For a Citizen of These United States Study Guide

For a Citizen of These United States by Li-Young Lee

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Introduction

Li-Young Lee's "For a New Citizen of These United States" appeared in the poet's second collection, *The City in Which I Love You*, published in Brockport, New York, in 1990. Like the majority of Lee's poems, this one is based on his memories of a turbulent childhood, beginning with his family's escape from Indonesia by boat in the middle of the night when he was only two years old. The past often plays a significant role in Lee's poetry, for it is something he feels is always there that, unlike a country or a prison, history is inescapable. But not all of the poet's relatives and friends who endured the same fears and upheaval of life in exile share his notion of an unavoidable past. "For a New Citizen of These United States" addresses a "you" who is not specifically identified but who appears to be an acquaintance of Lee's from the time of their flight from Indonesia. In this poem, the person spoken to is not enamored of things from the past, as Lee is, and seems not to recall any of the events and settings that Lee describes. Although the poem's speaker Lee himself, in this case pretends to accept his acquaintance's lack of interest and real or feigned forgetfulness of their shared history, his tone of voice and subtle sarcasm make it clear that he is frustrated by the other's attitude. This premise dominates the poem from beginning to end.

Author Biography

Li-Young Lee was born in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 1957. His parents were Chinese and were well educated and influential in their native country. Lee's father was Mao Zedong's personal physician while the family lived in China, and his mother was a descendant of China's provisional president, Yuan Shikai, elected in 1912 when the nation was in transition from a monarchy to a republic. The Indonesian government imprisoned Lee's father not long after Li- Young's birth. The older Lee's interest in Western culture did not sit well with the Southeast Asian leaders he enjoyed opera, Shakespeare, the philosophical writings of Kierkegaard, and the Christian Bible. In 1959, Li-Young's father escaped from prison and fled Indonesia with his family. They spent the next five years traveling throughout Hong Kong, Macau, and Japan before moving to the United States, where they settled in Pennsylvania in 1964. Eventually, Lee's father studied theology at a seminary in Pittsburgh and became a Presbyterian minister.

The tumultuous early upbringing influenced Lee throughout childhood and into his current middle age. But in spite of the family's migration from country to country, one constant was his exposure to poetry especially from hearing his father recite it and his familiarity with the King James Bible, from which his father also frequently read. The most dominating factor in the poet's life was indeed his father, and much of his work reflects that. Lee attended the Universities of Pittsburgh and Arizona and the State University of New York at Brockport. He has taught at various institutions, including the University of Iowa and Northwestern, and his first two books of poetry won major awards. In 1986, *Rose* won the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Prize, and in 1990 *The City in Which I Love You* including "For a New Citizen of These United States" was awarded the Lamont Poetry Selection of that year. Lee now lives in Chicago with his wife and children.

Poem Text

Forgive me for thinking I saw
the irregular postage stamp of death;
a black moth the size of my left
thumbnail is all I've trapped in the damask.
There is no need for alarm. And

there is no need for sadness, if
the rain at the window now reminds you
of nothing; not even of that
parlor, long like a nave, where cloud-shadow,
wing-shadow, where father-shadow
continually confused the light. In flight,
leaf-throng and, later, soldiers and
flags deepened those windows to submarine.

But you don't remember, I know,
so I won't mention that house where Chung hid,
Lin wizened, you languished, and Ming□
Ming hush-hushed us with small song. And since
you
don't recall the missionary
bells chiming the hour, or those words whose
sounds
alone exhaust the heart□*garden*,
heaven, amen□I'll mention none of it.

After all, it was just our life,
merely years in a book of years. It was
1960, and we stood with
the other families on a crowded
railroad platform. The trains came, then
the rains, and then we got separated.

And in the interval between
familiar faces, events occurred, which
one of us faithfully pencilled
in a day-book bound by a rubber band.

But birds, as you say, fly forward.
So I won't show you letters and the shawl
I've so meaninglessly preserved.
And I won't hum along, if you don't, when
our mothers sing *Nights in Shanghai*.

I won't, each Spring, each time I smell lilac,
recall my mother, patiently
stitching money inside my coat lining,
if you don't remember your mother
preparing for your own escape.

After all, it was only our
life, our life and its forgetting.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2

The first two lines of "For a New Citizen of These United States" are intriguing and somewhat ambivalent. In poetry, the "I" in a poem should not be confused with the poet him- or herself, and, therefore, critics and reviewers typically refer to the "I" as the "speaker" or "persona" when discussing the work. But because Lee's poetry is well documented as actual accounts of his past and of his personal feelings toward it, one is safe in presuming the speaker here is indeed Lee. Given that, he begins this poem by asking someone for forgiveness, but who that someone is, is not yet revealed. The real ambivalence, however, falls in the second line, in which he compares death to an "irregular postage stamp." It is possible, of course, that what the poet has in mind with this metaphor is just that□in his own mind and not accessible to readers in general. But one who has read other poems by Lee may liken this haunting, yet striking, imagery to his visions of a past that creeps up on the present through a letter turning up years after it was lost in the mail. The first poem in *The City in Which I Love You* is called "Furious Versions" and contains the lines, "Memory revises me. / Even now a letter / comes from a place / I don't know, from someone / with my name / and postmarked years ago." The postage stamp in "For a New Citizen of These United States" is irregular with its old date, and it reminds Lee of the deaths that occurred in his past, both those of loved ones and those of citizens killed by soldiers in China and Indonesia.

