I Go Back to May 1937 Study Guide

I Go Back to May 1937 by Sharon Olds

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Introduction

Sharon Olds's poem "I Go Back to May 1937" is included in her collection *The Gold Cell*, published in 1987. Like much of Olds's poetry, "I Go Back to May 1937" is concerned with exploring the relationship between wife and husband, parents and children. In this poem the speaker travels back to a time just before her parents' marriage so that she might warn them of the mistake they are about to make. Although the speaker knows her parents will face pain, she cannot stop their union, since to do so would deny her own existence. She wants to live and so these people must be permitted to marry.

Olds has been unwilling to provide information to critics and readers about her personal life, including information about her parents. Many critics search her poems hoping to find some autobiographical truth about her, but Olds has made clear that she is trying to separate her life into two spheres, what she calls "the life of art and the life of life." Accordingly, it is difficult to know exactly what inspires the content of this poem. Is it the speaker's own unhappy childhood or is she responding from the experience of a child of divorce? The reader cannot know and is instead forced to find meaning in the words, separate from finding meaning in the poet's autobiography.

For her readers, Olds's poems seem very personal, including "I Go Back to May 1937." Many of her poems are concerned with the speaker's relationship with her father, as she seeks to understand his alcoholism, his abandonment of his family through divorce, and his painful death. The exploration of her parents' marriage—beginning as this poem does, just prior to their wedding—presents the essential paradox. The speaker wishes her parents had never married, had never made one another's lives so miserable. She wishes her own childhood had been spared the torment of her parents' unhappiness, and yet to eliminate their marriage would be to eliminate the speaker. This paradox gives the poem a unique tension.

Author Biography

Sharon Olds was born November 19, 1942, in San Francisco, California. She received a bachelor's degree from Stanford University (1964) and a Ph.D. from Columbia University (1972). Many years ago, Olds decided she would not speak about her family, and so little is known about her personal life. For instance, Olds's poetry focuses on relationships, especially the relationship between father and daughter, but there is no information about Olds's parents, such as who they are, if they are still alive, or what her childhood was like.

Olds's poem "I Go Back to May 1937" explores the meeting of two people, whom the speaker would rather stay apart. Readers may assume the poem is about Olds's parents, though Olds has eliminated such easy analysis of her work by limiting public knowledge of her family life. What is known is that Olds married and that her two children were born while she was still a student at Columbia. Olds has also spoken frankly about the influence of religion on her life, noting that she was brought up to be a Calvinist Christian, with strong beliefs in punishment and hell.

Although Olds began writing poetry while still in her twenties, she was thirty-seven before her first collection of poems, *Satan Says* (1980), was published. This collection won the 1981 San Francisco Poetry Center Award. Her next collection of poems, *The Dead and the Living* (1984), was a 1984 Lamont Poetry selection of the Academy of American Poets and won a 1985 National Book Critics Circle Award. Two more collections of poetry followed in 1987, *The Gold Cell* and *The Matter of This World*. Olds's poetry collection *The Father* was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize in England and was a finalist for a National Book Critics Circle Award. *The Wellspring: Poems* (1996) and *Blood, Tin, Straw* (1999) were also well received. *The Unswept Room* is due for publication in September 2002.

Olds's work has also been published in several anthologies, including *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (2001), *Maverick Poets: An Anthology* (1988), *The Heath Introduction to Poetry* (2000), *The Bedford Introduction to Literature* (2001), and *The Longman Anthology of American Poetry* (1992). In addition, Olds's work has been included in *The Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses* on six occasions. *The Pushcart Prize* collections are considered prestigious anthologies, featuring the best of American literature each year.

Olds teaches poetry for the graduate creative writing program at New York University in New York City. She was selected to be the New York State poet laureate from 1998 to 2000. Augmenting her professional accomplishments, Olds gives back to the community as the founding director of the New York University workshop program for the physically challenged at Goldwater Hospital in New York.

Poem Text

I see them standing at the formal gates of their
colleges,
I see my father strolling out
under the ochre sandscone arch, the
red tiles glinting like bent
plates of blood behind his head, I
see my mother with a few light books at her hip
standing at the pillar made of tiny bricks with the
wrought-iron gate still open behind her, its
sword-tips black in the May air,
they are about to graduate, they are about to get
married,
they are kids, they are dumb, all they know is they
are
innocent, they would never hurt anybody.
I want to go up to them and say Stop,
don't do it□she's the wrong woman,
he's the wrong man, you are going to do things
you cannot imagine you would ever do,
you are going to do bad things to children,
you are going to suffer in ways you never heard of,
you are going to want to die. I want to go
up to them there in the late May sunlight and say
it,
her hungry pretty blank face turning to me,
her pitiful beautiful untouched body,
his arrogant handsome blind face turning to me,
his pitiful beautiful untouched body,
but I don't do it. I want to live. I
take them up like the male and female
paper dolls and bang them together
at the hips like chips of flint as if to
strike sparks from them, I say
Do what you are going to do, I will tell about it .

Plot Summary

Lines 1-9

In the first line, the speaker refers to "gates" and "colleges." The plural form of these words signals there are differences between the two adults being described. They are distinctly separate people, each coming from a different background and location. In the second and third lines the man emerges from under an ochre sandstone arch, which creates an earthy image of clay walls, tinted dark yellow or reddish brown, in the reader's mind. Combine the image of the sandstone arch with the "red tiles glinting like bent plates of blood," and an image of the southwestern United States emerges. Red ceramic tile roofs are a common architectural feature of Arizona and southern California, as are earthy brown walls. The "glinting" tiles suggest the sun's glare off the roof, which could also indicate the Southwest, a region known for its sunny, warm climate.

In contrast to the man's location, the woman stands at a "pillar made of tiny bricks," her books carried against her hip. A wrought-iron gate is behind her. While the man emerges from his college by passing under an arch, the woman must pass through the gate to begin her new life. The bricks and wrought-iron gate suggest a different location than that of the man's. The woman's college may be in the northeastern United States, perhaps New England. Her location, then, would be the opposite of the man's. And while she emerges with books, he is empty-handed. These basic differences alert the reader to the divisions that separate the man and woman. They are not only separated by gender, but by location and culture as well. And although he leaves the books of academia behind; she still grasps her books to her body.

Lines 10-12

The speaker now establishes the man's and woman's innocence. She tells her reader that the couple is about to graduate from college, and so the reader imagines the man and woman are young, probably in their early twenties. To reinforce the image of youth and inexperience, the speaker relates, "they are kids, they are dumb." The speaker also says they would "never hurt anybody." They are so innocent that the man and woman fail to see that their wedding might someday lead to pain. They see only the movement from their single college days into a new married existence. They are too young to consider their marriage might be a mistake. But the speaker is aware of the disaster awaiting the couple. She writes from the future, having seen the past, and knows that the couple stands on the precipice of a serious action, one that will affect others.

Lines 13-19

The speaker considers the actions she might take to prevent this tragedy from occurring. She considers stopping the man and the woman. She wants to "go up to them and say Stop." The capital letter at the beginning of "Stop" suggests the red sign

along the road, an absolute message for any driver. The speaker wants the couple's movement toward marriage to be blocked, and so she adds the imperative "don't do it" to emphasize her need to stop the marriage. The speaker does not tell them they are too young. Instead she says, "she's the wrong woman," and "he's the wrong man." The speaker warns that because they are wrong for one another, they will do things they cannot imagine. To strengthen her emphasis, the speaker continues, "you are going to do bad things to children." The reminder here is of the pain an unhappy marriage can cause children. The next lines make clear that not only the children will suffer, but the man and woman will suffer as well "in ways you never heard of." The reader is informed the misery is going to be particularly extreme, so severe that the man and woman "are going to want to die." The picture painted in these few lines is one of great unhappiness, a marriage so destructive that the children will carry the scars for a lifetime and the parents will find solace in wishing for death.

