a Rembrandt painting should be saved in a museum fire. Render the old woman's decision-making in the form of a dramatic monologue, poem, short story, or song.

Hold a debate using the question posed by the teacher in "Ethics" ("If there were a fire in a museum / which would you save, a Rembrandt painting / or an old woman who hadn't many / years left anyhow?"). Prepare by becoming acquainted with several moral philosophies of famous philosophers, such as Plato, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Hobbes, and John Dewey.

Write a story based on your own encounter with an ethical dilemma. Let the story reveal the processes involved in seeking a resolution, whether it is found or not.

Compare and Contrast

1979: The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City experiences its first theft in the museum's 110-year-old history on February 9 when an ancient Greek marble head valued at a quarter of a million dollars is stolen.

1988: Exactly nine years later, on February 9. two valuable Fra Angelico paintings are among the works stolen from a gallery in New York's wealthy Upper East Side, in the city's largest single art theft to date. Eighteen paintings and ten drawings valued at a total of $6 million are taken from the Colnaghi Ltd. gallery.

1990: The night of March 18, thieves enter Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and make off with $300 million worth of art, including three paintings by Rembrandt, five by Edgar Degas, Edouard Manet, and the most valuable, *The Concert,* by Jan Vermeer. None of the paintings has been returned.

1997: In December, the Department of Justice and the FBI issue a statement regarding reports that certain individuals could broker the return of art stolen in March of 1990 from the Gardner Museum. The Department denies that any such reports are legitimate, and that photographs and paint chips purported to be that of the stolen paintings are carefully analyzed by museum officials and deemed fraudulent.

1999: On July 13, the night before Bastille Day, thieves steal Rembrandt's *Child with Soap Bubble,* worth unspecified millions, from a municipal museum in the Toulon region of France.

Today: A $5 million reward is still being offered for the safe return of the art stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 1990.

1791: The nation's first internal revenue law requires a tax on distilled spirits, at 20 to 30 cents per gallon. The legislatures of North Carolina, Virginia, and Maryland pass official resolutions of disapproval.

1861: Four months after the Civil War begins, Congress adopts an income tax law to help finance the war. Incomes from $600 to $10,000 are taxed at 3 percent, and those $10,000 and above, at 5 percent.

1916: The federal income tax is ruled constitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court.

1960: U.S. taxpayers pay federal, state, and local taxes worth 25 percent of their earnings.

1969: On December 22, Congress passes a far-reaching tax reform bill that removes 9 million of the nation's poor from its income tax rolls. The bill draws criticism that it ultimately aids the rich, not the poor.

1981: Shortly after his election, President Ronald Reagan proposes a 10 percent income tax cut in each of the next three years. The plan is modified by Congress to begin with a 5 percent cut the first year.

1995: An average lawyer's income is $1,116 per week. A child care worker makes an average of $158 per week.

What Do I Read Next?

The opening poem of Barbara Ras's *Bite Every Sorrow* argues that "you can't have it all," contrary to the myth, spawned by the American dream, that you can. However, says the poem, which is titled "You Can't Have It All," you *can* have "the fig tree and its fat leaves like clown hands / gloved with green," as well as a host of other gifts the world freely gives: "You can't count on grace to pick you out of a crowd, / but here is your friend to teach you how to high jump, how to throw yourself over the bar, backwards, / until you learn about love, about sweet surrender." Though not yet as well known as Pastan, Barbara Ras has been spoken of as a poet who "accurately captures the tug of war between the quotidian and the miraculous." *Bite Every Sorrow* won the prestigious Walt Whitman Award in 1997 for a first book of poems.

Pastan's most recent collection, *Carnival Evening,* spans thirty years of the poet's career, and contains both new poems and a selection from nine previous volumes. If one reads through *Carnival Evening* chronologically, Pastan's evolving skill with metaphor and her changing preoccupations with art, marriage, family, and aging become apparent.

One could argue that Pastan's poetry is "confessional" in its treatment of personal, often private, emotions and situations. "Confessional poetry" emerged as a genre of American contemporary poetry in the mid-1950s through the work of Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath, and is embodied today in the poems of Sharon Olds and others. The poems in Robert Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) and *Life Studies* (1959) are peopled with family members and poets, both living and dead, whose lives and words provide a terrain for the self to be revealed, often painfully.

In some ways, Pastan has answered the imperative in^ *Room of One's Own* (1929) that a woman of "genius" must have the means to exercise her gift. Virginia Woolf s landmark "feminist" essay urges that a woman must have "a room of her own," the necessary time, privacy, and freedom from financial concerns to satisfy the call of her art. Woolf believed that men and women experience life quite differently, and that the form of their artistic expression, therefore, must also differ. To put it in Woolf's writerly terms, a woman's "sentences" will reflect the unique shape of her experience. Many of Pastan's poems reveal the tensions in finding such a "room," even while they provide examples of "sentences" distinctly feminine in both form and content.

In *Storyteller,* Leslie Marmon Silko has assembled a collage of stories, poems, and photographs that provide a portrait of Laguna Indian life, and specifically, that of several generations of her own family. Native American legend and voices from the land are woven seamlessly into this "family album." Silko's book, published the same year as Pastan's *Waiting for My Life* (1981), provides a glimpse into the "extraordinary ordinary" life of the Laguna people in this century.

Further Study

Pastan, Linda, "Response," *The Georgia Review,* Vol. 35, No. 4, winter 1981, p. 734.

Pastan was chosen along with several other poets to respond, in colloquium style, to a statement made about the changing audience for poetry. Though quite brief, her comments reveal much about her detachment from literary criticism and her stance on the political power of poetry.

--------"Writing about Writing," *Writers on Writing, A*

Bread Loaf Anthology, edited by Robert Pack and Jay Parini, Hanover, NH: Middlebury College Press, 1991, pp. 207-20. Pastan's love of painting and interest in self-portraits provide the entree into this essay, which has a simple thesis: Pastan likes to write about writing, and so do many other poets. She creates some useful categories for poems about poems, such as "How to Do It" poems, "writer's block" poems, "invocations to the muse," and poems that define either poetry or the poet's task. The anthology itself is full of lively essays by a variety of fiction writers and poets on the subject of writing, from many different viewpoints.

--------, "Ask Me," *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things,* edited by Tom Andrews, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993, pp. 253-54.

This is Pastan's tribute to the late poet William Stafford. It is short, intimate, and honest in her open affection for the late poet, and her discomfort in "writing about poems." Pastan focuses on Stafford's poem "Ask Me," "because it seems to give me permission to be almost silent, to stand with him a moment quietly at the edge of the frozen river and to just wait."

"Women & the Arts", *The Georgia Review* (special issue),

Vol. 44, Nos. 1 & 2, spring/summer 1990.

Occupying the center pages of this issue of *The Georgia Review* is a series of paintings, "Home-scapes," by Georgia artist Mary Porter. Porter's work, like Pastan's, finds domestic themes, places, and objects to be worthy of art. In Porter's lively water-colors and acrylics, the common porch, kitchen, stovetop, sink, laundry basket, and coffeepot are

transformed "into enigmatic metaphors." Several of the fiction writers, essayists, poets, and graphic artists in this issue are well known□Eudora Welty, Naomi Shihab Nye, Joyce Carol Oates, Maxine Kumin, Rita Dove, Eavan Boland, and Pastan, to name a few. The editors of this special issue hope that the contributors' engaging, "varied energies," will invite a "fresh reassessment" of women artists in our society.

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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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