Lines 3-5

In these lines, Lee admits that the flash of what he imagined to be the "postage stamp of death" was really only a moth that he has trapped in a piece of richly patterned cloth ("the damask"), typical of Oriental linens and fabrics. He also admits that there is "no need for alarm," but this first stanza suggests the poet's encumbered state of mind. He is so fixated on his troubling memories that he mistakes a common insect for a tragic omen.

Lines 6-8

At this point, the reader has no reason to doubt Lee's sincerity in claiming that there is "no need for alarm" and, in line 6, "no need for sadness" either. As the poem progresses, however, one sees that he is continually alarmed and saddened, by both the past itself and his acquaintance's lack of response to it. In lines 7 and 8, Lee makes first mention of the "you" in the poem, stating that the person addressed is not reminded of the past by "the rain at the window." (Although one cannot tell from the poem whether Lee's acquaintance is male or female, for the sake of simplicity here, the individual will be referred to as "he.") Rain itself is significant in this poem, and to Lee in general,

because his family fled Indonesia in the springtime monsoon season in that part of the world.

Lines 9-11

The first hint of the poet's frustration is revealed here as he describes a memory in vivid, yet metaphoric detail, but his acquaintance does not appear to recall the same images. The "parlor" mentioned is the compartment of the boat in which his family gathered when they escaped from Indonesia, fleeing the father's persecution by government officials. The reference to "nave" is pertinent in Lee's life because his father was a pastor in a small church and Lee used to help him clean it. The shadow images indicate the fluctuation between despair and hope that the escapees felt "cloud-shadow" implying darkness and doubt and "wing-shadow" recalling the moth flickering in the light in the first stanza, as well as the promise of flight and freedom. The "father-shadow" is a constant in Lee's poetry, for his father was the dominant figure in his life and the son is forever in the older man's shadow. Together, cloud, wing, and father "confused the light" with continual movement, or fluctuation. Line 11 ends with a double meaning in the word "flight": It not only perpetuates the wing imagery, but it also represents the Lee family's flight from Indonesia.

Lines 12-13

Here, Lee describes the chaotic rush to escape, his family battling both monsoon rains and winds creating a "leaf-throng" all around, making it difficult to see as they tried to protect themselves from harsh weather and approaching soldiers. In other poems, Lee describes waves so high that the boat seemed to sail underwater, and it is the tumultuous mixture of wind-whipped leaves, soldiers, and the ship's flags that he believes "deepened those windows to submarine."

Lines 14-17

Lee's memory now turns to other places and events in the history he shares with the acquain- tance, but he knows this recollection, too, is not shared. Line 15 employs a touch of irony in that he claims he "won't mention that house" and then goes on to do just that, including a description of what others in the house, including the acquaintance, were actually doing. "Lin" is probably Li-Young's older brother, Li Lin Lee, an accomplished painter also living in Chicago. "Chung" and "you," the acquaintance, may be Lee's cousins or other relatives, or they may be friends. "Ming" seems to be an adult trying to keep the children quiet by singing to them.

Lines 18-21

These lines describe Lee's memory of his church experience as a young boy and of words from the Bible "*garden, heaven, amen*" so beautiful and so heavy that they

"exhaust the heart" with their hopeful, yet sad sounds. The irony is even stronger at the end of line 21 as the poet says he will "mention none of" everything he has just mentioned in provocative detail.

Lines 22-23

Although the poet's tone of voice seems soft and melancholy as he recalls the events of his life throughout this poem, there is an underlying bitterness that surfaces from time to time. Line 22 is one of those times. The flippancy is obviously intended in "After all, it was just our life," and his sarcasm continues in the metaphor comparing one's life to only a few pages in a fat book of many pages.

Lines 24-27

These lines recall yet another memory from a specific year and a specific place. Although the Lee family reportedly fled Indonesia by boat, this scene in 1960 implies that another part of the escape involved rail travel as well. Apparently other families were trying to leave, including the acquaintance's. Lee notes that in the confusion of trains pulling in and rain coming down, "we got separated," as though the original intent was for their families to flee together.

