The Forest Study Guide

The Forest by Susan Stewart

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Introduction

"The Forest" is the first poem in the collection *The Forest* (1995) by American poet Susan Stewart; it is her fourth book of poems. The premise of "The Forest" is that there are no longer any forests in the world, but the forest itself is also a metaphor (the use of one object or idea in place of another to suggest a likeness between the two) for the loss of the human connection to nature, which the speaker of the poem tries to recover by remembering what a forest is like.

Like much of Stewart's poetry, "The Forest" presents a challenge to the reader. The poem is intricately structured, with a pattern of repeated lines, like recurring images in a dream. It travels back and forth between the conscious and the unconscious mind; it does not present a straightforward, linear narrative. Its meaning cannot be fully grasped at first reading but must be teased out through repeated encounters with the poem. Stewart writes for an active rather than a passive reader, a reader who must make the effort to delve deeply into the poem to discern the poet's intent and meaning.

In her choice of a forest as her central metaphor, Stewart touches a deep vein in the Western cultural imagination, since forests have over the ages carried a range of associations in society and literature. The poem also has startling contemporary relevance, since, due to the ever-increasing demands of the global economy, the world's forests are vanishing at an alarming rate.

Author Biography

Susan Stewart was born March 15, 1952, in York, Pennsylvania. She graduated from Dickinson College with a bachelor's degree in English and anthropology in 1973, received a master's degree in poetry from Johns Hopkins University in 1975, and earned a Ph.D. in folklore and folk life studies from the University of Pennsylvania in 1978. In 1978, Stewart also joined the faculty of Temple University as an assistant professor of English, becoming associate professor in 1981 and full professor in 1985. Since 1997, she has been the Regan Professor in English at the University of Pennsylvania, where she teaches the history of lyric poetry, aesthetics, and the philosophy of literature.

Stewart's first collection of poetry was *Yellow Stars and Ice* (1981). As of 2004, she had published three more collections: *The Hive: Poems* (1987), which won the Georgia Press Second Book award; *The Forest* (1995), in which "The Forest" appears; and *Columbarium* (2003), which won a 2003 National Book Critics Circle Award.

In addition to poetry, Stewart has also published a number of books of literary and aesthetic theory. *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (1989) examines the uses of "nonsense" in the work of Lewis Carroll, Jorge Luis Borges, Samuel Beckett, and others. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1984) studies large and small objects and discusses souvenir collecting in the West. *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (1991) is an examination of so-called criminal forms of writing, such as graffiti, forgery, plagiarism, and pornography. *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (2002) is a general theory of poetic forms; it won the Christian Gauss Award for literary criticism from Phi Beta Kappa and the Truman Capote Award in literary criticism. Stewart's collected essays on art titled *The Open Studio: Essays on Art and Aesthetics* were published in January 2005.

Stewart is the recipient of a Lila Wallace Individual Writer's Award; three grants in poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts; a 1995 Pew Fellowship in the arts; a 1995 Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest Writer's Award for poetry; and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation (1986—1987) and the MacArthur Foundation (1997). According to the Pew Fellowships in the Arts Web site, the MacArthur Foundation said of Stewart upon bestowal of her MacArthur fellowship: "Investigating themes such as miniaturization, giganticism, plagiarism, forgery, the souvenir, the collection, Stewart often makes strange and disorienting that which we usually take to be familiar and of common sense."

Plot Summary

Stanzas 1—4

In the first stanza of "The Forest," the speaker addresses an unnamed interlocutor ("you"), advising him or her to lie down and remember the forest because it is disappearing. In line 3, that statement is amended. The forest has already gone, but whatever details the person can recall will help to bring at least some aspect of it back. However, this will only be "a kind of life," not the life itself and not the kind of life for which the person had hoped. The speaker says in stanza 2, it might be called "'in the forest,'" the quotation marks suggesting it is not an immediate experience but one reconstructed, so to speak, from something else, perhaps from memory and language. The speaker emphasizes again, this time in italics, that the forest is gone, that it no longer exists, and then goes on to suggest that the interlocutor start to remember the beginning, the edge, or the first layer of the forest, as if it were "firm" and "underfoot," even though everything seems to be a blank ("blank in life, too").

In stanza 4, forest imagery begins to creep in ("black humus there") as the process of memory starts to work, although the parallel imagery of the sea seems to work against the formulation of any concrete, earthy images. In the last line of stanza 4, music imagery enters the poem ("like a light left hand descending, always on the same keys"), which suggests a pianist playing the same chord over and over again. This image of repetition implies that melody has been lost; no development is possible, which relates to the struggle to recall an experience now departed. Memory moves in the same repetitive grooves as the music, unable to get to the heart of the remembered experience of the forest.

Stanzas 5—8

The music image is continued in stanza 5, with birds singing in the forest, but it is a ghostly kind of singing. It does not take place in the present moment ("behind and before"); it is singing "without a music" that appears to be formless ("there cannot be an order"). It is a long way from hearing actual birds singing in a real forest. The forest imagery, begun in stanza 4, is taken up and strengthened in the final line of stanza 5 and in the first line of stanza 6: "wide swatches of light slice between gray trunks, // Where the air has a texture of drying moss." The forest imagery continues in line 3 of stanza 6, switching from a visual to an olfactory image: "a musk from the mushrooms and scalloped molds." The repetition of two lines about the insubstantial, unmusical singing birds seems to undercut any progress made, an impression which is confirmed in the last line of stanza 6 and the first line of stanza 7: "though high in the dry leaves something does fall, / Nothing comes down to us here."

