The God Who Loves You Study Guide

The God Who Loves You by Carl Dennis

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Introduction

Carl Dennis published his poem "The God Who Loves You" in his eighth poetry collection, *Practical Gods* (2001), which won the Pulitzer Prize. Like many of his works, the poem examines philosophical concepts, in this case predetermination and free will—topics that Dennis explored in previous collections such as *Ranking the Wishes* (1997). In Dennis's trademark style, "The God Who Loves You" also addresses the mundane details of everyday human experience. But in this poem, which is addressed directly to the reader, these details are initially viewed in a negative context, since Dennis poses the idea that the reader could have had a better life by making different choices. This idea sets up a corresponding concept that the reader's faulty choices have made God sad because God loves the reader. And God, through the deity's omnipotence, is forced to see this best possible path that the reader could have taken and thus God mourns the loss of this better life for His creation. Through the paradoxical struggle between predetermination and free will, as well as the discussion of an omnipotent God, the poem ultimately explores the consequences of human actions and addresses the idea of accepting what is in one's life, not what could have been. A copy of the work can be found in *Practical Gods*, which was published by Penguin Books in 2001.

Author Biography

Dennis was born on September 17, 1939, in St. Louis, Missouri. He attended Oberlin College (1957—58) and the University of Chicago (1958—59) and ultimately attained his bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota in 1961. He pursued graduate education at the University of California, Berkeley, where he received his doctorate in 1966. Dennis has had a long career in education at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he worked as an assistant professor from 1966 to 1971, an associate professor from 1971 until 1976, and a professor of English from 1976 to 2001. In 2001, he became an artist in residence at the State University of New York at Buffalo, a post he still holds.

His first book of poetry, *House of My Own*, was published in 1974. Over the next two decades, Dennis published five more books of poetry: *Climbing Down* (1976), *Signs and Wonders* (1979), *The Near World* (1985), *The Outskirts of Troy* (1988), and *Meetings with Time* (1992). With these collections, Dennis earned a reputation as a poet who communicates clearly the mundane details of everyday life. Critics especially liked Dennis's 1997 collection, *Ranking the Wishes*. Dennis's reputation continued to rise, and in 2000 he was awarded the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize from the Modern Poetry Association. Dennis's 2001 collection *Practical Gods*□which includes "The God Who Loves You"□earned him the Pulitzer Prize (2002).

In 2001, Dennis also published *Poetry as Persuasion*, a book of literary criticism that explores the poet's personal views of the poetic process.

Plot Summary

Lines 1—3

Dennis's "The God Who Loves You" begins with a supposition: "It must be troubling for the god who loves you / To ponder how much happier you'd be today / Had you been able to glimpse your many futures." With this introduction, Dennis sets up the idea of human choices and consequences. Dennis is trying to get inside the mind of an unnamed god, who could be the biblical God, but who is nevertheless not clearly identified throughout the poem. Looking at things from this unnamed deity's perspective, Dennis imagines that the being is troubled by the choices that Dennis's readers□addressed directly through the word "you"□have made, which presumably are not the best ones they could have made.

Lines 4—6

Dennis continues imagining this god being distraught, saying that "It must be painful for him" to watch as you get home after a typical week, in which you are "content" with the way the week has turned out. Here, although the poem is still addressed to the reader, Dennis imagines this reader specifically as a real estate agent, as indicated by the phrase "Three fine houses sold to deserving families." By using mundane details from one person's life experience, Dennis is attempting to examine human experience in general. He does not presume that all of his readers are real estate agents. Even readers who know nothing about real estate will understand the concept of "driving home from the office, content with your week." Authors and poets often use this technique, employing a specific experience to comment about a shared one that the author believes is relevant to all, or at least most, readers.

Lines 7—14

In this section, Dennis begins to explore why the unnamed deity is in pain, by listing some of the ways that the reader's life could have been better, "what would have happened," for instance, if the reader had "gone to your second choice for college." In this hypothetical scenario, Dennis, through the imagined perspective of the god, notes that the reader's roommate at this second-choice school would have had an affect on the reader, by instilling the roommate's "ardent opinions on painting and music" on the reader. This would have "kindled in you a lifelong passion." Using this hypothetical choice as a starting point, Dennis begins to map out an alternate history of the reader's life, which Dennis implies would have happened if the reader had gone to this secondary college. This alternate life would have been "A life thirty points above the life you're living / On any scale of satisfaction. And every point / A thorn in the side of the god who loves you." This implies a negative, saying that the reader has wasted what could have been a really good life by making one mistaken choice on where to go to college.