Lines 20-25

These lines suggest the depth of the speaker's anguish. The speaker tells the reader how she would like to have warned the man and woman, how she might have tried to stop their marriage, but that she could not do so. Once again the speaker speaks from the future. She has the omniscience of a god, having seen the end result of this couple's union. As she did in the first line, the speaker again establishes the time: at graduation in late May. It is another reminder, two-thirds of the way through the poem, of the couple's youth, of their innocence that day in 1937 when they emerged from college. The woman's face is "hungry," ready to seize upon new desires and opportunities, but the blankness of her face also suggests she is unable to comprehend the risk she is taking. The blankness may also suggest the lack of experience with which the woman greets the world; nothing is written upon her brow, and her eyes lack the knowledge that pain will soon bring.

In contrast, the man is described as "arrogant," a clear allusion to his unwarranted pride, which was emphasized earlier when "he strolled out" and away from his college. The man did not simply "walk," he "strolled," suggesting the sort of leisurely walk of a supremely confident individual. The man's "blind face," however, tells the reader the man is as limited and unable to see as the woman.

The parallelism and repetition of the lines, "pitiful beautiful untouched body," suggest the emptiness of the marriage, but these are words that also hint at great loneliness and loss. These bodies have not known great passion and intimacy. The repetition of the lines is separated slightly, just as the man and woman are separated. She is beautiful and he is handsome, but their attractiveness has not brought them together. The speaker sees all these things: their beauty, their aloneness, their loneliness, and their blindness, and she wants to say, "Stop, / don't do it."

Lines 26-30

The final lines of the poem relate the speaker's acceptance of her parents' fate and of her inability to alter the past. As she tells the reader in line 25, "I don't do it," she does not stop her parents from marrying. The speaker acknowledges she wants to live. To prevent the marriage and all the misery that flows from it is to prevent her existence. So, in a final effort, the speaker imagines she can force her parents to love one another. She tries to create a spark and ignite a passion between them by imagining her parents are paper dolls she can force together. The speaker says she will "bang" the two together. The word "bang" suggests the force with which the speaker hits the two together, but also suggests sexual intercourse (in vulgar slang), a meaning that works well for this poem. In lines 22 and 24, the speaker has made clear that passion has left this couple untouched. Now in banging the paper dolls together, the speaker would create intimacy where none has existed. Like "chips of flint" the speaker tries to ignite a flame that will consume the couple and melt them together.

In the last line, the speaker seems to acknowledge and accept the futility of her attempts. She cannot change the past, nor can she force a connection that never existed. With the words, "Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it," the speaker signals her resignation. All that remains is to tell the story of this disastrous union.

Themes

Grief and Loss

This poem reveals the speaker's grief and anger at the misery her parents' marriage has created. The speaker establishes her grief and pain through her choice of language to describe her parents. She describes them as "kids" who are "dumb." While they would never deliberately hurt anyone, the speaker admits they did cause a great deal of pain. The speaker's loss is most acutely felt when she describes their innocence. She tells the reader, "they would never hurt anybody." That they do hurt somebody is evident in the lines that follow, which describe the bad things done to the children. But perhaps the most grief is signaled by the lines, "you are going to suffer in ways you never heard of, / you are going to want to die." This marriage has created so much pain and misery that the child of this union recognizes her parents' desire to die. In the final line of the poem, the speaker tells the reader her parents should "do what you are going to do." These words reveal her resignation and her acceptance of her inability to change her parents or heal the breech. Instead she will "tell about it," and in doing so she can experience a movement toward catharsis and perhaps find healing for herself.

Loneliness and Isolation

Olds creates an image of her parents' loneliness and isolation with a few words in lines 22 and 24. The speaker describes her mother's "pitiful untouched body." Two lines later she describes her father in exactly the same words. The language used carefully conveys the man's and woman's loneliness, even in marriage. Their bodies are "pitiful," in stark contrast to the next descriptive word, "beautiful." The paradox is that these two beautiful people can be deserving of pity and compassion at the same time. Beauty is not often perceived as representing pity, but in this case there is no joy in their beauty, since it is empty of happiness. This couple has never known the true beauty of one another's bodies. No passion has touched them. A few brief words convey the emptiness of their marriage and the loneliness of their lives.

Parent and Child

This poem relates the speaker's efforts to imagine a way to fix what cannot be fixed: her parents' unhappy lives. By moving back in time to a period just before her parents' marriage, the speaker explores the fundamental differences between her mother and father. American society often paints a picture of the ideal family, with parents, children, and pets living out their ideal lives in happy bliss. The reality is often very different, and when families are not happy, children may need to understand why this unhappiness exists. In this poem the speaker is on a journey to understand her parents' unhappiness and her own unhappy childhood, and she does so by returning to 1937 and the period before their marriage. The speaker describes this marriage as one that resulted in the

parents doing "bad things to children." These words reveal the depth of pain that these parents caused for this child. The speaker is the child of this disastrous union, a fact she makes clear when she states she wants to stop the marriage but cannot because "I want to live." This man and woman are wrong for one another; the speaker knows this, but if she stops this marriage, she also stops her own creation.

Style

Analogy

Analogy is a common element used in poetry, and suggests a similarity between things that appear, on the surface, to be dissimilar. For example, Olds uses the initial image of the college gates as analogous commentary on her parents. The speaker describes each college gate individually to suggest differences, and perhaps incompatibility. The father's gate is ochre sandstone covered in red tile, whereas the mother emerges from wrought iron and bricks. The use of architectural details represents the differences between the two people, while serving as an analogy of the parents' movement from college to marriage. The use of analogy in Olds's poem is very subtle, so the reader needs to review the poem carefully to understand all the allusions.

Catharsis

Catharsis is the purging or release of unwanted emotions, often through the use of poetry or drama. The speaker in Olds's poem uses the poem to work through the pain and grief caused by her parents' unhappy marriage. At the beginning of the poem the speaker imagines she can journey to a time before her parents' marriage and stop the wedding. She relates her parents' unhappiness and the destructiveness of their union with its disastrous effects on their children. By the conclusion of the poem, however, the speaker is resigned to a past she could not change, the narrating of the events having functioned as a sort of catharsis. Rather than prevent the marriage, the speaker decides instead to write about it. She uses language and expression as one means to stop the pain, even if she cannot return to the past to stop the events themselves from occurring.

Imagery

Imagery refers to the use of figurative or expressive language to represent objects, actions, or ideas. The relationships between images can suggest important meanings in a poem. For instance, in Olds's poem the speaker describes her father in language that suggests the type of person he was, painting an unflattering picture of him. The father is described as "arrogant handsome blind." Each of these words suggests a different image. Arrogant denotes a sense of self-importance or exaggerated sense of pride. Handsome seems easy□maybe the speaker means that her father is attractive or pleasing to her sight□but handsome can also mean impressive in appearance, as in large. Blind suggests an inability to see, but it may also denote an unwillingness to notice what occurs or even an ability to disregard what he knows is true. Thus these three words create an image of the speaker's father that is far more extensive than the space the words themselves occupy on the page.