Lines 28-31

These lines imply that on the train, and perhaps on the boat leaving Indonesia, Lee was the one who took notes on the events occurring around him. That, of course, cannot be true, for he was only two years old. But in many of his poems, Lee blends, or intentionally confuses, the past and present to call attention to the difficulty in separating them. Here, he vaguely states that "one of us" wrote things down, but if that is not literally correct, it is still figuratively a snide way of telling his acquaintance he should be more closely in touch with what happened to their families long ago. ***Line 32*** Line 32 contains the central idea in "For a New Citizen of These United States." The bird metaphor may simply be translated as "human beings should look to the future ('fly forward') instead of trying to live in the past." This is apparently the philosophy of Lee's acquaintance, evidenced in the poignant phrase "as *you* say." This idea is a key element in the poem because it expresses the exact opposite of Lee's own philosophy□his own inescapable search of the past to understand the present.

Lines 33-41

These nine lines reiterate the irony of Lee's claiming he will not do something and then proceeding to do exactly that. He says he "won't show," "won't hum," "won't . . . recall," and then he details what it is he won't show, hum, or recall. His recollections center on his mother and his acquaintance's mother, both of whom still sing old songs about the homeland together. Lee still hangs on to family memorabilia, such as old letters and his

mother's shawl, and thinks about the way she sewed money into his coat lining before their springtime flight from Indonesia. The acquaintance, of course, does not remember his own mother preparing for whatever the exile might bring, including separation.

Lines 42-43

The poem ends by returning to Lee's sense of bitterness over his acquaintance's lack of interest in their history together, but the flippancy that surfaced in line 22 sounds more like resignation now. In saying "it was only our / life," he repeats the earlier idea, but he now adds, "our life and its forgetting." This tension between forgetting and remembering is another constant in Lee's life and in his poetry. As he ages, he tries to concentrate less and less on history in favor of life today. Perhaps the last line of this poem is his recognition that letting go may not be easy but it is necessary.

Themes

Inescapable History

The most dominant theme in "For a New Citizen of These United States" is the poet's own inability to escape the memories of his family's troubled past. Tied directly to the personal tragedies are the social tragedies that Lee witnessed as a young boy. The childhood he recalls is full of persecution and fear: tales of his father's imprisonment in an Indonesian jail and the family's eventual life in exile after the father's escape. For Lee, the present is continually infiltrated by the past. His thoughts, actions, and beliefs are all shaped by the disturbing history that followed him throughout five years of traveling from country to country and into his youth and adulthood in the United States.

From start to finish, this poem discloses an ongoing struggle between living in the past and letting it go. Lee pretends to be able, even if unwillingly, to stop bringing up events that occurred years ago, but what he says he will do and what he actually does are two different things. He cannot help but to talk about the house where he and his family and friends hid, about the chaos on a crowded railway platform, about his mother's belongings and the day she prepared him for their escape. Even the common experiences of the present□a moth flying by or "rain at the window"□remind him of death, shadows, and windows covered with water. Some may be tempted to call the poet's persistent thoughts an obsession, one that he should try to get over. It is difficult, however, if not impossible, for anyone who has not been through the turmoil that Lee's family has experienced to understand the relentless memories of such horrible times. The poet himself would be the first to admit the pain and frustration of recurring thoughts that will not go away, and in "For a New Citizen of These United States" he is even apologetic about it. His first words are, "Forgive me," and later he claims his mother's letters and shawl have been "meaninglessly preserved." But even though the last two lines of the poem indicate the possibility of forgetting the past, there is little evidence elsewhere to support Lee's ability to so do.

Self-Alienation

A secondary theme in Lee's "For a New Citizen of These United States" is actually a result of the primary one. Because his thoughts are so centered on events of the past, he is often alienated from friends and relatives who prefer to move on and put history behind them. Who the "new citizen" is in this poem appears to be the acquaintance addressed as "you," but it could also refer to Lee himself in regard to his arrival in America at the age of seven or eight. Past and present tend to intertwine in much of Lee's work, and the ambivalence mimics the melding of times and events in his own mind. Some people, however□including immigrants who suffered similar experiences in their own histories□are put off by the constant recollection of times gone by. The acquaintance in this poem is surely not as forgetful as Lee portrays him (how could one forget such overwhelming events?), but more likely he *chooses* not to remember.

Perhaps this is what frustrates Lee the most, but it is also what separates him from someone he wants desperately to connect with. Although the reader does not get to "hear" the acquaintance's responses, one can easily assume his words: No, he does not remember the house he "languished" in; no, he did not record his life experiences; and, no, he does not remember his mother preparing him to flee the country. The most penetrating and revealing statement attributed to the acquaintance is "birds . . . fly forward." In one line, he is able to strike down what it takes Lee forty or more to say. And it is the poet's desire, or *need*, to relive the past that alienates him from those who shared the experience, but not the fixation.

Style

Lee is noted for his "plain talk" poetry, written in free verse without many poetic devices, such as alliteration or meter, and hardly any rhyme, if at all. Most of his poems could be written in prose and not lose their meaning or impact. The only poetic function that does tend to surface in his work is an occasional potent metaphor, often surprising, sometimes elegant in tone and image.