Lines 15—26

At this point, Dennis continues in the same vein, and the poem gets even more negative, as he imagines how the reader would feel if the reader was omnipotent like the unnamed god, and could see the mistaken choices. Here, Dennis notes that he envisions the reader as a male"a large-souled man like you"and imagines this male reader living an unfulfilled life. This reader "tries to withhold from your wife the day's disappointments," so that the reader's wife "can save her empathy for the children." Again, Dennis is using specific examples from one imagined life, which will most likely resonate with many readers. Many people who have children can relate with this concept of keeping your own troubles hidden, so that the children receive the bulk of attention. The poem implies that it does not have to be like this, and says that the reader could have had a happier marriage. "And would you want this god to compare your wife / With the woman you were destined to meet on the other campus?" Dennis imagines this alternative wife as somebody who would have engaged the reader in conversation that is "higher in insight / Than the conversation you're used to." In this hypothetical scenario, it is not only the reader that suffers from not taking this other path in life. The reader's wife also apparently would have been happier with "the man next in line," who "Would have pleased her more than you ever will / Even on your best days, when you really try." The poem is getting increasingly negative as Dennis outlines all of the good aspects of life that the reader could have had but does not.

Lines 27—34

In this next section, Dennis continues discussing the unnamed deity's feelings but adds a new twist, imagining that this god "Is pacing his cloudy bedroom, harassed by alternatives" that the reader is "spared by ignorance." Dennis explores this concept, saying that all of these possible lives for the reader will haunt the god, "Even after you cease existing." The section describes the reader's eventual death, "Running out in the snow for the morning paper, / Losing eleven years that the god who loves you / Will feel compelled to imagine scene by scene." In this discussion, the reader does not know that he will mistakenly bring about his early death by catching a chill, but the unnamed deity does, and it pains him, causing him to think about each of the moments that the reader could have had if he had not caught the chill and died before his time.

Lines 35—41

In this final section, Dennis abruptly switches gears. After discussing the pain of the unnamed deity throughout the poem, Dennis says that the reader can "come to the rescue by imagining him / No wiser than you are, no god at all." Throughout the poem, Dennis has posed many hypothetical situations, revolving around an omnipotent god who must suffer as he watches his creations not live up to their full potential. Here, Dennis focuses on the idea of taking charge of one's life and of appreciating what one has, not what one could have had. In the final example, Dennis suggests his reader contact "the actual friend you made at college," a character that serves as a contrast to the idealistic one mentioned earlier in the poem. Dennis suggests that the reader "Sit down tonight / And write him about the life you can talk about / With a claim to authority, the life you've witnessed." By focusing on human choice and practical experience, as opposed to the divine, the poem ends on a high note by talking about the reader's actual life: "Which for all you know is the life you've chosen."

Themes

Predetermination versus Free Will

The central issue in Dennis's poem is whether people should lead a life that focuses on predetermination or one that emphasizes free will. If people believe in predetermination, or destiny, then all of their decisions have been decided for them already, and the path they are on is the only possible path. In this type of reality, it does not matter what the reader does, because this path will be the one the reader was destined to follow. The poem uses words that talk about this idea of destiny, such as when it talks about "the woman you were destined to meet on the other campus." But the poem also incorporates the idea of free will, a state in which people are the makers of their own destinies. The first indication of this comes when Dennis talks about the reader's "many futures." If a reader can truly have free will and choice and their resulting decisions can lead to many different futures, then there is no such thing as destiny. But the poem ultimately combines these two concepts. Dennis notes that the reader was destined to do certain things but, through his free will, has made different choices that go against his destiny, thus giving up the best possible life for himself. To visualize the effects of a state where both free will and destiny exist, Dennis creates an omnipotent god, who is sad in the poem because the reader has not followed the best possible path.

Consequences

God is not the only one at risk of being unhappy. Readers may also be unhappy if they stop to think about their current situation and compare "what is" to "what could have been." In the poem, the potential consequences include not pursuing the best career due to a mistaken choice of colleges. "Had you gone to your second choice for college," Dennis says, the reader would have heard "opinions on painting and music" that would have inspired the reader to lead "A life thirty points above the life you're living." Dennis also explores the consequence of this mistaken college choice on the reader's potential for marital bliss, saying that it would be painful for the reader to have the god "compare your wife" with the woman the reader was supposed to meet. Likewise, Dennis says the reader's wife would have been happier with "the man next in line for your wife," who "Would have pleased her more than you ever will / Even on your best days, when you really try." Indeed, the far-reaching consequences of a major decision such as where to go to college get worse and worse as the poem progresses. Even minor decisions can have drastic consequences, as Dennis notes near the end, when he depicts a future where the reader runs "out in the snow for the morning paper" and catches a chill that leads to his death.

Fulfillment

Throughout the poem, Dennis uses the ideas of free will and predetermination, as well as consequences, to address the issue of fulfillment in one's life. If readers knew that, through their free will, they could have chosen a better path, then readers could never be truly fulfilled, because they would always feel the loss of that happier alternative life. If, on the other hand, somebody believes in predetermination and thinks that no matter what he or she does life will end up the way it is supposed to, then this takes the burden off of wondering "what could have been." In the end, however, Dennis does not advocate either way. Instead, he simply encourages readers to focus on "the life you can talk about / With a claim to authority, the life you've witnessed." In other words, he says that readers should find fulfillment in the life they have lived, whether it was destined to be that way or not for, as far as readers know, it "is the life you've chosen."