Lyric Poetry

Lyric poetry describes poems that are strongly associated with emotion, imagination, and a songlike resonance, especially when associated with an individual speaker. Since lyric poetry is so very individual and emotional in its content, it is by its very nature also subjective. Lyric poetry is also the most common form of poetry, and its attributes are common to many other forms of poetry. Olds's poem makes effective use of both imagination and emotion, and since it presents only the speaker's point of view, it is also highly subjective. The reader does not hear the voices of the speaker's parents; instead, we hear their story through their child's perspective, a subjective voice filled with pain and grief.

Narrative Poem

A narrative poem is a poem that tells a story. Olds's poem imagines that the speaker might travel back in time to a period before her parents' marriage. The details of the poem tell of her parents' unhappiness, of the unhappiness of their children, and of the destruction their marriage wrought on all concerned. The story ends with the speaker's recognition that she cannot change the past, but that she can tell her parents' story, and perhaps find healing in that act.

Parallelism

Parallelism refers to repetition in style or words within the poem. This stylistic device is a means to express several ideas of similar importance in a similar manner. For example, Olds uses parallelism to describe her parents: "her hungry pretty blank face turning to me" is balanced with "his arrogant handsome blind face turning to me." Another example occurs in lines 17 through 19, and the repetitive use of "you are going to." Parallelism focuses the reader's attention on these lines and signifies they are important elements of the poem.

Historical Context

Economics and Politics in the 1980s

Although Sharon Olds did not publish *The Gold Cell* until 1987, the poems contained in this collection were written in the early 1980s, a time marked by such international crises as the war between Iraq and Iran, the western boycott of the Olympics in Russia, and the assassination of President Anwar al-Sadat of Egypt. In the United States, Ronald Reagan was elected president; *Dallas* was the most popular show on television; and Sally Ride, the country's first female astronaut, entered space aboard the *Challenger* space shuttle.

Also at this time, many social conflicts consumed American life. Unemployment was high and rising inflation made those who were employed feel they were losing money with each passing day. America became more fragmented, with widening divisions based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and wealth. Individuals who enjoyed economic success during the 1980s were predominately well-educated white males, while women and people of color lost ground in the movement toward economic success.

While on the surface, Reagan's America appeared to be white, male, and Christian, underneath the surface, America was replete with change. Increases in immigration changed the ethnic mix of America, leading to an increased need for schooling and health care. The need for improved social programs added to the fight for fewer federal tax dollars. Tax cuts, combined with huge military expenditures, did away with many social programs and led to a major recession and a budget deficit so large it would take more than twenty years to eliminate it. Unemployment, at about 10 percent, was the highest since before World War II. The poverty rate was increasing, particularly among children, and the AIDS epidemic soared.

The Social World

The 1980s brought huge changes to America's social fabric. Sandra Day O'Connor became the first female justice on the United States Supreme Court. In fact many women were now working outside the home. By the early 1980s it is estimated that 50 percent of all women held jobs outside the home, though few of them achieved the kind of success that O'Connor attained. Most women held low-paying, entry-level positions, often making so little money that they needed two jobs to support a family.

Equal rights for women, and especially equal pay, had been the objective of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) when it was passed by Congress in 1972; but by 1982 the amendment was defeated when an insufficient number of states failed to ratify it. In spite of this setback, the ideas behind the ERA helped change American life. As a result of the attention paid to the failure of the amendment to pass, more people began to

examine the conventional ideas that governed male and female roles. The idea that girls studied home economics in school and boys took shop was one of the first traditions to be examined. It seemed reasonable that both boys and girls might find it useful to learn to cook and repair or build small items. The feminist movement began with just that kind of small questioning and change. The changes brought by feminism, and they were hard-fought changes that came very slowly, eventually led to similar activism by other groups. Blacks and environmentalists learned lessons from the feminists and discovered that protests, especially when well organized and attended by the media, could change the world. In the end, the early 1980s became a period of great social change.

Critical Overview

"I Go Back to May 1937" is included in Olds's collection *The Gold Cell*. Reception of Olds's poems is often mixed, including reception for *The Gold Cell*. While individual poems from a collection are rarely singled out for comment in a review of the book, Terri Brown-Davidson does comment specifically on "I Go Back to May 1937" in a review of *The Gold Cell* for the *Hollins Critic*. Brown-Davidson refers to the first dozen lines of the poem as "disturbing," not because of the poem's intensity or topic, but because the critic finds the poem "formulaic." Brown-Davidson sug- gests that Olds is not taking chances with her poetry, and is instead refusing "to push beyond the boundaries to grow and keep growing." The critic argues that Olds's poetry is "belabored" and "overdramatic," and that "I Go Back to May 1937" is "fossilized." Brown-Davidson's primary criticism focuses on what the critic perceives as the sameness of Olds's work. According to Brown-Davidson, Olds has not grown as poet and has not been willing to try new approaches to her poetry.

However, one critic finds much to praise about *The Gold Cell*. Peter Harris, writing for the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, states, "Olds treats both the present and the past with a make-you-squirm explicitness that's buffered only by an ingenuous honesty about her relationship to the events she describes." These are poems that Harris labels as "confessional" and "gripping." Harris also cites Olds as having the "voice of a peculiarly exuberant survivor who speaks with gusto." In responding to criticism that Olds's poems have a sameness to them, Harris argues that this sameness "should not obscure the fact that she writes with great flair and often shows a resonant dramatic intelligence in searching out the contexts, or the frameworks of implication." Harris also cites Olds's "fertile metaphoric imagination" and her "analogical imagination" as strengths that provide insight into her poems. Harris concludes by stating, "*The Gold Cell* is saner and more full of love than anyone could reasonably expect."

A slightly more mixed reaction is offered by Christian McEwen, writing for the *Nation*. In a review of *The Gold Cell*, McEwen states that the political poems contained in the beginning of Olds's collection are "thrilling with imaginative sympathy." McEwen suggests that while other poets have attempted this style of poetry, none have managed to convey the images so well. McEwen also singles out the family poems in this book, which display the author's "fierce rhetorical skill." Although McEwen acknowledges that Olds's poems are not without fault, his critique singles out only a few individual poems as lacking the overall strength of the other poems. In spite of some small concerns, McEwen's endorsement of Olds's work is very favorable.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Metzger has a doctorate in English Renaissance literature. She teaches literature and drama at the University of New Mexico, where she is a lecturer in the English department and an adjunct professor in the university's honors program. In this essay, Metzger discusses the depiction of the mother character in Olds's poem and explores the influences of Olds's own admitted childhood Calvinist indoctrination on her poetry.

Olds's poems often focus on the parent-child relationship, especially the relationship between the poem's speaker and her father. A study of Olds's poems about the father reveals a cruel man who drank too much bourbon, terrorized his children and wife, and whose love, even in death, the speaker craves. Olds's poems expose the speaker's childhood, opening up a life filled with painful memories, where her abusive father dominates the landscape. The mother, when she appears, is cowed by the superior strength and meanness of her husband. She offers no rescue for the speaker or her two siblings, and indeed, in many of Olds's poems, it is the mother who looks to her children for rescue, thus reversing the traditional image of parent as a symbol of strength. Olds has suggested that her early childhood, which she describes as "very Calvinist, very Hell oriented," influenced the rhythm in her poems. Olds is speaking of the church hymns that she sang as a child and how those rhythms are responsible for the singsong nature of her poetic lines. But, the church influences more than the movement of the line; it also permeates the content of her work. Olds's poems contain the self-righteousness of biblical text. The speaker suffers as Job suffered and is righteous in that suffering. When asked to forgive, the speaker knows she must accede to that request, however reluctant she may be, because the bible teaches forgiveness of others. The speaker does not want to forgive, but the lessons of childhood, especially those on the forgiveness of God for his sinners, have not been lost on the speaker. There is a self-righteousness in agreeing to forgive that appeals to the speaker, even as she is reluctant to put away a lifetime of anger and blame.