In stanza 7, the effort of memory begins to produce fruit. Instead of urging her interlocutor to remember, the speaker herself does the remembering. She seems to be

returning to her childhood "(in that place where I was raised)," recalling the brambles, the ferns, and (in stanza 8) the "cinquefoil" (a plant that belongs to the rose family), "false strawberry" (groundcover sometimes also known as mock strawberry), and "sumac" of a real forest. This is shown to be a false promise because line 2 of stanza 8 repeats the earlier line, with a forceful additional word: "nothing comes down to us here, / *stained*." The last word suggests that even memories of the forest do not have the stamp of the real thing, the word "stained" suggesting the mere imprint of real sensory experience.

The speaker is not deterred by all the barriers to recalling and summoning real experience from the past. She produces another concrete image from the forest in stanza 8: "A low branch swinging above a brook." The suggestion of personal experience is heightened in the last line of this stanza□"and a cave just the width of shoulder blades"□which suggests not just any forest but a particular place in a particular forest, perhaps recalled from the speaker's childhood.

Stanzas 9—11

In stanza 9, the speaker returns to addressing her interlocutor directly, assuming that he or she understands the reference to the entry to the cave as "a kind of limit." Perhaps by this the speaker means that the cave suggests another more primal level of experience of the forest, but one that is not open to them, thus representing a boundary that cannot be crossed. Or, it is a reference to childhood, a small secret cave (either literal or metaphoric) that was accessible to the child but not to the adult.

The speaker then imagines the two of them walking in the forest together. This time, in contrast to stanza 8, the memory of a plant ("pokeberry") is "stained," as if it now has a fuller sensual reality. The experience of the forest seems to be becoming more real, an implication confirmed by the last line, that they are walking "in a place that is something like a forest." Although it is still only "something like" a forest, not the thing itself, it is a tribute to the power of language to evoke a resemblance of the tangible world.

The speaker then moves on in stanzas 10 and 11 to another line of thought, imagining an aspect of the forest that is less benign and more threatening than the images have so far conveyed. She imagines, or tries to remember, what is below the "pliant green needles," "the sharp brown blades, / The disfiguring blackness," which suggests the power of the forest to inflict pain on unprepared feet and to create illusions, perhaps frightening ones, by distorting objects seen in the dark of the night. The darkness is then broken by the "bulbed phosphorescence of the roots." Phosphorescence is light given off without heat or combustion, as in decayed wood. Taken together, the images convey a disorienting picture of darkness interspersed with eerie light. Line 3 in stanza 11, "so strangely alike and yet singular, too," may refer back to these bulbed roots. They all appear very similar but each one is in fact unique.

In line 5 of the final stanza, the speaker, having previously built up a tapestry of rich forest imagery, states, "Once we were lost in the forest," which may refer to an actual

memory of childhood, or it may have a more universal reference, perhaps to the prehistory of human beings, before civilization. The repetition of "so strangely alike and yet singular, too" gains in significance because on this second mention it is italicized. Its meaning has shifted, since it now seems to refer to some kind of unspecified connection between the subject "we" and the forest, a relationship perhaps of unexpected kinship ("*so strangely alike*") even while a separateness is also maintained ("*yet singular, too*"). Whatever relationship might once have existed between humans and the forest is emphatically contrasted with the present reality in the last line of the poem, which states that the forest is "lost to us now." This is a restatement in almost identical words of stanza 1, line 3, thus bringing the poem back to where it began.

Themes

Loss of Connection to Nature

In an interview with Jon Thompson in *Free Verse*, Stewart remarks, "Little could be more devastating to our lives and to the life of poetry than a forgetting or denial of our place in nature." This is one of the themes of the poem. The forest is a symbol of the connection between humans and all of nature. The rich images with which the forest is evoked are presented as something from the past that cannot be recaptured. The speaker realizes that the connection has been lost, and she struggles to reclaim at least a flavor of it through memory and language. However forcefully this is attempted through the medium of poetry, the result is far removed from the original living experience. It is only "a kind of life," something that can only be referred to in quotation marks as "'in the forest,'" suggesting its status as a literary construct.

The poem also suggests that there is a loss of an inner connection with the self. In other words, the speaker (who is representative of all humans) has lost touch with the deeper aspects of the psyche. The poem becomes a kind of journey to rediscover the psychic life that exists beyond the surface of the mind. Seen in this light, the first line, "You should lie down now and remember the forest" becomes like an instruction from a therapist or psychiatrist to a patient at the beginning of a session. The session then proceeds through successive layers of the mind ("starting somewhere near the beginning, that edge, / Or instead the first layer, the place you remember") to the uncovering of deeper realities.