Style

The most noticeable aspect of Dennis's poem, and the one that affects all other aspects, is the huge shift in mood that the work undergoes from beginning to end. The mood of the poem is its emotional quality. In the very first line of the poem, Dennis cues his readers that the poem is going to have a negative mood: "It must be troubling for the god who loves you." This line sets up two concepts: that there is a god who loves the reader, and that this unnamed god is distressed. Dennis reinforces this mood throughout the poem. For example, in the beginning of the fourth line, he says "It must be painful for him to watch you." Dennis continues using words that convey a negative mood, such as when he notes that the reader could have lived a life that was "thirty points above the life you're living" and notes that every point is "A thorn in the side of the god who loves you." The use of the word "thorn" reinforces the negative mood. In addition, the reader is made to feel guilty for causing the divine figure pain.

As the poem progresses, it is the reader himself who Dennis notes will be hurt if he thinks about the better life he could have had, such as when Dennis talks about the conversations the reader could have had at an alternate college: "It hurts you to think of him ranking the conversation / You'd have enjoyed over there higher in insight / Than the conversation you're used to." In the final section before the mode shifts, Dennis says that the god is even hurt by the fact that the reader will make a mistake and have an early death, "Losing eleven years that the god who loves you / Will feel compelled to imagine scene by scene." Then, at the end of the poem, Dennis offers a relief from the negative mood, by telling readers not to imagine this omnipotent, troubled god as a god at all but "only a friend." And the poem ultimately ends with a positive, optimistic mood because Dennis says that readers should find enjoyment in what they have, not what they might have lost.

Historical Context

When Dennis published "The God Who Loves You" in 2001, religion was a hot topic in the media and had been for several years. Depending on who one talked to, either the year 2000 or the year 2001 was the start of the new millennium—since zero is technically not a number, most numerology purists argued that the millennium did not start until 2001. As the millennium approached, some believed that it would signal the end of time. Some Christians, for instance, thought that the new millennium would witness the return of Jesus Christ on Earth. Christian fiction, most notably the bestselling *Left Behind* series by Tim Lahaye and Jerry B. Jenkins—which depicts life on Earth after the Rapture—became popular in the late 1990s.

As an added wrinkle, scientists and computer programmers were predicting a technological armageddon, in the form of the so-called Y2K bug. The Y2K bug was a worldwide programming error, which began in the early days of computers, when data storage space was precious and programmers truncated the four-digit year to two digits. Many predicted that when the clock struck midnight and clicked over into 2000, any computer using this old two-digit programming style would have a technological cardiac arrest, and some found religious connections to this expected disaster. Since so much of the world was run by computer chips at that point, the years leading up to 2000 were marked by a flurry of computer renovation, as companies, governments, and individual consumers spent billions of dollars to try to fix the problem. As it turned out, New Year's Day 2000 passed without incident, and many, in hindsight, cited the Y2K bug as a hoax.

The focus on religion and morality remained strong, however, in the year 2000. In the United States, the issue of religion came to the fore in the 2000 presidential election. The outgoing incumbent, Democratic President William Jefferson Clinton, had been one of the most scandalous presidents in the history of the United States and was even impeached. Many Republicans used these scandals to cite the need to return morality to America's highest office. In the 2000 election, Clinton's vice president, Albert Gore, ran against the conservative Republican candidate, George W. Bush—who spoke of returning honor and decency to the Oval Office. Unfortunately, this election will forever remain one of the most controversial presidential elections on record. The race, one of the closest ever, produced mixed results. At first, it appeared that Bush was the clear winner. But, as the election results in Florida were scrutinized by Gore's camp and the press, the confusing ballots used in certain Florida counties were blamed for potentially causing people to mistakenly vote for the wrong candidate. As Gore demanded recounts, and Bush moved to block the recounts, the battle quickly split along partisan lines. Various pundits from both camps highlighted the issues that best supported their candidate, and some Democratic supporters even went so far as to suggest that the Florida election—which was overseen by Bush's brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush—was fraudulent. This partisan bickering even made its way into the courts, where the issue was debated for more than a month. Ultimately, the United States Supreme Court determined the outcome, although the court acknowledged that it may never know for certain the real winner of the election.

Despite this shaky start, Bush's presidency gained strength and credibility when he acted quickly following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, in New York City and Washington, D.C. As would eventually become clear, these attacks were motivated largely by religious intolerance and were carried out by religious fanatics who are believed to have acted under the direction of Osama Bin Laden, a wealthy Saudi exile and leader of an international terrorist network. Following the attacks, in a move that was initially supported by much of the country, Bush mobilized the United States for war, vowing to make the terrorists pay for the attacks.

Critical Overview

Dennis's *Practical Gods* received almost overwhelming praise when it was first published. In her 2001 review of the work for *Booklist*, Donna Seaman calls it "lucid, canny, and warmly funny." Seaman remarks on what she sees as the overall theme of the collection: "What Dennis wants to know is, Why aren't the gods more responsive, more helpful, more accountable?" She appreciates the "plainspoken and resonant" quality of the poems, which she says "hopscotch from the divine to the ordinary as they challenge pagan gods and the biblical God."