Although much of the emotion of Olds's poetry is directed toward the speaker's father, whom she often blames for her childhood misery, the poems that explore the mother's role in this misery are also worth close examination. The poems that focus on Olds's mother, in which the speaker must forgive her mother, present the speaker as conflicted and unwilling to let go of a lifetime of reproach. Forgiveness, as Olds no doubt learned as a child in church, is much more difficult to achieve than the sermons promised. It would be easier to simply assuage the anger of her childhood without letting go completely, as the speaker in the poems about the mother would admit. Three of Olds's poems□" I Go Back to May 1937," "Why My Mother Made Me," and "After 37 Years My Mother Apologizes For My Childhood"□all taken from *The Gold Cell*, reveal the speaker's inner conflict as she moves among blaming her mother, pitying her, and acknowledging that, by forgiving her, the speaker is forced to redefine meaning in her own life.

If the reader assumes that the poems in *The Gold Cell* are arranged in chronological order, then "I Go Back to May 1937" is the earliest poem of the three to be discussed

here. In this poem, the speaker imagines herself back in time, at a period just before her parents' wedding. At first, she contemplates warning her parents of the misery that their future holds, but when she realizes that she cannot stop the wedding, since to do so would be to prevent her own life, she imagines that she can force her parents to find happiness together. To do this, the speaker imagines that her parents are two paper dolls. She uses these toys of childhood to create what is missing in her life. Rather than the reality of divorce, the speaker can use the dolls as surrogate parents. She can "bang them together" and force them to unite, as she could not do in reality. The forcefulness of the "bang" suggests the depth of anger that the speaker feels as she tries to force her parents to feel a passion and a connection that was missing in their lives. This is an angry movement, revealing the speaker's defiance and rejection of her past. In forcing these two paper dolls together, the speaker also attempts to forge a union that divorce has now rendered in two. By the end of the poem, the speaker acknowledges that she cannot prevent nor repair her parents' lives, and so the poem ends on a note of resignation. The speaker cannot change their lives, but she can write of their lives. There is a melodramatic note evident in the last lines of the poem:

I want to live. I
take them up like the male and female
paper dolls and bang them together
at the hips like chips of flint as if to
strike sparks from them, I say
Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.

There is an emotional extravagance to these lines, an exaggerated sense of conflict, followed by an equally exaggerated sense of resignation and acceptance. In an interview published in the *Poetry Society of America Newsletter*, Olds suggests that it is her religious upbringing that is responsible for the melodrama present in much of her work. She also credits biblical influences for the tone of selfrighteousness and the desperation of her characters, who are defined by extremes of good or bad. Those biblical influences also stand out in this poem. The man and the woman lack a complexity; they are "going to do bad things"; they are going to "suffer." The woman is "hungry pretty blank" and "pitiful beautiful." The man is "arrogant handsome blind" and "pitiful beautiful." Real parents are more complex than this man and woman; but then, the speaker is holding paper dolls, which are one-dimensional. If the speaker can maintain this lack of depth, she is not forced to confront her parents, nor deal with the anger that momentarily has escaped as she bangs the two dolls together. Instead, Olds can fall back on biblical teaching to create characters who are either obedient or not, righteous or not, but such characters need not reveal any complexity.

In the second of Olds's poems, "Why My Mother Made Me," the speaker moves forward in her examination of her parents' marriage to the creation of the child, herself. She sees herself as fulfilling her mother's need. As a child, she is what her mother wanted: "my father as a woman." Once again, there is a sense of melodrama and desperation in these words. Later in the poem, the speaker describes her parents' creation of her in words that are very different from the Bible's instructions in Genesis 2:24 that a husband

and wife "become one flesh." While the words are different, the image is very much the same. The speaker describes how her mother,

pressed the clear soft
ball of herself like a stick of beaten cream
against his stained sour steel grater
until I came out the other side of his body.

The joining of the speaker's parents is methodical, lacking passion. In many ways, this joining creates an image of function, not so very different than all those biblical men and women who "knew" one another, and so the next generation is created. After her birth, the speaker imagines that her mother gazes at her with the same pride that the "maker of a sword gazes at his face in the / steel of the blade." This is not a depiction of motherly love, but one of pride and triumph. Once again, these words suggest the speaker's sense of self-righteous judgment of her mother. There is no attempt at mediation or an effort to admit that her mother might be more complex than these words suggest. The speaker can only see practical reasons for her creation: her mother's need to recreate someone in her father's image, the opportunity for the mother to recreate herself as she wished to be, or the pride of ownership that being a parent conveys. The speaker does not ask, "Where is the love?" Although unspoken, the question still hangs at the end of the poem. Virtually every book in the Bible defines God's love for his creation. It is a godly pattern that parents are expected to imitate for their own children. Olds knows this from her own childhood, and the speaker, who is Olds's creation, knows of this expectation as well. So, the poem ends without an affirmation of the mother's love for her infant. It cannot be otherwise. To affirm the mother's love would be to negate the anger that the speaker feels. The only way to maintain her anger is to increase the sense of righteousness and melodrama in the poem. Love would disperse those elements and leave the poem without a focus.

This lack of love again emerges in the third poem under consideration, "After 37 Years My Mother Apologizes for My Childhood." Love is the one important element missing from this poem, in which the speaker's mother finally apologizes to the speaker for having subjected her to the father's drunken violence. The speaker acknowledges her mother's physical efforts to force an image of sincerity into her apology:

your
tiny face glittered as if with
shattered crystal, with true regret, the
regret of the body.

The final line, "the / regret of the body," suggests that while her mother is using her body to create an image of sincerity, the speaker recognizes that this is only performance. The regret is all in the body and not in her mind. The mother may feel regret at that moment, but the speaker doubts its authenticity. However, the mother's apology forces the child to respond, "I said *It's all right, / don't cry, it's all right."* The parent-child role has been reversed, and the child is forced to comfort the parent. The mother has never spoken of love, only of justification: *"Where else could I turn? Who else did I have?"* The

mother's tears and her pleas are too much for the child to ignore, and so the speaker is compelled to accept the apology. How reluctant she is to do so is revealed in the final lines: "I hardly knew what I / said or who I would be now that I had forgiven you." The speaker has invested so much of her life in blaming her mother that the forced forgiveness leaves her with no real sense of her own identity. Who is the speaker if she cannot hate her mother? She cannot imagine what she will do with the rest of her life. Once again, as she did in the early two poems, Olds turns to melodrama to convey her ideas. The images are ones of desperation and overwrought emotion. These are the very images that Olds admits were conveyed during her Sundays in church. Forgiving the mother permits the speaker to achieve a kind of biblical self-righteousness that would appeal to the Calvinist orientation that formed Olds's childhood.

Just as Job has come to symbolize the image of the long-suffering and willing believer, the speaker in Olds's poems imagines herself as a selfrighteous sufferer who has been forced to endure much pain. Because Olds has refused to divulge details about her own life, there is a temptation to see the author in her texts. That, of course, would be a mistake. Although there is no personal information to inform the readings of Olds's poems, her own admittance of the importance of the Bible on her childhood can be used to help define her characters' lives. Writers use what is familiar in life to create depth in their creations. And so, it is reasonable to assume that Olds has borrowed from her own experience with religion to help create a reality for her characters. As a result, the three motherdaughter poems included here are laden with self-righteousness and melodrama. The characters reveal a desperation but without the depth that the reader would hope to see. Olds does an effective job of capturing the Calvinist spirit in her poems, but she leaves the readers still wondering about the truth of the mother's identity.