Innocence and Experience

If the forest is taken to symbolize the human psyche as well as nature, the poem can be interpreted in terms of what English Romantic poet William Blake called innocence and experience. The forest seems to contain both states of mind.

Innocence is usually associated with childhood. In Stewart's poem, the line "in that place where I was raised" implies that memories of childhood are being recalled. "A low branch swinging above a brook" suggests an idyllic place where children might play. The images of "pliant green needles, there below the piney fronds" are also benevolent. The cave that is "just the width of shoulder blades" conjures a secret place where children could go. All these images suggest a contrast between a child's world and the barren world of an adult, in which "nothing comes down to us here."

There are other forest images that are threatening. They suggest the forest can also be a perilous place: "Sometimes I imagine us walking there. / And quickening below lie the sharp brown blades, / The disfiguring blackness." The threatening "sharp brown blades" are emphasized by the meter and by the alliteration in the "b" sounds. The description of them as "quickening" implies they are alive and ready to strike and scratch. Add to this

the darkness of the forest, in which the shapes of objects are distorted, and the forest becomes a place associated with fear and with the possibility of harm. These images suggest Blake's state of "experience," in which the cruelties of the world are encountered and innocence is lost. The speaker and her companion become rather like Hansel and Gretel in the fairy tale, lost in a wood full of dangers.

The forest seems to represent a range of human understanding, from innocence to experience, from lightness to darkness. (Contrast, for example, the "disfiguring blackness" with the earlier image, "wide swatches of light slice between gray trunks.") In contrast to the rich possibilities of the forest, the speaker seems to live in an anesthetized world characterized by blankness, cut off from the deeper springs of an authentic self.

Style

Stewart comments in an interview with Jon Thompson for the online magazine *Free Verse* that her poetry collection *The Forest* "was concerned with the relations between unconscious and conscious knowledge of the past." The comment partly explains the unusual repetitive structure of the poem. Lines appear and are then repeated in the next stanza, according to the following pattern, consistently applied throughout the poem: line 1 of each stanza is repeated in line 2 of the next stanza, and line 3 of each stanza is repeated in line 4 of the next stanza. For example, stanza 1, line 1 ("You should lie down now and remember the forest") recurs in stanza 2, line 2. Stanza 1, line 3 ("no, the truth is it is gone now") recurs, with italics for emphasis, in stanza 2, line 4. There is only one place where a significant change other than italicization occurs in the repeated line and that is in stanza 9, line 4, in which the line "(. . . pokeberry, stained. A low branch swinging above a brook)" is not quite the same as line 3 of the previous stanza ("*stained*. A low branch swinging above a brook"). The alteration is perhaps a signal to the reader of the significance of the image of "pokeberry, stained," which acquires, when read in context, a connotation of a breakthrough moment in the quest to reexperience the forest that is unapparent in the earlier line.

The repetitions disrupt the reader's experience of following the poem in a linear fashion, since the repeated line is often an interpolation that interrupts the narrative, flashing back to an earlier thought, as for example:

But perhaps the other kind, where the ground is covered

(you can understand what I am doing when I think of the entry)

by pliant green needles, there below the piney fronds,

The logic here runs from line 1 directly to line 3, with line 2 being a repetition from the previous stanza. The repeated lines convey the sense of the conscious mind repeatedly playing on the images and concepts supplied by the unconscious mind. The orderly way in which this occurs in each stanza suggests a subtle counterpoint to the notion expressed in stanza 5 that "there cannot be an order, / as layers fold in time." It seems as if the poem is moving from a sense of blankness and emptiness in the mind ("And blank in life, too") to a stirring-up process that utilizes both conscious and unconscious levels of the mind.

The last stanza has a heavier pattern of repetition than the others. Not only are lines 2 and 4 repeated from the previous stanza but there are two extra repetitions. First, "so strangely alike and yet singular, too" in line 3 is repeated, with italics added, in line 5. The last line "But the truth is, it is, lost to us now" is a repetition, with a slight alteration, of stanza 1, line 3, "no, the truth is it is gone now." The addition of the two commas in the last line is significant, since it adds not only another repetition (the subject and verb in the statement "the truth is" are repeated in "it is") but it also subtly alters the meaning from stanza 1, line 3, where what was lost or gone was clearly the forest. In the last line,

although the fact that the forest has been lost is obviously central to the meaning, the line has a more serious meaning□not only is the forest lost, but truth is lost too (the addition of the second comma makes "it" refer to truth, rather than, or perhaps in addition to, the forest).

Historical Context

Poetry in the 1990s

In a celebrated and notorious essay titled "Can Poetry Matter?" which was first published in 1991 in the *Atlantic Monthly* and later published in book format, poet and critic Dana Gioia argued that although there was an unprecedented amount of poetry being published each year, poetry had become irrelevant to mainstream American life. He wrote, "American poetry now belongs to a subculture. No longer part of the mainstream of artistic and intellectual life, it has become the specialized occupation of a relatively small and isolated group." The group Gioia identified was located almost entirely within colleges and universities. It consisted of professors of English and teachers of creative writing and their graduate students, as well as editors, publishers, and administrators. Poetry had become a profession, Gioia argued, with its own career track and system of recognition and rewards. Poets no longer wrote for the general reader but for the other members of their profession, their fellow poets. The decline of the cultural importance of poetry could be seen in the fact that daily newspapers no longer reviewed poetry, observed Gioia. Few poets who had renown within their own professional circles were known to the general public, unlike, for example, leading novelists.