In his 2002 review of the collection for *The Antioch Review*, John Taylor also gives Dennis high marks, noting that "the appropriate medium for the exposition of thought is usually prose." Taylor says that "some poets boldly circumvent this rule" and remarks that "Dennis is one of the rare and most masterly practitioners of 'thinking poetry' in the United States." He also gives a brief mention to "The God Who Loves You" in particular, saying that "Sundry 'guardian angels' and 'gods who love you' become tangible in awesome or amusing ways, whence the ironic title that recalls a how-to-do-it manual."

Even reviews that criticize the poem do so in a light way, and there are more positives than negatives. For example, while the 2001 *Publishers Weekly* review notes that Dennis can be "saccharine or predictable," the reviewer also notes that "At his best, though, Dennis can be far stranger, and funnier, than that." This review also discusses Dennis's style, which the reviewer says consists of "long, elaborate free-verse sentences" that "amble down odd paths of thoughts, past forested landscapes, furniture, paintings and solitary men, to end up with NPR-like reflections on human life." Finally, the reviewer draws parallels between *Practical Gods* and the work of other modern poets: "It should please devotees of Stephen Dunn, or even of Raymond Carver, whose regretful musings suffuse the volume-closing "The God Who Loves You."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Dennis's use of point of view and imagery to explore free will and predetermination in the poem.

Dennis's "The God Who Loves You" is a poem that yanks readers around emotionally. By addressing the poem directly to the reader, the reader is pulled into the hypothetical situation that Dennis creates, where the reader is both made to feel sad that he□for the purposes of the poem, Dennis addresses the poem to a male reader□could have had a better life and also guilty because the reader is causing an unnamed, omnipotent god pain by not following the path that would have led to this better life. Dennis achieves this emotional roller coaster through careful use of both point of view and realistic imagery.

When the poem begins, Dennis poses a hypothetical situation: "It must be troubling for the god who loves you." The use of the word "must" shows that Dennis is assuming something about this god's point of view and not stating a fact. If Dennis wanted to be more forceful and turn his assumption into a statement of fact, he would have used a more direct word, such as "is": "It *is* troubling for the god who loves you." By starting the discussion in the realm of the hypothetical, Dennis puts the burden on the reader to figure out whether or not the situations that Dennis is describing are real or imagined. But Dennis certainly makes them seem real, by taking the reader inside the mind of this unnamed god, and letting the reader see things from this god's point of view. For example, in the second and third lines of the poem, Dennis has the god "ponder how much happier you'd be today / Had you been able to glimpse your many futures." The use of the word "glimpse" indicates that the god has seen these futures, and it is the first of many visual words that Dennis uses to describe images of an alternative, better life that the reader could have had.

As the poem progresses, it uses this twin dynamic□point of view and imagery□to further pull the reader in. The reader is shown a number of situations which most readers can apply to their own lives. While still hypothetical, these situations seem all the more real because of the details that Dennis uses. For example, Dennis depicts an image of a typical end of a work week, where the reader is "Driving home from the office, content with your week□/ Three fine houses sold to deserving families□" This mundane situation will resonate with many readers who have had similar experiences. Because Dennis is relating these details through the point of view of his unnamed deity, it makes this god seem more real because the god has knowledge of this shared human work experience. In his review of *Practical Gods* for *The Antioch Review*, John Taylor notes how, throughout the collection, Dennis employs "Sundry 'guardian angels' and 'gods who love you,'" who "become tangible in awesome or amusing ways."

Indeed, as the poem continues, the god becomes even more tangible as he indulges in more of what the *Publishers Weekly* reviewer calls the god's "regretful musings." This sense of regret runs strong throughout the poem, and gets stronger as Dennis makes subtle changes to his language to take the situations out of the realm of the hypothetical. For example, in line seven, Dennis says the god knows "exactly what would have happened / Had you gone to your second choice for college." Knowing "exactly" how something would have happened is a marked change from the beginning of the poem, where Dennis used indefinite, hypothetical words such as "must" and "ponder." Now, the god's knowledge□and by extension, the god himself□is referred to in terms of reality, not hypothetical situations.

This sense of reality increases as Dennis picks one mistaken choice and builds an extended example of how an alternate choice would have made the reader's life better. "Had you gone to your second choice for college," Dennis notes, the reader would have lived a life "thirty points above the life you're living." In addition to losing the "lifelong passion" of "painting and music" that the reader would have gained at this other college, the reader would also have gotten married to "the woman you were destined to meet on the other campus." Likewise, the reader's wife would have been happier with "the man next in line," who "Would have pleased her more than you ever will." The burden that Dennis places on the reader is heavy and gets to the crux of the issue that many humans face when they explore the concepts of predetermination and free will. Many people wonder "what if?" torturing themselves with thoughts of alternate lives that could have been led if they had gone to a different school, chosen a different career, or married a different person. Through his use of specific imagery that depicts this idealistic, better life, Dennis addresses these fears.