Source: Sheri E. Metzger, Critical Essay on "I Go Back to May 1937," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following interview, Olds discusses her books of poetry and the way she approaches writing.

Domesticity, death, erotic love—the stark simplicity of Sharon Olds' subjects, and of her plainspoken language, can sometimes make her seem like the brooding Earth Mother of American poetry. ("I have learned to get pleasure," Olds wrote in her last book, "from speaking of pain.") In photographs she tends to look somewhat dark and remote, too; there's a sense of brewing drama. She seems a natural heir to such melancholy talents as Ann Sexton and Sylvia Plath.

It's a happy surprise, then, to discover that the 54-year-old Olds is anything but withdrawn and more-serious-than-thou. In fact, she comes across as a bundle of nervous energy, slightly neurotic, a bit like an intellectual Julie Haggerty. It's the end of the semester at New York University, where Olds has taught in the Graduate Creative Writing Program for the last 12 years, and the atmosphere outside her small office is chaotic. Olds herself arrives a few minutes late, looking slightly harried, and apologizes profusely while pulling two paper cups of tea from a brown bag—one for herself, one for a visitor.

It's hard to blame her for seeming a little breathless. In addition to her multiple duties at NYU, Olds runs the poetry workshop she founded in 1984 at New York's Goldwater Hospital for the severely disabled, and she reads at numerous speaking engagements. What's more, she claims to have such a backlog of poetry that when she does find the time to issue a new book—such as *The Wellspring* (Knopf), published earlier this year—it is generally made up of work written more than a decade earlier.

Born in San Francisco and educated at Stanford and Columbia, Olds arrived as a poet somewhat late: her first collection, *Satan Says*, was published when she was 37. Over the course of five books, however, she has quickly become one of America's most highly regarded poets; her readings attract overflow audiences, and her volume *The Dead and the Living* won the 1983 National Book Critics Circle Award.

Olds' new book, which follows on the heels of *The Father* (1992), a harrowing series of poems about the death of the narrator's alcoholic father, is comprised largely of poems on somewhat more accessible themes—family life, parenthood, romantic love. But as Olds' many readers have learned over the years, her work's apparent simplicity can't hide the scalding honesty of her observations. As Michael Ondaatje put it recently, her poems "are pure fire in the hands." Like each of her previous books, *The Wellspring* leaves an emotional afterburn.

Olds spoke with *Salon* for nearly two hours, on topics ranging from poetic inspiration and bad reviews to the problem with reading the morning's *New York Times*.

Thanks for the tea. Which reminds me that I once read somewhere that you don't smoke or drink coffee, and that you consume very little alcohol. Why is that?

Well, one thing I'm really interested in, when I'm writing, is being accurate. If I am trying to describe something, I'd like to be able to get it right. Of course, what's "right" is different for every person. Sometimes what's accurate might be kind of mysterious. So I don't just mean mathematically accurate. But to get it right according to my vision. I think this is true for all artists. My senses are very important to me. I want to be able to describe accurately what I see and hear and smell. And what they say about those things not being good for one's longevity makes an impression on me also. So I did quit coffee and I did quit smoking. But I haven't managed that with drinking!

So many poets are associated with alcohol and other kinds of excess.

There are some fine books and essays about that. Lewis Hyde has written about alcoholism and poets and the role that society gives its writers□ encouraging them to die [laughs]. And Donald Hall has wonderful, sobering stories about many of these poets. But I don't think anyone believes anymore that drugs and alcohol are good for writing, do they? I'm probably so out of it at my age that I don't know what people think. But I think that exercise and as much good health as one can enjoy is the best thing for writing.

I was even more surprised to read that you don't take a newspaper or watch television.

It's true, but it's kind of a different issue. At one point I took on a new job, and I just didn't have time to do anything but work. [Olds was the Director of the Graduate Creative Writing Program at NYU from 1989-91.] So I figured that for a year, just for the first year of this job, I would not watch TV, I wouldn't read a newspaper, I wouldn't read a book, I wouldn't go hear any music, I wouldn't do any of that kind of thing. Just so I'd have enough time. I was very afraid that I wouldn't be able to do this job well. And the time never came back. But there are problems connected with this□with keeping informed about what's happening in the world. So I try to look at the front page whenever I'm walking by a newsstand. And people talk about what's happening, so I get a certain amount of information that way. It might be a bad thing, not to know what's going on in the world. I can't say I really approve of it.

Is this paring down an attempt to get back to basic things, in your life as well as your work?

I'm not sure that the benefit□as a writer and as a citizen□that I would get from reading at least the front page of the *Times* every day or every other day would outweigh the depression. Learning about so many things that we can't do anything about. The amount of horror one used to hear about in one village could be quite extreme. But one might not have heard about all the other villages' horrors at the same time. I just don't have a big mind, I don't have a big picture, I am very limited.

Yet didn't some of your earlier, somewhat political poems take their inspiration from things you'd read in newspapers?

Yes, and they still do. I wish I wrote more about the world at more distance from myself. I think that for any of us to be able to imagine another person's life, if we could do that really well, would be wonderful.

There is only one in The Wellspring, *your new book. It's a poem titled "Japanese-American Farmhouse, California, 1942."*

Well, *The Wellspring* was written from 1983 to 1986. And it had a section in the beginning that was poems that began from others' experience. But the book just insisted on having this more domestic shape—against my wishful thinking.

I didn't realize that the "new" poems were so old.

That's why I didn't have time to go to the movies and read the paper and drink coffee [laughs]—because I'm very far behind in terms of putting books together.

Can you put this new book into place for me, then, in terms of your chronology?

The Gold Cell was published in 1987, and the poems in it were written in 1980, 1981 and 1982. Half of *The Father* [published in 1992] was written in '83 and '84. The second half was composed of one or two poems each from 1984, '85, '86, '87, '88, '89. So for *The Wellspring* I went back to where *The Gold Cell* left off, which was work written through 1982. So *The Wellspring* goes through 1986. The book I'm working on now will be made of poems written in '87, '88 and '89. The next one will be from 1990, '91 and '92

. *I find that fascinating. Do many poets work that way?* I don't think so. I got behind in putting books together. *How hard is putting a book together? It would seem like the hard part would be writing the poems in the first place.*

Well, you just need time. When I quit all these things and said I didn't have any time, I meant I didn't have *any* time. So the teaching, the writing of first drafts, the traveling, the reading, and whatever else might be in the life—that was all I had time for. I didn't have time to sit down and look at the work of a year and choose what to type. And then choose, among what gets typed, what to work on. And then among what's worked on what to *keep* working on until lots of poems become just the ones that seem the best. Or the least worst!

Why do you keep yourself so busy with things that don't pertain directly to writing? Is it because you love these other jobs, or is it because you've had to take them?

It's a combination of both. The teaching is very rewarding, and very time-consuming, and very exhausting. But it's wonderful. The community here at NYU is very precious to me. And the traveling and reading is rewarding in a different way, and it's an honor to be asked. It's hard to say no, when one is asked.

People who know your work well might be surprised to know that you have such a vigorous public life. Because your work is very focused and often kind of quiet. It's hard to imagine the narrator of one of your poems fending off multiple phone calls.