Gioia's essay generated a number of heated responses, but few could deny that as far as the educated general public was concerned, poetry had lost ground from, say, fifty years prior, when anthologies of modern poetry sold well and were read by a wide and varied public.

During the 1990s, there was a new trend in poetry in the United States. It represented a populist approach and was disdainful of the academic poetry that otherwise dominated the genre. This new approach was the phenomenon known as the "poetry slam." The poetry slam originated in 1986 at a Chicago jazz club. It treated poetry as a competitive performance art, with judges selected from the audience and cash prizes for the winners. Poetry slams quickly became popular, spreading throughout the late 1980s and 1990s into most large cities in the nation. The annual National Poetry Slam was established in 1990, in which four-person teams from all over North America and Europe gathered to compete against each other for the national title.

Although poetry slams attracted large audiences and showed the continuing vitality, at a grassroots level, of the desire to write, read aloud, and listen to poetry, academic poets did not embrace poetry slams. The nature of the poetry slam meant that a poem had to have an immediate impact; it had to be easily and quickly understood by a diverse audience. The intricacies and erudite subtleties of academic poetry would most likely be lost in such a setting.

Deforestation

Stewart dedicated "The Forest" to a man named Ryszard Kapuscinski, who suggested to Stewart that a time may come when no one would remember the experience of being in a forest. The rapid rate at which global deforestation proceeded during the 1990s and beyond is therefore of some relevance to the poem.

During the 1990s, it was estimated that 214,000 acres (86,000 hectares) of forest worldwide were being destroyed every day□an area larger than New York City. In the mid-1990s, the World Resources Institute reported that more than 80 percent of the world's natural forests had been destroyed. Much of what remained was in the Brazilian Amazon and in the boreal areas of Canada and Russia.

Deforestation has a variety of causes. It is in part driven by worldwide demand for wood products. Deforestation can also accommodate population growth and the desire to create new agricultural land or grazing land for cattle. However, deforestation has serious consequences for the global environment and for the continued existence of human life. It can lead to soil erosion, flooding, and the loss of animal and plant habitats. The world's tropical rainforests, which occupy only 7 percent of the dry surface of the earth, hold over half of the earth's species. As these forests are cleared, species become extinct at an estimated rate of up to 137 species per day. Deforestation also contributes to global warming, since the burning of forests releases carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. The carbon dioxide traps the sun's heat and causes temperatures to rise.

Ecologists warn that if current rates of deforestation continue, rainforests will disappear from the planet within 100 years, affecting global climate in unpredictable ways and eliminating a majority of the world's animal and plant species. Given this prediction, the opening lines of "The Forest" might be attributed to a futuristic speaker around the 2090s or 2100s: "You should lie down now and remember the forest, / for it is disappearing□ / no, the truth is it is gone now."

Critical Overview

Reviewers of Stewart's poetry have sometimes commented on the denseness and opacity of her poetic language. However, the reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* writes that *The Forest* is marked by "an aura of mystery," with narratives "reminiscent of fairy tales." Although the reviewer had reservations about some of the poems in which Stewart becomes "self-consciously literary," his or her overall assessment was highly favorable, calling the book "a rare phenomenon in recent poetry," filled with poems that "require several readings" but that do not lose intrigue upon rereading.

Carmine G. Simmons in *American Book Review* comments, "One can easily become disoriented within the dark, frightening recesses of . . . *The Forest*." Simmons notes specifically of the poem "The Forest" that the "somber voice" heard in the poem is similar to that found elsewhere in the collection. The voice, notes Simmons, belongs to "A kind of stunned, perhaps entranced speaker . . . who is able to apprehend reasons for remembering the forest but who cannot quite muster up the appropriate reaction to the memories stored there." However, he argues that the "urgency of the . . . [poem] is not well served by the speaker's sleepy imperatives." For Simmons, this muted voice constitutes a flaw in the collection as a whole. Stewart's use of repetition, says Simmons, "works well to reinforce the mystical nature of such a recollection of the past," but sometimes interferes with the clarity of meaning.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century poetry. In this essay, Aubrey discusses "The Forest" in terms of the insulation of modern society from the life of nature and the psychological and cultural significance of the symbol of the forest.

In Theodore Roszak's brilliant polemic *Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Postindustrial Society*, which was written over thirty years ago, Roszak sounded the alarm about the spiritual emptiness at the heart of the scientific, technological society of the West. Roszak laments what he called the "artificial environment" that prevailed in urban areas. "City-dwellers," he writes, "have grown accustomed to an almost hermetically sealed and sanitized pattern of living in which very little of their experience ever impinges on non-human phenomena." The result is that people forget their connection with and dependence on nature.