But the poem also inadvertently raises a question. If this unnamed god is so omnipotent, and can see his creations making faulty choices, why does he not step in and help humans make the right choices? As Donna Seaman notes in her review of *Practical Gods* for *Booklist*, "What Dennis wants to know is, Why aren't the gods more responsive, more helpful, more accountable?" Seaman notes the tendency for poems in the collection to "hopscotch from the divine to the ordinary as they challenge pagan gods and the biblical God." Likewise, Taylor notes that Dennis is exploring "situations where Christian beliefs . . . intersect bodily demands or telltale everyday dilemmas." When people try to apply religious ideas and philosophies such as predetermination and free will to everyday life, they do not always match up.

And this, in the end, is Dennis's point. Dennis is saying that traditional notions of an omnipotent god who loves humans do not play out when they are applied in the everyday human world. An omnipotent god, as Dennis depicts him□sad all the time because his creations are not choosing their best possible path□is not very practical, and hence the title of the volume, *Practical Gods*, which, as Taylor notes, "recalls a how-to-do-it manual."

As the poem demonstrates, the idea of an omnipotent god especially creates problems when discussing the ideas of predetermination and free will. If, as is the paradoxical situation in the poem, both situations are thought to exist, then they cancel each other out. If people's lives are truly predetermined, then no matter which path they take, it will be their destiny. Destiny is the opposite of free will. It implies lack of real choice, since no matter what choices humans make, they will always end up following their destiny. If an event were truly "destined" to happen, such as going to a different school or marrying a different woman, then it would have. If, on the other hand, people have free will and are ultimately in charge of their own fates, then there can be no such thing as "the woman you were destined to meet on the other campus" or "Losing eleven years" that a person was supposed to live. In other words, if God is truly omnipotent and outside time, as the poem indicates when God glimpses the reader's future death, then he already knows the choices people will make before they make them, and knows that, without divine intervention, people will always choose this path. So, there is no practical value in being sad about something that this god, alone, has the power to change. By exposing this paradox and illustrating it in a scenario that includes a regretful god, Dennis forces readers to examine their own beliefs about predetermination and free will.

Dennis does leave his readers with at least some advice, however. For most of the poem, Dennis takes readers inside the mind of a god that moves from the hypothetical realm to reality and offers readers glimpses of an alternate, better future that only this god can see. But at the end, Dennis abruptly reverses his tactics, telling readers to "come to the rescue" of this suffering god by being more practical in their expectations and not thinking of God as an all-knowing being who suffers because of our mistaken choices. Instead, Dennis suggests imagining God as "No wiser than you are, no god at all, only a friend." In this way, Dennis undercuts the negative emotional effect that he has been building throughout the poem and takes the burden off of the reader. Ultimately, by including the paradoxical situation in the poem where both free will and predetermination exist, Dennis invalidates the argument of which of those concepts people should believe in, and suggests that his readers simply focus on their life as they have lived it, whether or not it was their choice, which, in the end, is irrelevant. For, unlike an omnipotent god, humans do not live outside of time—and so cannot change their pasts—so it's not very practical to wonder "what could have been."

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "The God Who Loves You," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Critical Essay #2

Monahan has a Ph.D. in English. She teaches at Wayne State University and operates an editing service, The Inkwell Works. In this essay, Monahan explores how Dennis's poem uses reverie as a way of talking about free will and determinism.

In "The God Who Loves You," Dennis indirectly addresses issues of free will and determinism as he explores a real estate agent's daydream. In this the final poem of his Pulitzer Prize—winning collection, *Practical Gods*, Dennis uses the agent's habitual Friday night drive home as the occasion for the agent's self-evaluative reverie. On a given Friday night, the agent assesses himself positively because he has had three sales. At the same time, the agent imagines a loving, omniscient (all-knowing), and anthropomorphic (humanized) god who is troubled because the god can see the unfulfilled potential that would have come to this man had he made different choices. The man may think for a moment that he is doing quite well, but when he imagines his life from the god's point of view, its value shrinks by contrast to the better life the god knows he might have chosen. The agent is on the road to home; he knows where he is going. But the god knows where he would have gone had he made different decisions.

Since classical times, philosophers have wondered if human beings are free agents or if their lives are determined by agencies beyond their control. The quandary is created by looking at the human condition from two angles: the perspective of the mortal, time-bound individual and the perspective of an infinite, eternal, and omniscient god. The notion of free will (the ability to choose between alternatives so that the choice is an expression of the person who chooses it) suggests that individuals create their own destiny; the notion of determinism (the belief that acts or events are determined by antecedent causes, such as divine agency, biological characteristics, or sociological influences) assumes that while individuals may seem to act autonomously, their choices are actually predetermined by forces over which they have no control. The continuing debate over these two ideas is closely connected to the question of what causes evil and to the task of judging human conduct. For example, are criminals personally responsible for their crimes, or are their crimes determined by the way the criminals were parented, by their socioeconomic class, level of education, and other factors?