But don't you think that every single one of us is leading a harried life? We're all taking on too much, we're all asking too much of ourselves. We're all wishing we could do more, and therefore just doing more. So I don't think my life is different from anybody else's. Every poet I know□although there may be some I don't know who lead very different lives, who maybe live in the country and don't teach□tends to be just like the rest of us: just really busy, really overcommitted. We wouldn't necessarily see it in their poems. Because a poem is not written while running or while answering the phone. It's written in whatever minutes one has. Sometimes you have half an hour.

Can you write a poem in half an hour?

Forty-five minutes is much better [laughs]. Many, many poets whose work I love, they take longer than I do to write a first draft. In a way, it doesn't matter how long it takes, if we can each just find the right way to do it. Everyone is so different. I sometimes wish I wrote in a different way. You know, that feeling of: So-and-so writes slowly, if only I wrote slowly. But it's just the way I work. I feel a very strong wish, when a poem does come to me, to write it and get to the end of it.

So you don't sit down every morning at 9 a.m. and say: Now I'm going to write a poem.

No. I don't know if there are many poets who do that. I think that there are fiction writers for whom that works well. I could never do it. I feel as if, by the time I see that it's a poem, it's almost written in my head somewhere. It's as if there's someone inside of me who perceives order and beauty□and disorder. And who wants to make little copies. Who wants to put together something that will bear some relationship to the vision or memory or experience or story or idea or dream or whatever. Whatever starts things out.

What did you mean when you once said that your poetry comes out of your lungs?

[Laughs] Well, you know, it's curious where different people think their mind is. I guess a lot of people believe that their mind is in their brain, in their head. To me, the mind seems to be spread out in the whole body□the senses are part of the brain. I guess they're not where the thinking is done. But poetry is so physical, the music of it and the movement of thought. Maybe we can use a metaphor for it, out of dance. I think for many years I was aware of the need, in dance and in life, to breathe deeply and to take in more air than we usually take in. I find a tendency in myself not to breathe very much. And certainly I have noticed, over the years, when dancing or when running, that ideas will come to my mind with the oxygen. Suddenly you're remembering something that you haven't thought of for years.

Your last book, The Father, *was an unflinching account of your father's or at least the narrator's father's death from cancer. Your new book deals with more domestic themes, and while it's not lightweight, it doesn't have that sense of darkness that hung*

over The Father. *Did you find that writing these poems was refreshing, a kind of release?*

The decision for me was whether to have *The Father* be a book that told a story□from the point of view of this speaker, the daughter□without, as in the earlier books, then having a section on something else and a section on something else. At first I thought it would not be a good idea to have a book all on one theme. I also didn't know if I had enough poems on the subject that I liked well enough to make a book of them. But it turned out that I did. And it just seemed true to make a story that was all of itself. It pleased me to do so, and it still does. I've never had regrets that I went that way with *The Father.* The fact that there was a lot of anger and sorrow and a sense of connection to destructive feelings in *The Father* doesn't bother me. For me, the subject kind of makes its demands. And I don't write books. I just write poems. And then I put together books. Many poets write books. They'll tell you: Well, I've got my next book, but there are two poems I need to write, one about x, one about y. This is a wonder to me. But I think in another way I am like these poets: we like to get in the art's way as little as possible.

That's an interesting phrase, not getting in art's way. Is that why you write your poems in a style that's somewhat accessible?

I think that it's a little different from that for me. I think that my work is easy to understand because I am not a thinker, I am not a□How can I put it? I write the way I perceive, I guess. It's not really simple, I don't think, but it's about ordinary things□feeling about things, about people. I'm not an intellectual, I'm not an abstract thinker. And I'm interested in ordinary life. So I think that our writing reflects us. I was recently reading in Des Moines with Yusef Komunyakaa and Philip Levine. You listen to them and you're hearing a world-view, a bodyview, you're hearing a spirit of a person, and mind, and heart, and soul. Their work is completely distinctive; you know you're hearing a Komunyakaa poem immediately. And I don't think they are trying to sound one way or another□it doesn't seem to me to be something that comes from a conscious decision. Their spirits and their visions are embodied in their craft. And so is mine. It's not Jane Saw Puff. But the clarity of Jane Saw Puff is precious to me. What was the other part of your question?

Well, I was wondering what you meant about not getting in art's way.

There are some things that have to do with art that we can't control. This creature of the poem may assemble itself into a being with its own centrifugal force. That's what I'm thinking about when I'm trying to get out of art's way. Not trying to look good, if a poem's about me. Not trying to look bad. Not asking a poem to carry a lot of rocks in its pockets. But just being an ordinary observer and liver and feeler and letting the experience get through you onto the notebook with the pen, through the arm, out of the body, onto the page, without distortion. And there are so many ways I could distort. If I wrote in a sonnet form, I would be distorting. Or if I had some great new idea for line breaks and I used it in a poem, but it's really not right for that poem, but I wanted it, that would be

distorting. It's kind of like ego in a way, egotism or narcissism. Where the self is too active.

Your poems often seem, on the surface anyway, somewhat more autobiographical than most not that the "I" in your work is necessarily you. Do people try to read your life into them?

I don't know if it would feel accurate to me to say that I put myself into my poems. I don't know if that would describe what was happening in a poem that I wrote and that I liked. Someone is seeing, someone is thinking, dreaming, wondering, and remembering, in everybody's poems. Whether there's a speaker that has an explicit "I" or not, there is some kind of self or spirit or personality. We think of Lucille Clifton's poems, and they don't have to have an "I" in them for the spirit of the poet, a person, to be felt. I wouldn't say she was putting herself in, but the qualities of her being come through. She's not leaving herself, her wisdom and experience and music out. That's partly what craft is, I think. The body of the poem is the spirit of the poem. But I do sometimes make an effort to use the word "I" as little as possible. I would not have chosen to have that word appear so much in my poems. *My* poems□I don't even like the sound of that, in a way. Not that anyone else wrote them. But we know that only people who are really close to us care about our personal experience. Art is something else. It has something to do with wanting to be accurate about what we think and feel. To me the difference between the paper world and the flesh world is so great that I don't think we could put ourselves in our poems even if we wanted to.

Do you ever wonder what one of your children will think when he or she reads one of your poems that might be, at least in some small way, about them? Or do you wonder about what insight they will have into their mother's life through your work?

It's a wonderful question, and it's not one I can answer, really. Ten years ago I made a vow not to talk about my life. Obviously, the apparently very personal nature of my writing made this seem to me like maybe a good idea, for both sides of the equation□both for the muses and for the writer. But it's a wonderful and important question. I think the thing that's most important to me about it is this idea that every writer has to decide these things for themselves, and we learn by making mistakes. We learn by finding out, five years later, what we wish we hadn't done. I've worked out this thing I've called "the spectrum of loyalty and betrayal." Which is also the spectrum of silence and song. And at either end, we're in a dangerous state, either to the self, or to others. We all try to fall in the right place in the middle.

As accessible as your poetry can seem to be, there also seems to be an almost brutally direct emotional quality sometimes. There are some tough images.

I think that I am slowly improving in my ability to not be too melodramatic, to help the images have the right tenor. My first book came out when I was 37, so when I was finally able to speak as a writer my wish to not be silent was, in my early work, extreme. It's like someone, in baseball, who thinks that the ball is being thrown by a very strong arm from the outfield, and so she can't just land on home, she has to try to run way past

it, practically into the dugout. Reading some of my earlier work, I get that sense of the need for too big a head of steam to be built up. It seems extreme to me at times, some of the imagery. That's part of why I'm not so sorry I'm a little behind in putting books together, because some of those rather crude images I can now maybe correct. It also might be that maybe I've used an image that is too mild, and I'll correct in the other direction. I don't want to imply that it's always going the other way. But my tendency was to be a little over the mark. And so I just really love now the possibility of getting it right.