In "For a New Citizen of These United States," the first striking metaphor comes right up front, in the opening stanza. The comparison of a black moth to the "irregular postage stamp of death" is dark and beautiful at the same time. So, too, are the "cloud-shadow," "wing-shadow," and "fathershadow" images in the second stanza, along with the notion of windows "deepened . . . to submarine." Surrounding these metaphors, though, is plain language that simply conveys the poet's thought at that moment. He says, "There is no need for alarm. And / there is no need for sadness," and he opens the third stanza with, "But you don't remember, I know, / so I won't mention that house."

Lee intertwines the simple language with powerful imagery throughout this poem, with probably the most compelling metaphor occurring in line 32. "But birds, as you say, fly forward" is a very straightforward, common sense piece of information, but its significance lies in what it represents rather than what it literally means. It is arguably the most important line in the poem and is clear evidence of Lee's ability to speak in plain English and still startle the reader with remarkable revelation.

Historical Context

Only a few decades after its declaration of independence from England, the United States of America became known as a melting pot, so named because of the number of immigrants who landed on its shores from all over the world. For a while, this influx of diverse groups of people was a welcome sight, for it helped to "grow" the new country and make it stronger. But personal bias and stereotypes do not go away quietly, and before too long immigrants especially those of color or distinguishable physical features found themselves the victims of racism and unfair treatment in the work place, on the streets, and in residential communities everywhere. Asian immigrants were no exception, and in 1960 nearly two hundred years after gaining independence, the United States was still a hostile place for many foreigners, including the Lee family who arrived that year.

Five years after the Lee's arrival, the Immigration Act of 1965 was passed, abolishing the discriminatory practice of fulfilling immigrant quotas based on national origins, which had favored northwestern Europeans prior to that. Although the act limited the number of people who could migrate to America from both the western and eastern hemispheres, close relatives of those immigrants already in the country were exempt from the quotas, so the number of newcomers was still more than anticipated. By the time Li-Young Lee was writing poetry heavily influenced by his family's history and life in their new home, Asians were still pouring into the United States, even though Asia itself had registered the most rapid economic growth of any nation on the planet. During the 1980s and 1990s, the continent's share of the world's output increased from 10 to 20 percent. This growth is partly attributed to American recovery programs after the Vietnam War, as well as the American provision of capital and technology to help increase industrialization. Probably the greatest factor in American contribution to Asian development is the purchase of huge quantities of Asian products in the United States.

Lee's parents were Chinese, but he was born in Indonesia, called Tanah Air Kita, or "Our Land and Water," by its native citizens. The name refers to the area's geographical makeup, consisting of 17,508 islands connected by six seas in the South Pacific. Indonesia is the largest archipelago in the world and the fourth largest nation. Jakarta, the capital city and Lee's birthplace, is on the island of Java. During the mid-twentieth century, much of Asia, including Indonesia and China, had governments that frowned upon free speech and freedom of religion. Lee's father encountered the repression firsthand, and his promotion of Western religion and Western philosophy resulted in imprisonment. But during the 1980s and 1990s, parts of Asia, including China, stopped overt repression of religious activity, and, as a result, interest in various religions grew. Also during this time, many Chinese citizens became enamored of American culture in the form of McDonalds fast food, Coca-Cola, trendy clothing, and rock music. Westerners delighted in this turn of events, believing it signaled China's move toward capitalist ideas and democratic values, but scattered news stories of young Asians enjoying fashionable clothes, heavy metal, and Big Macs did not tell the entire story. Economic reforms triggered negative, as well as positive, results. Inflation,

unemployment, and corruption kept much of society in check, leaving the door open for government to retain as much repressive control as possible.

In 1989, America and other Western countries had their hopes for China's development dashed on national television. When Chinese students staged a demonstration in Tiananmen Square to draw attention to the continued repression, they were eventually met by troops and tanks. After the massacre of the demonstrators, Chinese officials instigated a wave of arrests throughout the country, resulting in many Westerners fearing nothing had changed in China at all. Since the Tiananmen Square debacle, relations between China and the West have been unstable, although signs of China's willingness to be part of the common world market are increasing again. While Indonesia's development has come along at a faster rate, that nation, too, still struggles with political strife and religious repression. However, Indonesians are also no strangers to the hustle and bustle of big business, entertainment, sports, arts and culture, and social life. Though complete freedom may not yet exist in this nation of over seventeen thousand islands, the possibility appears stronger for Indonesians than for their neighbors in China.

Critical Overview

It is not unusual for a talented young immigrant writer with a less-than-happy past to find an intrigued and sympathetic audience in America. Not all of them, however, have the success of Li-Young Lee, who seems to dwell beyond the normal level on his family's history as the basis for his poetry. But in spite of this seeming obsession, Lee has been accepted as a viable poetic voice since the publication his first collection, *Rose*, in 1986. Critics praise his candor in relating real-life experiences and his ability to do so both forcefully and creatively. In an article for *Melus*, critic Mary Slowik calls Lee's writing "insistently in the present tense, where past experience and future promise are fused in the confusion of the present moment, intensely and immediately experienced." In *Publishers Weekly*, Penny Kaganoff describes Lee's second collection, *The City in Which I Love You*, as a "journey through his wayward consciousness to relive sad and strange moments, their emotional impact somewhat deadened by the distance of his memory." Of the poet's style, Kaganoff says the "images are economical yet fluid, and his language is often startling for its brave honesty."