In Catholic theology, according to Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, man has free will and limited knowledge, but God has infallible and unlimited knowledge. Existing in a particular time and place, the individual chooses with a limited and fallible awareness of what the choice entails or precludes. By contrast, in the eternal mind of God the past and future are parts of a known present totality, and because of that omniscient awareness of mortal choice, God sacrificed his Son Jesus Christ to suffer and die on the cross for man's sins. Catholics believe individuals are judged after death and if they believe and have been forgiven, they are sent to Heaven as a reward for their good acts, but if not they are sent to Hell as punishment for their wrongdoing.

Sixteenth-century thinkers, John Calvin and Martin Luther, denied free will and emphasized that man lives and acts by the grace of God. In their separate ways, these

Protestant leaders believed that human action is predestined or predetermined by God. Seen as heresies by Catholics, their teachings asserted that before humans are born, their destinies are sealed. Similarly, in modern secular thought, behavioral scientists have explained that human action is determined by various factors, such as genetics, psychology, and social conditioning. The poem never mentions the words free will and determinism, yet these are the ideas it addresses.

In this poem, Dennis has the agent imagine a god very much like himself, one who endlessly contrasts what is with what might have been, "A life thirty points above the life [the agent is] living." The man imagines this loving god as being troubled by and in pain from witnessing the agent's inferior choices. The agent could have gone to a different college and been enthralled with "painting and music" by the roommate he would "have been allotted." The god can feel "a thorn" in his side over the comparison he is able to make between the woman the agent would have met on that unselected campus and the wife he has. The agent is "a large-souled man" and would want to spare this god his suffering just as the agent "withhold[s] from [his] wife the day's disappointments." But even the agent's thoughtfulness for his wife's feelings is undercut by the way the man thinks about the god's assessment of him. The god of this daydream is able to know the man who was second in line for the agent's wife, a man who "Would have pleased her more than [the agent] ever will."

With subtle yet cutting irony, Dennis creates an interior monologue that allows him to render a 2500-year-old debate over free will and determinism in terms of an ordinary man's efforts to sum up his life. The real estate agent's first impulse is to evaluate himself in terms of his recent property sales, to feel "content" because he sold "Three fine houses . . . to deserving families." But ironically, "the god who loves [him]" is not happy for this success. Indeed, in his love and foreknowledge, this god ponders "how much happier [the agent would] be today / Had [he] been able to glimpse [his] many futures" and presumably made more fulfilling choices. However, by setting up the comparison so that the agent's choices are inferior to the ones he chose not to make, the poet creates a no-win situation for the agent. If the agent were omniscient, as the god is, then the agent would have seen the destinations in various paths and made better choices.

In a sense the agent's line of thinking is an example of god playing man: the agent envisions the god "pacing his cloudy bedroom, harassed by alternatives / [The agent's] spared by ignorance." This characterization of deity helps the agent underrate what might have been. Indeed, projecting into the future, the agent even blames himself for his own imagined, untimely death caused by "catch[ing] a chill / Running out in the snow for the morning paper." A simple choice like that would, he imagines, subtract "eleven years that the god who loves [him] / Will feel compelled to imagine scene by scene." Thus he blames himself in advance for being an ordinary person, a certain kind of loser who cannot even die at the right time.

However, at this point the agent's thought shifts direction. The way to escape pointless replaying of one's past and prevent a wasted future outcome is to re-envision the god in the present moment and consider present possibilities. The god will imagine the future lost, the agent thinks, "Unless [the agent] come[s] to the rescue by imagining him / No wiser than [the agent is], no god at all, only a friend." Ironically by eliminating the suffering from his image of god, by thinking of god as "no god at all," the agent is released from pondering the paths not chosen and can focus on his next step. The agent can write a letter to "the actual friend [he] made at college, / The one [he hadn't] written in months." The agent can "Sit down tonight / And write him about the life [the agent] can talk about / With a claim to authority, the life [he has] witnessed."

Dennis's poem is a fresh rendering of an old problem: the time-bound nature of human experience and the human impulse to evaluate it. It is a theological version of the secular theme Robert Frost addressed in his poem "The Road Not Taken." "The God Who Loves You" finds a way to escape the theological dilemma by having the agent drop the idea that the loving god suffers because of human choices, and this shift allows the agent to focus on the present moment's potential.

In an interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth after he received the Pulitzer Prize, Carl Dennis says "I'm not interested in theology or mythology for their own sake. I'm interested only in . . . how I can use, really this perspective to help clarify my own more secular stances toward things." Elsewhere in the same interview, he says "I want to create an individual voice that the listener will find it worthwhile to engage with . . . an individual talking to individuals."

Human beings cannot know what might have been. However, it is human to try to imagine those possibilities, and, like the agent in this poem, it is human to assume those possibilities prove that one has not measured up or fulfilled one's potential. The fact is humans only know what has happened and can only speak with "authority" about that. "The God Who Loves You" reminds readers to focus on the present and to consider mindfully the choices it has to offer.