Your new book contains several poems that are quite realistic in terms of their descriptions of sex. Is it difficult writing poetry about sex, not to fall into language that might seem cliched?

I don't think that sex has been written about a lot in poetry. And I want to be able to write about any subject. There is a failure rate□there are subjects that are probably a lot harder to write about than others. I think that love is almost the hardest thing to write about. Not a general state of being in love, but a particular love for a particular person. Just one's taste for that one. And if you look at all the love poetry in our tradition, there isn't much that helps us know why that one. I'm just interested in human stuff like hate, love, sexual love and sex. I don't see why not. It just seems to me if writers can assemble, in language, something that bears any relation to experience□especially important experience, experience we care about, moving and powerful experience□then it is worth trying. The opportunities for offense and failure are always aplenty. They lie all around us.

Your poetry isn't necessarily known for its comic aspects. But I'm wondering about your wonderful poem "The Pope's Penis," from The Gold Cell, *where that came from and if it has proven controversial.*

Life has a lot of sorrow in it, but also has a lot of funny things in it, so it makes sense to me to have that range. So many poets whose work I love are funny now and then. We're just funny creatures, human beings. But that particular poem□I am careful where I read it, not wishing to give maximum offense. It's a poem I didn't get for a long time. I didn't ask myself: Why do you feel okay about teasing this stranger? Why do you think that's okay? I was just so startled when I noticed that this particular Pope was also a man. And I thought: Well, that means □ [trails off]. And I just began musing on The Other, in a way. And I wasn't thinking, "I must not write anything about a religion that is not mine because I have no business doing so." I'm sure there are a lot of people who feel that way, that we can write well only about what we deeply know and have known all our lives□that we can't write about very different experiences. I don't think that's necessarily always true. I grew up in what I now call a hellfire Episcopalian religion□I think that phrase communicates the atmosphere□and I didn't feel light years away from understanding the male hierarchy of power leading up toward the male God. But I didn't understand, until years later, that this poem was kind of a return gesture. This man, the Pope, seemed to feel that he knew a lot about women and could make decisions for us□various decisions about whether we could be priests or not, and who would decide whether we could have an abortion or not. He had crossed our line so far□ this is according to my outsider's point of view□ that hey, what's a little flirtatious poem that

went across his line somewhat? It looks like a young poem now. It mixes its metaphors. So I don't tend to read that poem, but I don't wish I hadn't written it. I don't want to take it out of the book. And unlike maybe three other poems in that book that I've rewritten□in the latest printing they are different from what they were□it's okay enough for me that I don't feel like I have to, or could, rewrite it. If I tried to fix the images it would just fall apart.

Many of the poems in your new book, certainly unlike that poem about the Pope's penis, take their inspiration from very simple domestic things   a kid blowing bubbles in milk, a pair of blue jeans, a sick child.

Why is it, do you suppose, that you have two people in two different apartments, and they are surrounded by all the same stuff, and one of them will write about blue jeans and bubbles in milk, and the other will write about something less ordinary, or something with more ideas connected to it? How we perceive is just very different.

You published your first book of poems somewhat late, at 37. Can you tell me a bit about why that was?

That sure seemed old then, and it sure seems young to me now. It seemed old because I knew of all these amazing people who had done amazing work in their 20s. Of course, anyone who ever can do anything is lucky. It means that there has been enough education, enough peace, enough time, enough whatever, that somebody can sit down and write. Many lives don't allow that, the good fortune of being able to work at it, and try, and keep trying.

Can you imagine your life if you hadn't become a writer? Do you feel lucky?

No, I certainly can't imagine my life not being a writer. Lucky? Um-hmm. It's hard to believe□it's like this is a dream. I need to write, and I need to write a lot. And I've been very lucky to be able to make the time, have the time given me, depending on what stage of my life I'm thinking of. Yes, luck. Luck. "Sometimes a crumb falls / From the tables of joy, / Sometimes a bone / Is flung. / To some people / Love is given, / To others / Only heaven." That's Langston Hughes' poem "Luck." It's one of the poems on the subways.

Have you ever learned anything from a review of your work?

Oh sure. Sometimes I feel like warning signs are thrown up. As long as one doesn't get too discouraged.

I haven't seen many   or any, actually   negative reviews of your work. Maybe it's because I see so few poetry reviews. But do bad ones get to you?

Yeah. Sure. I think there have been plenty of them [laughs]. You were looking in a different direction. And they have differed a lot from each other in their amount of thoughtfulness, their amount of bad feeling. But we put our boat in the stream. By putting one's work out there, one is asking to be considered as a part of the world. If the

world feels very powerfully that this work should not have been written, it will say so. That seems quite fair. But then I think of the great things I have read, great stuff describing other people's work that a critic likes or loves. Criticism can be so enriching, it can add to the pleasure we take in the poetry.

Source: Dwight Garner, "Sharon Olds," in *Salon.com*, http://www.salon.com/weekly/interview960701.html, July 1, 1996.

Critical Essay #3

In the following review excerpt, Ostriker, praises Olds's diverse themes in her poetry collection

The Gold Cell. The opening section of Sharon Olds's *The Gold Cell* contains some of her most haunting poems. A white woman faces a black youth with the "casual cold look of a mugger" on the subway and considers how deeply they are in each other's power. Some policemen coax a suicide from his parapet on a hot night, and they light cigarettes whose "red, glowing ends burned like the / tiny campfires we lit at night / back at the beginning of the world." Some Ugandan villagers during a drought are beating to death a food-thief whose headwounds are "ripe and wet as a / rich furrow cut back and cut back at / plough-time to farrow a trench for the seed." A 12-year-old girl who has been raped and has watched her best friend raped and stabbed to death lives on to go to high school where she works hard at math and becomes a cheerleader, "and she does a cartwheel, the splits, she shakes the / shredded pom-poms in her fists." Olds's characteristic note is a clear unsentimental compassion; her characteristic imagery is laid on thick, wet, and warm as bodies.

The book's three remaining sections return to themes powerfully treated in her earlier volumes, *Satan Says* and *The Dead and the Living*: father and mother, sexuality, son and daughter. In "I Go Back to May 1937," the poet pictures her parents on the brink of their marriage and is tempted to warn them to stop:

but I don't do it. I want to live. I
take them up like the male and female
paper dolls and bang them together
at the hips like chips of flint as if to
strike sparks from them, I say
Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.

Tell she does, sparing neither parentfather another Saturn eating his young, mother rolling over daughter like a tongue of lavawhile the stunningly awful details, by their very intimacy and physicality, make anger impossible. These people are the poet, she is they. When Olds writes of sex, she sinks into voluptuous metaphors of food, predatory animals, satiety, birth. Writing of her children, she concentrates on their living and imperilled flesh, which we see as it were suspended in the amber of the poet's locutions and her love. While she neither philosophizes nor moralizes explicitly, Olds's refusal to establish any conventional poetic distance from her subjects amounts to a tacit moral imperative: that we affirm as intensely as possible our biological existence and the attachments to others it implies, and that we hold life as absolutely precious. "The gold cell" as a figure for life's primary unit implies both entrapment (we cannot escape our parents, our children, our sexuality, our bodies) and pure treasure.