Honesty is a key factor for any poet who relies so heavily on troubling personal experiences for inspiration. Without it, the writing can quickly falter into pathos and sentimentality, turning off readers who may feel a tug on their heartstrings but not on their intellectual prowess. Lee's work presents sorrowful stories, but it leaves a reader stimulated and thoughtful, as well as saddened. It has appeared in major literary journals across the country, such as *American Poetry Review*, *Iowa Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *TriQuarterly*, and Lee has received a National Endowment for the Arts grant, a Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, and various creative writing grants in Illinois and Pennsylvania.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill contends that Lee's poem is more an attempt to gain sympathy than to produce a creative work.

If one defines *pathos* as the essence of a creative work that arouses feelings of sympathy or pity in its audience, then Lee's "For a New Citizen of These United States" is, at least, an attempt to be pathetic. Generally, this is a tricky issue for poets, as they run the risk of turning off readers who may consider the pathos simply whining. In Lee's case, the subject of his poem is real, the premise of his poem is real, and the "new citizen" to whom it is addressed is, presumably, real. Therefore, one is tempted to say that the poet is only reporting the facts and his feelings about them and should not be criticized for doing so. This poem, however, takes "reporting" to a new level□a new *low* level of pityseeking that detracts from the power of what it is actually about.

No one should doubt the enduring emotional pain suffered by people whose childhood experiences were traumatic and, in some cases, lifethreatening. Insecurity and instability are surely factors that result in many children growing up fearful and mournful, unable ever to put away the misery they encountered for so long. Li-Young Lee and his family□as well as countless other human beings living under tyrannical governments and forced into exile□know all too well the mental, as well as the physical, suffering that results from simply trying to stay alive in stressful conditions. They know, too, that eventually landing in America may have been a blessing but not one without some drawbacks. "Foreigners," after all, are up against ethnic and racial biases no matter where they go. And although the Lees may not have been under the same threats to their physical well-being in Pennsylvania as they were in China and Indonesia, they still had to deal with the frustration and degradation of not being fully accepted in their new home. Li-Young was only a boy when he arrived in America, but after five years of moving from one country to another, his troubles did not go away upon making it to the United States□they just changed in nature.

Given all that, is it not expected that a young poet would use his creative ability as an outlet for expressing sorrow and anger over the events that so heavily burdened his life? Yes, of course. But purely emotional expression is difficult to pass off as creativity, especially if it is not very carefully presented. The problem with "For a New Citizen of These United States" as a literary work is its presentation; in particular, the irony tactic is too obvious and too frequent.

The first two stanzas of this poem are really very remarkable in their intricate description and metaphoric quality. The comparison between a "postage stamp of death" and "a black moth" is an engrossing thought, and the portrayal of various shadows moving about "confus[ing] the light" is a captivating picture to imagine. Unfortunately, the poem takes a downturn in creativity beginning in the third stanza with "so I won't mention the house," which is the first time Lee uses the ironic twist of describing what he has just said he would not describe. This may work once in a brief poem (forty-three total lines,

in this case), but in a longer poem it becomes too obvious and trite. Lee does it again in lines 21 ("I'll mention none of it"), 33 ("So I won't show you letters"), 35 ("And I won't hum along"), and 37 ("I won't . . . recall my mother"). Granted, the repetition is intentional, and in some poems repetitiveness can be an effective tool for communicating a vital message in the work. But when the recurring tactic strings together pathetic descriptions of personal misfortune, it loses the punch it may have otherwise had.

"For a New Citizen of These United States" exhibits pathos in the details of the crowded railway platform where frightened families huddle in the rain, losing track of each other in the melee; it is exhibited in the stanza-long description of the poet's and his acquaintance's mothers□their singing nostalgic songs together, the old letters and shawl Lee has kept for years, the memory of his mother sewing money into his coat lining before they attempted their escape. All this is, indeed, heart-wrenching as actual events, but as strictly poetry, it slips into that dubious area of pathetic complaint.

It is interesting to ponder what may have saved this poem from crossing the thin line between creative autobiography and autobiographical pathos. Perhaps it is something as simple as expanding on one of the most important lines in the poem: "But birds, as you say, fly forward." There is more power□both in meaning and in simple poetics□in this one line than in much of the drawn-out details of Lee's troubled past. If he had addressed at greater length his acquaintance's apparent philosophy on the past, a more cohesive, more intriguing poem may have resulted. Instead, Lee belabors the point of sorrowful memories and dismisses the beautiful metaphor of birds flying forward□implying the de- sire to look to the future□without second thought. This quick dismissal likely stems from the fact that Lee cannot escape the past and, therefore, the future is almost insignificant to him. So why include the line in a poem that is otherwise centered in history and carries a tone of sarcasm and admonishment on the part of the speaker toward the "you" he addresses? Without it, the work would display no evidence whatsoever of its author's acknowledgement that some people choose not to dwell on their troubled pasts. But with it, the poet has an opportunity to show his recognition of the opposite philosophy, even if that translates only into another chance to shoot it down. The latter seems most plausible; after all, this wonderful line about flying birds is the beginning of one of the most pathetic stanzas in the poem.