Source: Melodie Monahan, Critical Essay on "The God Who Loves You," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Critical Essay #3

Guyette is a longtime journalist. He received a bachelor's degree in English writing from the University of Pittsburgh. In this essay, Guyette discusses the deeper meaning of a poem that, on its surface, seems lightly humorous.

In "The God Who Loves You," poet Carl Dennis considers a timeless question, one that everyone has asked at some point in his or her life. That question is "What if?" It is certainly something tempting to think about, especially when life is not turning out to be as happy as hoped for. "What if a different path had been taken?" a person can easily wonder. "Wouldn't life be much better now?" In a voice that is wry, with a wink of dark humor, and a style that is easily accessible, Dennis creates a cautionary tale for people who might be tempted to wallow in musings that ultimately lead nowhere. In doing so, he demonstrates one of the finest attributes of great poetry□its ability to quickly and succinctly clarify, so that issues of fundamental importance to a person's life can be put into perspective.

This poem is the concluding piece in *Practical Gods*, a collection that won Dennis the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Despite the loftiness of subject matter, the poems are written in a highly engaging style that easily draws the reader in. As Bill Christophersen points out in a review appearing in *Poetry* magazine, Dennis's verse "probes and ponders but does so in the relaxed style of a good after-dinner conversationalist." The gods Dennis conjures up vary from poem to poem. They are Greek and Roman, Christian and Buddhist. Others still are more ambiguous. The god in this particular poem, for example, is not associated with any one religion. He is, however, certainly omniscient, which means all knowing. That is made evident in the poem's first lines:

It must be troubling for the god who loves you

To ponder how much happier you'd be today

Had you been able to glimpse your many futures.

The subject□luckily, as it turns out□is spared the knowledge his god possesses.

Every life is formed by countless fragile threads, and a twist in any one of them can completely alter the entire tapestry of a person's existence. In this case, Dennis muses about the ramifications of something as simple as attending one college over another. A mere mortal can never fathom what that alternate existence would have offered. However, the all-seeing god of this poem is able to divine that going to a different college would have led, among other things, to this man finding a different wife, one who would have made his life much happier. All in all, that other life this god sees is "thirty points" higher on "any scale of satisfaction." His wife also would have been happier with a man whom she never married because her husband came along first. Knowing this, what kind of god lets these people follow paths that lead to lives far less fulfilling and pleasurable than they could have been? After all, this is a loving god; Dennis makes that point no less than four times.

The emphasis on how much this man is loved by a god who can exert no direct influence in his life is part of this poem's subtle, slightly dark and ironic humor. Why does not this deity intervene? Certainly the man is worthy of his god's good graces; he is, for example, obviously kind. In fact, he is so self-sacrificing he conceals disappointments from his wife so that she can save her empathy for their children. So, it stands to reason that if this god is all knowing, and the man is deserving, then the deity must not be omnipotent, or all powerful. How could he be? If he were omnipotent, then would he not make certain that this good man chose life's optimum paths? Wouldn't an omnipotent god have directed someone he loves to that other college and a life filled with so much more pleasure? Is it not ironic, then, that a being could be endowed with the power of omniscience, but is denied the ability to act upon that knowledge? Even worse, instead of being able to alter the course of events, this god actually suffers from possessing such great knowledge. In the world Dennis paints in this poem, humans are blissfully ignorant of the other lives they might have led, leaving them no clue of the greater happiness they have missed. But the god who loves them is bedeviled by all this knowledge. It leaves him "pacing his cloudy bedroom, harassed by alternatives." To this god's great detriment, that harassment continues long after the people he watches over have died because he is tormented by visions of what would have occurred had fate not intervened and cut their existence short.

In this poem, Dennis adds an interesting twist to what has become a familiar plot device in both literature and film. Charles Dickens employed it in the tale *A Christmas Carol* when he used supernatural intervention as a way to answer the "what if" question for the miser Ebenezer Scrooge. In that story, it was the Ghost of Christmas Future who provided Scrooge with a glimpse of the sad and lonely finality of a fate he will certainly meet unless he changes his ways and begins treating his fellow man with more charity. Allowed to see what his future holds, Scrooge alters his destiny. More recently, the same sort of device was used in the film *It's a Wonderful Life*. In that movie, a man who believes his life has been a total failure is so distraught he decides to commit suicide. An angel intervenes, and provides a different answer to the "what if" question. In this case, the character George Bailey is allowed to see what life for others would have been like had he never lived at all. What he learns is that the world is a much better place because of his presence in it; the alternate reality is bleak, with the fate of an entire town much more miserable because of his absence. In this case, the divine intervention causes Bailey to see the life he led in a new light. As a result, his fate is changed when, given a second chance that allows him to alter a path taken in a moment of desperation, he decides against committing suicide. The result is one of the happiest endings in movie history. Dennis takes that story line and turns it on its head. Man is not privy to all that might have been; this knowing of alternate paths, Dennis seems to be saying, really is something that exists only in the world of fiction and film. Because of that, it is fruitless to ponder the "what if" question.