Roszak observes:

How easily we forget that behind the technical membrane that mediates our life-needs, there *is* ultimately a world not of our making and upon which we must draw for sustenance. The air conditioner must still rely upon a respirable atmosphere; the chlorinated, fluoridated, piped-in water supply must still connect with potable lakes and rivers; the neatly displayed cans, jars, and cartons in the supermarket must still be filled with the nutritive fruits of the earth and the edible flesh of its animals.

He then tells a story of how his daughter was eight and a half years old before she realized, on her first visit to a butcher's shop, where meat actually came from. Up to that point, she had known it only as something that was wrapped in plastic and cardboard in the frozen-food section of the supermarket and looked nothing like the remains of a dead animal. This prompted Roszak to reflect, "We live off land and forests, animals, plants, and minerals; but what do we know of their ecological necessities or the integrity of their being?"

Roszak's message is similar to the message Stewart seeks to convey in "The Forest." Human culture has developed to such a point that the forest, and all that it symbolizes of the entire world of nature, is "lost to us now." People have to ransack their memories and their imaginations to even begin to understand the visual, tactile, auditory, and olfactory reality of that mysterious domain□the forest□in which nature, not a collection of artificial human constructs, is sovereign. Seen in this light, humans are prisoners of their own success, utterly ignorant of what that success has cost them. They have treated nature as a "thing" to be subdued, harnessed it to meet their needs, and then pushed it into the background, to be regarded only as pleasant "scenery," cut off from and irrelevant to the day-to-day reality of their lives.

In her book, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Stewart makes essentially this same point. She argues that in industrialized nations, certain kinds of sense experiences that

up to now humans have taken for granted are disappearing. Stewart says that these include:

[A] tacit knowledge of tools and forms of dancing or of carrying infants, the disappearance of ways of living with animals or cultivating plant life, along with the smell and feel and sounds and even tastes that accompanied such practices; the sound of wind in uninhabited spaces; the weight of ripe things not yet harvested.

She continues, in a passage that can serve as a gloss on the meaning of "The Forest": "These experiences are gone, and even their names will soon be gone. The historical body of poetic forms is more and more an archive of lost sensual experiences."

This is certainly a high claim for the status and power (and responsibility) of poetry and the poet. It suggests that in "The Forest," the struggle on the part of the dreamy, alienated consciousness of the speaker to construct the lost sensual experience of walking in a forest is also an attempt to create a poem that will act as a kind of storage device for future generations to re-experience what a forest is like when there is no other way of doing so.

When Stewart chose the forest as her central symbol, it was part of her quest, as she told interviewer Jon Thompson in *Free Verse*, to explore nature "as a reserve beyond the facts of history." She also commented that when she later came across Robert Pogue Harrison's book *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, she learned "in a deeper way how much of my thinking was connected to a long tradition of the place of forests in the Western imagination."

In his book, Harrison traces the complex and sometimes contradictory Western attitudes to the forest in society and in literature from ancient times to the present. The term "forest" derives from the Latin *foris*, meaning "outside." In ancient and medieval times, forests lay outside civilization. They were the homes of outcasts and misfits, the mad and the persecuted, as well as saints and religious hermits. The institutions of the West, such as religion, law, family, and city, originally established themselves in opposition to the forests, which literally covered most of the land.

Harrison points out how in literary history, forests are often places of terror, fear, nightmare, and enchantment. They sometimes represent the unconscious mind. (Stewart, in her interview with Thompson, explained that her concept of the forest was linked in her mind to the unconscious as a "source of terror." She added that it was also a source of "consolation.") Harrison gives an example from one of the stories in the *Decameron* by Boccaccio (the third story of the Fifth Day), in which two young lovers run away from home and end up getting lost and separated in a forest. The violence they encounter there symbolizes the shadow side of sexual desire. Shakespeare's wood in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has a similar function: the four lovers who spend a night in the forest come face to face with their unconscious desires.

At the same time, there is also a tradition, beginning with Petrarch in the fourteenth century, in which literary forests are transformed into places of nostalgia. This is

particularly apparent in the literature of the eighteenth century and beyond, into the romantic era. In this period, forests were conceived, writes Harrison, "in terms of some originary plenitude of presence, innocence, community, or even perception." According to Harrison, in the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, written in Germany in the early nineteenth century, "The forests . . . represent the ancient unity of nature the unity and kinship of the species." In a comment that seems especially relevant for "The Forest," Harrison says that in romantic and symbolist literature, "forests have the psychological effect of evoking memories of the past; indeed, that they become figures for memory itself. They are enveloped, as it were, in the aura of lost origins."

It is those lost origins ("that place where I was raised") of which the speaker in "The Forest" goes in search. The fact that the speaker appears to be cut off from them suggests that modern life is an impoverished, anemic thing, disconnected from the richness suggested by the many-sided image of the forest. Harrison claims the romantic poets had a similar perception. William Wordsworth, for example, deplored city life and felt a deep connection to the life of nature. He could recover that "originary plenitude" (to use Harrison's phrase) only in the presence of nature or in moments of quiet introspection when he could recall such experiences. Wordsworth is also one of the poets cited by Roszak, along with Shelley, Blake, and Goethe, as being possessed of the vision of the unity of all life that the modern West must recapture if it is to save itself from sterility and despair.