Perhaps it seems too harsh, unjustified even, to criticize a poet who records the truth, as he sees it, and who is not afraid to wear his heart on his sleeve, as the saying goes. Perhaps, but the *heart* in this case is as stubborn as it is pitiable. It is not just the repeated message of how bad life was in his early years that diminishes the quality of Lee's work in this poem but also that he appears hostile toward those who opt not to wallow in dark memories along with him. As a result, the poetry suffers. After considering "For a New Citizen of These United States," readers may feel more sympathetic toward people who have endured hardships they never will, but they may also feel cheated out of the high-quality work that this poet is capable of producing.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "For a New Citizen of These United States," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Kelly is an adjunct professor of creative writing and literature at Oakton Community College and an associate professor of literature and creative writing at College of Lake County and has written extensively for academic publishers. In this essay, Kelly explores the dark undertone to the poem, finding it to be an indictment of the immigrant experience.

It is far too tempting to read Li-Young Lee's poetry in terms of the biographical facts of his life. This is especially a problem in the case of a poem like "To a New Citizen of These United States," which includes a few details that can be confirmed as corresponding to the life the author has led. Like Lee, the speaker of this poem came to America long ago after a harrowing struggle against one or more oppressive political systems, a life of hiding from soldiers. But it is misleading to concentrate on the similarities and to ignore the differences. In this case, the differences lie in the details of the character's life that the author has not chosen to share. A conscious decision has been made about what details to leave out and which to include, making the character his own individual person. To fill in details by matching given facts from Li-Young Lee's life would trivialize the poem's artistic achievement. The situation that is given in print should be allowed to speak for itself, with no need for any outside influence. In spite of the fine details that make the poem come alive, "To a New Citizen of These United States" is not about its author nor about any particular people from any particular place; it is about the cultural experience of becoming American.

This poem is one of those subtle, carefully calibrated artistic works that yields a slightly different meaning with each reading. It starts out bestowing its reader with a feeling of optimism toward the future and sadness toward the past, but with each successive reading its spirit of anger becomes more clearly evident. The story it tells is about two friends who have each escaped from a repressive life and who have reunited in the United States. Even without equating the speaker with the author, it would be a fair guess to say that the inclusion of a date here might mean the same to the character as it would to Li-Young Lee. If so, the separation would have happened when the poem's speaker was two or three years old, Lee's age in 1960. There is no indication of how old the poem's New Citizen would have been then, or whether these two were relatives, friends, or acquaintances, or what brings them together now; there is only the history that they share, one of fear and suffering. A superficial reading might leave the impression that the poem's speaker avoids the subject of the past's horrors out of politeness, but that is taking his words at face value. It leaves too many questions raised but unanswered.

The poem's initial impact is of one person, its speaker, trying to connect with a person who has presumably just crossed over into safety. This entails working around any mention of the difficult conditions that they once shared. The title hints at a much different poem, mentioning a transitional moment that usually ranks with life's most celebrated. To immigrants, new citizenship can be as significant a rite of passage as marriage or childbirth, indicating a future overflowing with promise. The title also uses

the folksy, commercial phrase "*These* United States," common to popular magazines and textbooks, to imply that the New Citizen is entering a happy community and can leave his worries behind.

The poem introduces its dark side in the very first few lines, with the mention of death, but it immediately undercuts the severity of this idea, explaining it away as a simple mistake. Ironically, this "mistake" continues to be an image of violence even after it is explained: The moth, for which the speaker claims to have mistaken death, is captured in a cloth of damask, likely made of silk, which moths destroy. At the same time that it introduces this sinister aspect, though, the poem also introduces its speaker's polite, humble tone toward the New Citizen. The first two words of the first line are "forgive me." With the mistaken impression, the newness promised by the title, and the gentle begging for pardon, the poem starts in a hopeful mood, subverting its frightening imagery of death as a fluttering black moth. Like the moth in silk, though, the poem also carries the hint of destruction that is obscured by opulent beauty.

The speaker of the poem is clearly struggling to suppress some ideas that are unacceptable for this reunion. Sprinkled throughout its lines is the phrase "I won't mention," which belies a strained, insincere form of humility. It brings up a subject while pretending that it is not doing so. This speaker actually seems eager to talk about the adventures of the past, which include hiding and escape, but he is held back from open discussion of such matters. The idea implied is that the danger that these two have overcome would gain validity if they were to dwell upon it, allowing those who terrorized them before to take control of their future. There is a strong implication in this poem that the past needs to be buried so that when the mind drifts toward times gone by, even while thinking of the good things associated with those times, it ought to be redirected away from such thoughts.