Olds's poems here are longer and slightly less taut than her earlier work. I'm puzzled at times by her lineation (e.g., many lines ending in "the" or "a" for no apparent reason

other than a general preference for run-on). But the grace, the ease, the American casualness of her phrasing, along with the rich and precise tactility of her imagery, make a perfect combination. I found many of these poems no less than breathtaking.

Source: Alicia Ostriker, "Comment: The Tune of Crisis," in *Poetry*, Vol. CXLIX, No. 4, January 1987, pp. 231-37.

Adaptations

Sharon Olds: The Lannon Literary Series is available on VHS. This 1991 production is sixty minutes long and includes Olds reading from *The Dead and the Living* and *The Gold Cell* as well as from unpublished work. This video also includes an interview with Olds by Lewis MacAdams.

The Power of the Word with Bill Moyers, is a six-part, 1989 Public Broadcasting series, with a running time of 360 minutes. It includes interviews with many contemporary poets, including Sharon Olds. This series is available on VHS.

The Best of NPR: Writers on Writing is a ninetyminute audiocassette with contemporary writers, including Sharon Olds, talking about their work.

Poets in Person (1991) is a fourteen-part audio series featuring more than a dozen contemporary American writers discussing their poetry and how they composed some of their favorite poems. Sharon Olds talks about turning real life into poetry. Each cassette is thirty minutes in length.

In Their Own Voices: A Century of Recorded Poetry (1996) is a four-CD boxed set featuring poets reading their own work. Many of the selections included are old recordings, some from as early as the nineteenth century, but this set also includes many contemporary poets reading their work. Sharon Olds reads her poem "Wonder."

Topics for Further Study

Olds's poem is about a marriage and the effect it has on the couple's child. Write a poem about your parents. Or, if you are unable to express how you feel about your own parents, write a poem that explores the parent-child relationship in either its ideal state or in the context of what you have observed in other families.

Research the rate of divorce in the United States during the past twenty years. Does the rate seem to be increasing or is it holding steady? If it has changed, what factors might be responsible for that change?

Poetry should create images and pictures in the reader's mind. Draw or illustrate one of the images her poem creates.

Artists are often inspired by poets to create art. For instance, William Blake was inspired by John Milton's poetry to create illustrations of the poet's finest work. Spend some time looking through art books in the library and try to select a picture or illustration that you feel best illustrates Olds's poem. Then, in a carefully worded essay, compare the art that you have selected to Olds's poem, noting both the similarities and the differences.

Olds's poem was composed early in the 1980s. Research and write about the economic status of single-parent homes during this period. Consider what kinds of employment were available for divorced mothers and how easy or difficult it was for single families to manage on just one income.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: This decade begins with the "perfect" marriage between an English princess and prince. The marriage of Lady Diana Spenser and Charles, the Prince of Wales, suggests the sort of fairy-tale marriage that many women still want for themselves, in spite of the feminist movement that began at the end of the preceding decade. The fantasy appeal of the wedding for women is represented by the 700 million people who watched the wedding on television.

Today: Within fifteen years, the Prince and Princess of Wales are divorced. A year later, Diana is killed in an automobile accident. The divorced Prince of Wales is left a single father of two boys. In the United States, the number of single parents is rising as well, often as a result of divorce□the outcome in approximately fifty percent of all marriages.

1980s: Steven Spielberg's *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* is only one example of a wave of new films enhanced by the elaborate use of special effects often supplied by computers. One important feature of this film, though, does not involve special effects; it is the inclusion of divorce. The children who befriend ET live in a single parent household. This film's popularity is so great that it remains the top grossing film for eleven years.

Today: Movies are still an important element in American life. The development of more elaborate computers continues to contribute to special effects in film, with each new film more elaborate than its preceding competition. *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* is updated with additional special effects and is re-released in movie theatres in celebration of its twentieth anniversary.

1980s: In 1982, in Chicago, the first cellular phones are introduced for common use, at a cost of $3000 each for the purchase price and $150 a month for service. New transmitters make mobile phone use available in more areas.

Today: Statistics suggest that fifty percent of all households own and use a cellular phone. A reduction in cost and competition among suppliers helps increase the number of users.

1980s: The United States President for most of this decade is Ronald Reagan, a former Hollywood actor. Reagan wins the presidency using his acting talents, including an adept use of television and film to promote his ideas. Reagan's presidency illustrates the fascination Americans have with film stars and the willingness of the population to ignore experience in favor of performance.

Today: The public's fascination with Hollywood and film stars continues. Although no actor since Reagan has been elected to the nation's highest office, a significant part of the election process focuses on the media coverage and celebrity surrounding a candidate. In many ways, this movement suggests a superficiality about the American public, with less emphasis on the content of the message, and more emphasis on the delivery.

What Do I Read Next?

Olds's *The Father* (1992) is a collection of poems on the death of the speaker's father. This book continues many of the father-daughter themes touched upon in Olds's earlier books.

Olds's *The Unswept Room* is a new collection of poems to be published in September 2002 by Knopf.

The Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses, published every year since 1977, contains the editor's annual selections for the best contemporary poetry and fiction. A study of the poems in this book provides readers with contemporary poets of Olds's caliber.

Otherwise: New and Selected Poems by Jane Kenyon is a collection of the author's work. Published in 1997, two years after Kenyon's death, this work offers a glimpse at another female contemporary poet.

Womanifestos, published in 2000 by the Women's Writing Circle, is an anthology of women's poetry, containing feminist and Latina poetry. While Olds is not Latina, many of these poems explore issues that are similar to Olds's work: the relationship between parents and children, and a woman's role in the world.

The Longman Anthology of American Poetry, published in 1992, is an anthology of American poetry that includes poetry from several different time periods. This book provides a compilation of poetry that allows students to visualize Olds's poetry within a context of other American poets and to understand how Olds fulfills or deviates from the poetic traditions that influenced her work.

The Heath Introduction to Poetry, with a fifth edition published in 2000, is an anthology of poetry that includes poems from the earliest poets through contemporary poetry. Selections are drawn from around the world. A study of the history of poetry can assist the reader in understanding how American poets fit into a worldview.

Further Study

Dacey, Philip, and David Jauss, eds., *Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms*, Addison- Wesley, 1986.

This collection of poetry provides the reader with a large selection of poems that demonstrates the many different poetic forms used.

Mullaney, Janet Palmer, ed., *Truthtellers of the Times: Interviews with Contemporary Women Poets*, University of Michigan Press, 1998.

This book is a collection of interviews with fourteen contemporary poets. Although an interview with Olds is not part of this book, the text does provide a glimpse into the creative world of some of Olds's contemporaries.

Pinsky, Robert, *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999.

An easy to read primer on how to read and understand poetry, in which Pinsky discusses line, syntax, meter, rhyme, and the art of poetry.

Schaller, Michael, *Reckoning with Reagan: America and Its President in the 1980s*, Oxford University Press, 1984.

This book provides a comprehensive overview of the Reagan years. The author focuses on Reagan's politics, the economy, the social world, and the diplomatic world of the 1980s.

Slansky, Paul, *The Clothes Have No Emperor: A Chronicle of the American Eighties*, Fireside, 1989.

Slansky provides a humorous look at the 1980s and an often cutting assessment of the Reagan presidency. This text is largely non-partisan.

Strand, Mark, and Eavan Boland, eds., *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.

An excellent guide to how to read poetry, this text offers help to the reader who is trying to understand poetic form. It includes an anthology of poems that illustrate the various concepts discussed.

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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 membersеducational 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.

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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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