Unlike Roszak and the poets he champions, Stewart offers no panacea for restoring human life to a fuller consciousness of itself and its relations to nature. She does not believe in Wordsworthian-style epiphanies. "The Forest" remains a rather bleak poem that speaks more of loss than of recovery. "Slaughter," Stewart's poem that immediately follows "The Forest" in the first section of *The Forest*, offers a small clue to Stewart's thinking about how life might be perceived differently. Like "The Forest," "Slaughter" is a poem about loss, and its mood is equally somber. The speaker, whose tone is not dissimilar to that of the speaker in "The Forest," is reflecting on how "the breakdown in the fullness of the world" first took place. She/he alludes to some knowledge about this that had been hidden behind "the given- / ness of all things to us now." In other words, the way things appear to people now are not necessarily the way they always were, even though it may seem that way. The bulk of the poem is then taken up with a detailed description of the way an animal is killed in a slaughterhouse. The killing seems to become symbolic of the rupture of a primal unity between man and nature, and the speaker is a lone voice trying to understand how this rupture happened. Even though no one in the slaughterhouse is interested in pursuing the speaker's line of thought, s/he wants to go back to the moment at which the doomed animal is stunned, which may symbolically represent the moment "the fullness of the world" is sundered:

Now let us go back to the stunning,

to the meeting of a human and animal mind, let us

go back and begin again where the function

overwhelms all hesitation and seems like

an act of nature.

In other words, actions (and presumably perceptions too) that seem inevitable, part of the natural order of things, may not in fact be so. They may merely be the result of the inability or unwillingness of humans to be fully aware of what they are doing. Stewart has commented in an interview for *Free Verse* that "Slaughter" is "concerned with taking responsibility for habitual practices, and understanding their causes and consequences." Seen in this light, the speaker in "Slaughter," like the speaker in "The Forest," is in search of the fresh moment when all possibilities present themselves, as opposed to the futility and emptiness of repetitive, habitual responses. Both speakers try to imagine their way back into lost origins, lost states of being, as constituting the only hope for the present. The speaker in "Slaughter" comes to the realization that "the real could not / be evoked except in a spell of longing for / the past." This note of nostalgia characterizes "The Forest" also. It suggests that life is marooned between the emptiness of the present and the imagined fullness of the past and that humans are like lost travelers forever casting an eye back to the home they once knew, but which is lost to them now.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "The Forest," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #2

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 examines "The Forest" as a poem whose effective content is based wholly on its construction   essentially, the meaning derives from the mode.

Occasionally, a poem comes along that is so entwined, so interwoven within itself, that distinguishing content from construction is not an easy task. And when the method *works*, distinction is neither necessary nor desirable. "The Forest" is one such poem; its language so layered and overlapping that the words call as much attention to themselves as to the message they convey.

If one must whittle this multifaceted work down to an overarching theme, it is this: history gets lost if it is not continuously repeated. The definition of "history" is not as generic as it seems. Here, it is specific to a physical, botanical entity made up of trees, shrubs, vines, small plants, and everything that lives among them□in short, a forest. This forest has a twofold representation□one, the actual, visible existence of the flora, and, two, the symbolic reference to things that fade from human memory if they are not carefully and intentionally preserved.

Twenty-one lines of the poem are repeated, nearly all of them verbatim. The repetition is painstakingly constructed, allowing for two lines from each stanza to be echoed in the following stanza, sometimes with greater emphasis or a twist in meaning, but virtually always with the exact words. The pattern begins with the first and third lines of the first stanza: "You should lie down now and remember the forest" and "no, the truth is it is gone now." These statements are repeated verbatim as the second and fourth lines of the second stanza, but their connotation is slightly askew from the original.

In the first stanza, "You should lie down now . . ." appears to be a simple, though intriguing, statement of instruction: one should take time out to consider nature in its purest form because that form is quickly disappearing in a postmodern, technological, and artificial world. The abrupt and seemingly contradictory admission "no, the truth is," suggests that the speaker is determined to be honest about the forest's peril. It is not just "disappearing" after all; in reality, "it is gone now."

Consider how these lines are used in the second stanza. Presented between long dashes, "You should lie down now" is, here, a disruption in thought, a sudden reminder of the need not to forget. Its unexpected intrusion suggests an urgency greater than that in its initial utterance, like someone interrupting a conversation to repeat a request that has already been made moments before. The line "*no the truth is, it is gone now*" is treated similarly in this stanza. The most evident difference is that it is now italicized, indicating an obvious renewed emphasis on its message, but note the shift in comma placement as well. In the first stanza, the punctuation mark appears after "no," following a simple rule of proper grammar. But in the second, the comma is placed between "*is*" and "*it*," with no break between the opening adverb ("*no*") and the words it modifies. Not

only are the italics used to call attention to the importance of the line's meaning, but also the punctuation is manipulated to show the *rush* of the first part of the phrase ("*no the truth is*") and the slow, compelling thought in the second: "*it is gone now*."