What comes out from reading the poem carefully is the speaker's disassociation from this idea of burying the past and his complete disdain for it. Willful ignorance is not a poetic stance, although this speaker seems to be willing to go along with it. Each time the poem asks for forgiveness or mentions some aspect of the past that it says it will not mention, the speaker draws attention to the struggle that he is putting up to remain silent.

The third stanza offers a perfect example of this. In the second line, it begins, "I won't mention," and then it goes on to render a scene in full, intricate detail, given the short space of a poem. Three other characters are mentioned, and songs and bells and specific words tickle the memory. Lee's use of sounds is one of the surest ways of jogging memory, which means that the poem does exactly what it says it is trying not to do, by bringing buried memories to the fore. In fact, in reference to the things just detailed, the stanza ends with "I'll mention none of it," just to make the irony clear to readers who might have been duped into believing that the speaker really intended to avoid discussing the past.

The speaker is, in fact, obsessive about the past. The reference in the fifth stanza "faithfully" chronicling the events that occurred in childhood and since is, like the events

themselves, given emotional importance by the meticulous details with which the written record is described: The words "pencil," "day-book," and "rubber band" are all aspects that would not occur to someone who takes the responsibility of recording history lightly. Under other conditions, the speaker's explanation that "one of us" kept this record could function as a unifying technique, as if it were irrelevant whether the speaker or the New Citizen was the one writing all of this down. Here, however, since there can be no question that it is the speaker, the effect is sarcasm. It adds emphasis to what the speaker has done to keep the past alive and thereby highlights what the New Citizen has not done in that same regard.

Given this tension between remembering and forgetting and the speaker's clear, strong support for the former, it is hard to accept all of the poem's pretensions of humility. The frequent apologies in the beginning and the vows not to speak of the past in the poem's middle lead the speaker to, in the later stanzas, abandon his own personal beliefs with such exaggeration as to summon up a fierce sense of anger. He refers to treasured mementos, such as letters and a shawl that he has held on to for decades, as "meaningless," although readers cannot really doubt their sentimental value. He promises to forget the songs that his mother taught him, even to forget his own mother, if the New Citizen is willing to do the same. The last half of the poem has a bitter tone, full of pain and sorrow and hatred, established by the phrase "After all, it was just our life."

Even if one accepts the fact that this speaker is being insincere in his modesty and that he wants his insincerity to show through his words as sarcasm, there is still a question of whom the sarcasm is meant for. The most obvious candidate is, of course, the New Citizen, whose past is so closely tied with that of the speaker. The New Citizen is presented as the one who cannot or will not remember the details of the house they hid in or the mission bells or his mother. According to the poem, it is the New Citizen who lives by the motto "birds fly forward," indicating that this person believes it no more wise or practical for a human to examine the past than it would be for birds to fly in reverse.

The New Citizen *could* be the speaker's adversary in this, as the advocate of letting the past go, but then one needs to ask why this person, meant to hold up the opposing view from the speaker, is never presented in the poem with any clear personality. It would make sense that the details about the past would be obscured, given that the New Citizen stands for forgetting and the speaker seems to have come to the United States long ago. It does not make sense, however, that Lee would not balance the speaker's point of view with the ideas of a character rendered with a respectable degree of realness. Readers are not even given the New Citizen's age or gender nor told what part of the world this person has come from. To argue effectively against a character who believes that the past should be forgotten, it is important to know if he or she has been fighting political oppression for ten years, or twenty, or fifty; if the character is educated enough to appreciate the broad scope of history or if his or her sense of the world is based solely on personal experience; and, most importantly, if this is a person so psychologically damaged by the struggle to emigrate that dwelling on the past would only do harm. Without being told these things, it would be unfair to criticize the New Citizen, or to blame an unknown person wanting to forget. Yet, the poem's stance is

accusatory, showing the desire to forget, to be self-indulgent and even cowardly. This is not the sort of point that an intelligent poem like this would have to make by hiding the truth about the title character.

The New Citizen and the country or countries the New Citizen came from are irrelevant. The object of Lee's sarcasm about forgetting must, by process of elimination, be "these" United States, and the malaise that would make a newcomer forget his or her entire previous life is citizenship itself. The new country is one of the few specific, knowable elements given in the poem, the one thing of which all of Lee's readers would have some knowledge. Though the country is not mentioned after the title, it is quite easy to understand how, in this piece, becoming a citizen of the United States is equal to forgetting.