Wondering about what might have been can only be as painful as a "thorn" stuck in flesh. Contemplating the way things might have been is useless at best and a kind of torment at worst. Only one life can ever be known—the one that is being led at the moment. Instead of thinking about what might have been, deal with how things are, and take the sort of positive action that will prevent regrets in the future. Things like friendship are important and can fade away. So, advises Dennis, instead of wondering about what might have been, sit down and write that letter. In other words, take action. Don't worry about alternate lives that will never be anything more than figments. The life being lived is they only one worth thinking about. And it is up to the person living it to make sure it is fulfilling. As Elizabeth Lund writes in her review of *Practical Gods* that appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor*, "These poems are not, after all, about finding answers, and Dennis's gods are not focused on answering anyone's pleas. If anything, the book shows readers that they must intervene in their own lives." That god who loves you has better things to do than keep asking "what if" and so do you.

Source: Curt Guyette, Critical Essay on "The God Who Loves You," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Topics for Further Study

In Dennis's "The God Who Loves You," the reader is encouraged to ignore hypothetical people and instead focus on real-life people and experiences. Research the options available to you for pen pals, such as a soldier serving overseas. Write a letter to this pen pal sharing your own experiences and asking about what life is like for him or her.

Dennis's poem explores the ideas of predetermination and free will. Research these two philosophies and write a report that includes your own views on these subjects, using your research to support your claims. Choose the one that interests you most and write a short biography about one of the philosophy's major proponents.

Imagine how your life might have been drastically different, if one simple event had occurred or not occurred. Write a fictional account of one day in this altered life.

Artists have explored divine images in art, film, music, and other media in various ways. Choose one medium, then choose one modern work within this medium that depicts an image of God. Research the background of the piece and write a report discussing why the artist was influenced to create this particular image of God.

Various religions have different images and ideas of who or what God is. Choose two images of God from two religions other than the one you practice and compare and contrast at least five characteristics of these divine entities on a chart.

What Do I Read Next?

Like *Practical Gods*, the poems in Dennis's sixth poetry collection, *Meetings with Time* (1992), explore various philosophical ideas, while contrasting them with the mundane details of everyday human experience.

In Dennis's only work of literary criticism *Poetry as Persuasion* (2001), the poet discusses his various poetic methods, including creating voice, the use of irony, and the use of myth.

In Dennis's seventh poetry collection, *Ranking the Wishes* (1997), he examines the ways that our wishes define us, through the use of several poetic mediums. Like "The God Who Loves You," this volume explores the concepts of free will and predetermination.

Stephen Dunn, a contemporary of Dennis, is also a poet who examines the everyday details of the human experience. Unlike his previous volumes, however, Dunn's *Landscape at the End of the Century: Poems* (1991) examined these experiential details within the context of the then-upcoming millennium change.

Ruth Stone, an octogenarian, is another poet who examines the details of everyday life. Like Dennis, Stone's poetry is contemplative and explores a wide range of subjects including her own upbringing, her perspective on aging, and her observations of scenic America.

In "The God Who Loves You," Dennis takes the reader through an alternate history where he shows what might have happened if the reader made different choices. Alternate histories are also a type of speculative fiction that was very popular in the twentieth century. *The Best Alternate History Stories of the 20th Century* (2001), edited by Harry Turtledove and Martin H. Greenberg, includes some of the most widely known stories from this genre and offers a good overview of this type of fiction.

In Neal Donald Walsch's controversial *Conversations with God* (1999), the author claims to have talked to God and that the deity answered him through Walsch's pen. The resulting book is, according to the author, a literal translation of Walsch's conversation, during which God answers all of the author's questions about everyday life and the human experience.

Further Study

Basinger, David and Randall G. Basinger, *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*, Intervarsity Press, 1986.

In their book, the Basingers include four different views of the paradox of predestination and free will. The book is written in a style that highlights the weaknesses of each position and discusses how proponents of these views defend these ideas.

Kunin, Seth D., *Religion: The Modern Theories*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.

In his book, Kunin, the head of the School of Divinity, Religious Studies, and Philosophy at the University of Aberdeen, provides an overview of the religious theories that developed during the twentieth century, including an overview of the major religious theorists, a discussion of the various disciplines that have affected the study of religion, and an examination of the rituals, symbolism, and myths found in modern religion.

Pollocks, Robert, *The Everything World's Religions Book: Discover the Beliefs, Traditions, and Cultures of Ancient and Modern Religions*, Adams Media Corporation, 2002.

This book gives a solid overview of the major world religions throughout human history and in modern times, including the various sects of each religion. It also includes discussion of smaller and lesser-known religions.

Smith, Christian, *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life*, University of California Press, 2003.

Smith's book rejects the popular notion that secularization is a natural outcome of modernization and studies the causes of the secularization of American public life between the years 1870 and 1930. Smith and his contributors argue that this shift was caused deliberately by academics and other intellectuals, who wished to remove the religious influence from social institutions.

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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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