If this detailed examination of only two lines of a fifty-six-line poem seems overburdened, it is not without intent. "The Forest" itself is laden with intricacies and echoes and redefinition. It continuously circles back upon itself, folding and unfolding its language as well as its meaning. The technique of presenting new and old information side by side is carried on throughout the work and serves to both muddle and mystify. Read only the new lines in the second stanza to see how they stand on their own as a cohesive set: "Not the one you had hoped for, but a life / nonetheless, you might call it 'in the forest,' / starting somewhere near the beginning, that edge." Now, add in the two old lines from the first stanza and the effect is both to add a layer of density to the language as well as to accent the need to remember. Again, construction and meaning are interwoven.

The layers of the poem deepen with each successive stanza. In the third, the line "not the one you had hoped for" is repeated, but this time it is parenthetical, thrown back into the mix as yet another reminder of what has already been said. This stanza, too, can be unfolded, with its three new lines standing alone as a complete thought: "Or instead the first layer, the place you remember / as if it were firm, underfoot, for that place is a sea, / which we can never drift above, we were there or we were not." In the real poem, of course, there are two repeated lines that separate these three. They echo the need to recall the forest.

Toward the middle of the poem, the language becomes more concrete in its description. There are "gray trunks," "drying moss," "mushrooms and scalloped molds," "brambles," "ferns," and "twines of cinquefoil, false strawberry, sumac." But even though the nouns have become more specific□delightfully graphic, actually□they still add to the poem's density as they are reused and redefined. Perhaps their exactness and nearly tangible quality play another role as well. Note that as the language that describes the forest becomes more concrete, the speaker's ability to remember the actual woods becomes more vague and unsure. The question, then, is whether all the particular details are the product of keen recollection or just desperate imagination.

One of the initial indications that the speaker is losing her memory of the forest is that she admits, "Nothing comes down to us here." The first time this line appears, it follows "though high in the dry leaves something does fall," implying that, although she is aware of actual, physical movement in the trees, the certain *fact* of that movement is not visible to her. The second time the line appears, it plays the role of interrupter, falling between two other lines in the next stanza that continue the description of the forest's plants and brooks. The ninth stanza, however, provides the greatest evidence of fading memory, overlapping language, and the need to preserve human histories. Once again, it is best to filter out the repeated lines in order to get at the heart of the new thought to consider. That thought is revealed in the first, third, and fifth lines of the stanza: "You can understand what I am doing when I think of the entry□ . . . as a kind of limit. Sometimes I imagine us walking there . . . in a place that is something like a forest." Suddenly, the

forest is not a real forest but something *like* a forest. Note, also, the seemingly contradictory description of an "entry" as a "limit." The beginning has become an ending, and it is all because of the fallibility of human memory.

The line "in a place that is something like a forest" is one of the few lines in the poem that is not repeated. This fact alone is significant. Once a memory has begun to fade, its imaginary "shape" changes, like the actual shape of a visual object moving farther and farther away from the person watching it. No matter how one tries to recall it□to define or describe or envision it□the memory is obscured in multiple layers of confused thoughts. Losing the recollection of something tangible and vital like a forest suggests a loss of humankind's own naturalness. One cannot feel connected to nature when the reality of it is lost from memory.

Something *like* a forest is all the speaker in the poem has left. There is no need to repeat it because its meaning would not be altered. Unlike other lines that show up verbatim in subsequent stanzas, this one simply tells it like it is the first time around. Reality is blurred enough to make the speaker admit that she can no longer reach it. Her imagination must make up for all the realness that is lost.

The final line of "The Forest" is a near repeat of the previously discussed third line of the first stanza and fourth line of the second stanza. This time it appears as, "but the truth is, it is, lost to us now." The word "gone" is replaced with "lost," and the commas come back into play with yet a third meaning.

It is no coincidence that the poem ends with this pivotal message, and it is not surprising that the construction of the line is essential to its meaning. Consider the difference between the words "gone" and "lost." While one may make a case that they generally convey the same point, their placement in this poem suggests otherwise. Stewart has constructed a work with dense, opaque language in which each component□whether a word or a punctuation mark□bears significance to the entire poem. The switch from "gone" to "lost" implies a responsibility on the individual who initially has an ability then loses it.

Without getting bogged down in semantics, it is safe to assume that when something is gone, it is gone on its own, and when something is lost, someone lost it. In Stewart's poem, it is a forest□both literally and figuratively□that has shifted from "gone" to "lost." Human beings have removed themselves so far from nature and from natural living that it is difficult to visualize that kind of existence. Attempts to do so are odd and uncomfortable. Note the line: "Once we were lost in the forest, *so strangely alike and yet singular, too*." The collective "we" implies both the speaker and all humankind, and there is both a weird kinship with and an undeniable estrangement from the environment.

The comma placement in the final line is also worth considering. Here, the two words "it is" are enclosed in commas, and the punctuation serves to slow down the message for a very ponderous effect. The line is broken into three segments, each to be read thoughtfully and deliberately: "but the truth is," "it is," "lost to us now." Obviously, such a

dismally resigned final phrase leaves one to consider not only the hopelessness it suggests but also to ask, "Why?"