It makes sense sociologically: The obvious side effect of the American "melting pot" that brings all citizens together would have to be that each individual loses the past that made him or her unique while yet blending into the whole. The logical consequence of adapting to a "new" land is that the old one, and all of the things associated with it, would have to be left behind. It makes sense, too, on a more personal level, that the speaker of this poem would reserve such sarcasm for a cultural environment rather than at the old friend that he is greeting. When the speaker says, "you don't remember" or "it was only our life," he seems to have more pity than blame for his old friend. It is clear enough that this speaker is angry and resistant toward someone who is trying to make both characters in the poem forget, someone who supports the idea that their pasts, individually or together, are not worth holding on to: If it is not the unnamed, repressive former country and if it is not the victimized New Citizen, then the next most likely candidate is the new country. As it appears here, the problem of forgetting is a United States one.

New citizens are often so elated with their achievement that they do not look at what could be lost. There is nothing in this poem to suggest that Li-Young Lee himself opposes the ideals that the United States stands for, only that there is an inevitable inclination to forget the past when starting an exciting new future. In this poem, the speaker argues his points by pretending to believe the opposite of what he really does: He is apologetic when most angry, and he claims to be ready to forget when that is clearly the last thing on his mind. This speaker is fighting a cultural battle so large and complex that it could only be against his chosen home.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "For a New Citizen of These United States," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

A videocassette of Lee's April 18, 1995, reading in Los Angeles was recorded in VHS format by the Lannan Foundation (Sante Fe, New Mexico). Lee reads from his two poetry collections and his autobiographical prose poem *The Winged Seed* and is interviewed by Shawn Wong. The tape runs sixty-six minutes.

Topics for Further Study

If your family had decided to emigrate to another country when you were a young child, what are some of the things you think would be different about your life? Try to think of both positive and negative aspects and write an essay describing your life in a foreign country. Include information about that country that differs from the one in which you now live.

Lee is frustrated because his acquaintance cannot or will not share in his memories of their past lives together. Think of a time when you could not get someone to understand or share a feeling that is very important to you. Write about your approach to the situation, how you handled the "rejection," and how the situation was resolved.

Write a poem titled "Birds Fly Forward." What does the metaphor mean in your poem? How is it different from or the same as Lee's meaning?

Li-Young Lee has a famous brother, Li Lin Lee, who is an accomplished visual artist. Discover some of his paintings, in books or online, and write an essay describing one you like in particular. Give specific details to explain why it appeals to you.

What Do I Read Next?

Many people think of Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, and so forth, when South or Southeast Asia is mentioned, but the Indian subcontinent is a major part of this area of the world. *Living in America: Poetry and Fiction by South Asian American Writers*, edited by Roshni Rustomji- Kerns, is a comprehensive collection of work by authors from the Indian subcontinent. Published in 1995, these writings reflect the experiences and concerns of predominantly middle-class, English-speaking, educated South Asians living in America, caught between two cultures and struggling to define their identity.

In 1999, Gavan Daws and Marty Fujita published *Archipelago: Islands of Indonesia, from the Nineteenth-Century Discoveries of Alfred Russell Wallace to the Fate of Forests and Reefs in the Twenty-first*. This is a wonderfully illustrated book that follows the journey of a young English naturalist named Alfred Russell Wallace in the mid-1850s. It is a fascinating historical and biological look at Indonesia, a country that comprises only 1.3 percent of the world's surface but harbors nearly a quarter of the world's species.

Jonathan D. Spence's *Mao Zedong*, published in 1999, is one of the better biographies of the "Great Helmsman" of Communist China, whose personal physician, for a while, was Li-Young Lee's father. This book concentrates primarily on Mao's early life, including the poetry he wrote to his first wife, but eventually depicts the behavior and mindset of a colossal leader considered responsible for the deaths of some sixty million people.

Readers interested in Indonesian contemporary history and society will enjoy Timothy Lindsey's lengthy but intriguing *The Romance of K'Tut Tantri and Indonesia: Text and Scripts, History and Identity* (1997). This book tells the story of an American woman who established the first hotel in Bali and, later in life, became known as the revolutionary "Surabaya Sue." Portraying herself as a heroine of the Indonesian Revolution, Tantri eventually died abroad, forgotten by most Americans and Indonesians alike.

Further Study

Hongo, Garrett, ed., *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America*, Anchor Books Doubleday, 1993.

This extensive collection of contemporary Asian-American poetry provides an in-depth look at the experiences, hopes, fears, and dreams shared by this segment of the American population. It contains four poems by Lee.

Lee, Li-Young, *Book of My Nights*, BOA Editions, Ltd., 2001.

This is Lee's latest collection of poems, again presenting lyrical, free verse work that fuses memory, family, culture, and history. The book includes four black and white drawings from the University of Rochester's Memorial Art Gallery.

□, *Rose: Poems*, BOA Editions, Ltd., 1986

This is Lee's first collection of poetry. Compared to *The City in Which I Love You*, it concentrates more heavily on the poet's relationship with his father and the overwhelming influence the older man had on his son.

□, *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance*, Simon & Schuster, 1995.

This book is as close to an actual autobiography as Lee has yet come. Written in the form of a prose poem, it is a beautiful, but haunting, recollection of the poet's past and his search for answers to the disturbing inner questions of his mind.

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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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