The short answer is "we" have gone too deep. Humankind has mired itself in so many layers of attempts at progress that discerning the real from the false is not a simple task. Instead, the more one tries to comprehend the multiple layers of human history and make sense of how "we" got from there to here, the more muddled it all becomes. It is like someone taking a path through a forest, believing all she has to do is turn around and retrace her steps in order to exit at the point of entry. In turning, however, she finds the woods are thick behind her and the path overgrown. Attempts to find her way out only lead her farther and farther off the original path and deeper into the dense flora.

This is the metaphor Stewart plays out in her well-built poem. She constructs a forest of trees from a forest of language□or vice versa□and ends up with a remarkably clear message. Although the conclusion offers no hope for what is "lost to us now," the overriding point will only become more obvious as new layers are added to the history of humankind.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "The Forest," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Write a short poem describing a walk in the woods. Describe how the woods make you feel. Do you feel different in the woods than in the city? What language or techniques do you use in your poem to describe the difference?

Research the causes of deforestation. What are some of the consequences of deforestation, and what can be done to stop or slow down the process?

Research the political debate in the United States regarding restrictions on commercial logging in national forests. What are the arguments for and against loosening some of the restrictions? Should business interests take precedence over environmental concerns? Why or why not?

The poet seems to be trying to remember experiences that lie just beyond the borders of consciousness, some of them perhaps going back to childhood. Describe some of your earliest memories. Are you more conscious of what you remember or of what you have forgotten and cannot quite recall? As you try to remember, do you have, like the poet, a feeling of loss, or are the memories warm and nourishing to you?

What Do I Read Next?

In the Rainforest: Report from a Strange, Beautiful, Imperiled World (reprint ed., 1991), by Catherine Caulfield, is a comprehensive study of the rainforests of Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Caulfield examines the forests from historical, political, economic, and biological standpoints and analyzes why these irreplaceable resources are in such great danger today.

Deforesting the Earth: From Prehistory to Global Crisis (2002), by Michael Williams, surveys ten thousand years of history to explain how deforesting the earth has affected human societies and landscapes. He also discusses the current crisis of deforestation□why it is happening and what its implications are for a rapidly growing human population.

Walden; or, Life in the Woods (1854), by Henry David Thoreau, is a classic of American literature. In 1845, Thoreau moved into the cabin he had built on the shore of Walden Pond. The resulting book is a celebration of the restorative powers of nature and of the human connection to nature.

Young Goodman Brown (1835), by Nathaniel Hawthorne, is a story about a young Puritan man in seventeenth-century America. One night, Goodman Brown leaves his wife to go on a journey that takes him through a forest. He finds himself involved in a nightmare experience in which he observes many of his townspeople attending a Black Mass, and he is drawn into a covenant with the devil.

The Hive: Poems (1987) is Stewart's second collection of poems. Although some of the poems are opaque, like many of the poems in *The Forest*, reviews for the collection were positive. One reviewer commented that Stewart draws the reader into the poems with a quiet, steady voice; another pointed out the skill with which Stewart endows ordinary objects with a magical quality.

Further Study

Hass, Robert, et al, "'How Poetry Helps People to Live Their Lives': *APR*'s 25th Anniversary Celebration," in *American Poetry Review*, Vol. 28, No. 5, September—October 1999, pp. 21—27.

This article contains statements by prominent writers, including Stewart, about the usefulness of poetry. For example, Stewart comments, "A great poem will not let the mind rest; it compels us to a continual engagement that is something like the force of life itself."

Online Poetry Classroom, Summer 2000, http://www.onlinepoetryclassroom.org/ (accessed January 14, 2005).

This Web site contains the transcript of a poetry seminar given by Stewart at the Online Poetry Classroom's Summer Institute, held at Columbia University's Teachers College in New York City.

Swiggart, Katherine, Review of *The Forest*, in *Electronic Poetry Review*, 1996, http://www.poetry.org/issues/issue1/alltext/rvsw.htm (accessed January 14, 2005).

Swiggart discusses "The Forest" in terms of the force of its language. By the end of the poem, language has supplanted the physical realm. It seems that only through the power of language to evoke reality can the forest, or any historical particularity, be known.

Zanzotto, Andrea, *Selected Poetry of Andrea Zanzotto*, edited and translated by Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann, Princeton University Press, 1975.

Zanzotto is a twentieth-century Italian poet whose work has attracted English-speaking readers. In his poetry, a pervasive emblem for the source of both nature and culture is the forest.

Zipes, Jack, *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World*, Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1988.

Zipes demonstrates how the nostalgia of the Brothers Grimm for lost origins was linked to their concept of the forest as a place associated with a lost unity in creation.

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Review of *The Forest*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 242, No. 26, June 26, 1995, pp. 101—02.

Roszak, Theodore, *Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Postindustrial Society*, Faber and Faber, 1972, pp. 10—12.

Simmons, Carmine G., Review of *The Forest*, in *American Book Review*, Vol. 18, April 1996, p. 29.

Stewart, Susan, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 332.

"Susan Stewart," *Pew Fellowships in the Arts*, 1995, http://www.pewarts.org/95/Stewart/ (accessed January 14, 2005).

Thompson, Jon, "Interview with Susan Stewart," *Free Verse*, Spring 2003, http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/freeverse/Archives/Spring_2003/Interview/interviews.htm (accessed January 14, 2005).