In the Suburbs Study Guide

In the Suburbs by Louis Simpson

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Introduction

"In the Suburbs" can be considered a representative poem of Louis Simpson's, both in subject matter and style. Following in the footsteps of his literary idol, Anton Chekhov, Simpson has fashioned a career of chronicling the mundane lives of ordinary people. However, his descriptions of middle- class life are not without thorns. Undergirding his poems about suburbia and small talk lurks a pervasive sense of gloom and despair. The very collection in which the poem appears, *At the End of the Open Road,* published in 1963 by Wesleyan University Press, is itself an extended and complicated evaluation of American society in the middle of the twentieth century. The title is a response to Walt Whitman's vision of America as a place of endless possibility, described in his poem "Song of the Open Road." Simpson considers the country a hundred years after Whitman wrote, when its geographical, and by implication spiritual, frontiers have been exhausted. Simpson asks, what's next?

"In the Suburbs" is the second poem in the collection, following "In California," a dark piece about what happens when a dream has gone bad. "In the Suburbs" is only six lines long and comprised of just three sentences, each a separate statement about the emptiness of suburban life. Using the second person "you," Simpson pronounces both the meaninglessness of this existence and the futility of attempting to escape. In its evocation of a life that needs to be changed, it echoes both Rilke's poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo" and James Wright's poem "Lying in a Hammock on William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota." Statement poems like these are frequently anthologized because they are short and considered "easy" to understand. "In the Suburbs" is no exception, having appeared in a number of introductory poetry texts, including *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* and Michael Meyer's *Poetry: An Introduction*.

Author Biography

Louis Aston Marantz Simpson was born in 1923 in Kingston, Jamaica, West Indies, to Aston Simpson, a lawyer, and Rosalind Marantz Simpson, an Eastern European emigré and beauty queen. The Simpsons lived in the suburbs of Kingston and were quite well off. Simpson describes his family during that time as "well-to-do colonials" and solid members of the upper middle class. Rosalind Simpson was a major influence on her son's literary development, keeping the young Louis entertained with fairy tales and tales of her life in Poland. When he turned nine years old, Simpson enrolled in Munro College, an elite preparatory school. He began to write poems and stories in earnest in his early adolescence and even won an essay competition when he was fourteen. His article on the coronation of George VI was printed in the *Daily Gleaner,* a Kingston newspaper.

After graduating from Munro, Simpson left Jamaica for America, where his mother had moved after his parents had divorced. Simpson studied literature at Columbia University in New York City but interrupted his studies in 1943 to join the United States Army. He returned to Columbia after the war and graduated with a bachelor of science degree in 1948. A few years later he received a master's degree in English from Columbia and his doctorate degree in comparative literature from Columbia in 1959.

Simpson's career as a poet and critic was helped by his teaching career, as the latter provided him time and money to write. He taught literature, first at the University of California at Berkeley, then at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, from which he retired in 1993. In all of his writing, Simpson's dry wit and humor is evident, as is his attention to the lives of his subjects. His many books include poetry collections including *The Arrivistes: Poems 1940-1949* (1949), *A Dream of Governors* (1959), *At the End of the Open Road* (1963), *Caviare at the Funeral,* and *Selected Poems* (1988); an anthology, *An Introduction to Poetry* (1972); criticism, *A Revolution in Taste: Studies of Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell* (1979), *Three on the Tower: The Lives and Works of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams* (1975), and *The Character of the Poet* (1986); a novel, *Riverside Drive* (1962); and memoirs, *North of Jamaica* (1972), and *The King My Father's Wreck,* (1995). His many awards include a Pulitzer Prize for *At the End of the Open Road,* which includes the poem "In the Suburbs," an American Academy of Arts and Letters Rome Fellowship, two Guggenheim Fellowships, an American Council for Learned Societies grant, and Columbia University's Medal for Excellence. Simpson lives and writes in Setauket, New York, on Long Island.

Poem Text

There's no way out.
You were born to waste your life.
You were born to this middleclass life
As others before you
5 Were born to walk in procession
To the temple, singing.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-3

"In the Suburbs" is a small poem about a big topic. Its title announces its subject. For Americans, the idea and image of the suburbs is mixed. On the one hand, many consider it a welcome refuge from the congestion, noise, and crime of the city. On the other hand, it has the reputation as a place marked by conformity, conservative values, and stodginess. In the first stanza, the speaker adopts the latter point of view, presenting the suburbs as a prison of sorts. The tone is harsh and accusatory, as the speaker equates the suburbs with middle-class life, both of which he sees as meaningless. The important word in this stanza is "born." Being born into a situation or identity suggests that one has little or no choice in the matter, that he or she acts according to a path already laid out. By using the second person "you," Simpson suggests that he is addressing another part of himself. This is a standard use of the second person in contemporary poetry.

The idea that one is born into a way of life over which one has no control is embodied in naturalism, a way of representing the world that emerged in the nineteenth century, largely as a result of the theories of Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud. Naturalist writers, like realist writers, focus on the observable world, paying close attention to those forces that limit human desire or will, such as nature, one's genetic inheritance, or economic conditions. American naturalist writers include Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser. In Simpson's poem, these forces are implied rather than explicitly described.

Lines 4-6

This stanza completes the third sentence of the first stanza. By running the sentence over into the next paragraph, Simpson emphasizes the idea of "procession," which he introduces in the fifth line. A procession is a group of people moving along in a systematic and orderly manner. The word also suggests ritual, which is embodied in the image of people walking to church.

This last image is key for understanding the poem. Linking suburban, middle-class life to churchgoing makes sense, as church life was a conventional and regular part of American life when Simpson wrote the poem in the early 1960s. However, Simpson's tone is ironic. By using a religious image to describe suburban, middle-class life, he is saying that this group of people holds their way of life sacred, even though they are largely powerless to change it and, Simpson suggests, unconscious of its effect on them.

Themes

American Dream

Since the country was established in 1776, the United States has offered the promise of freedom, freedom not only to worship one's own God but freedom also to pursue material wealth. When Walt Whitman wrote "Song of the Open Road" in the middle of the nineteenth century, he represented America as a place of brotherhood and expansiveness, where each person was a cosmos unto him or herself. Possibility was limited only by what one could dream. Simpson takes that vision of America and the American Dream and shows its tawdry underbelly. He suggests that the achievement of the Dream leads not to untold happiness and communion with one's countrymen and women but to a life of monotony, where the pursuit of pleasure and convenience outweighs any desire to pursue the higher good. Rather than saying these things outright, Simpson implies them by depicting the middle-class life as one of waste, where its inhabitants can only blindly chase what they have been told is the "good" life. This blind pursuit is summed up in the image of people walking in procession "To the temple, singing." The suggestion here is that middle-class life itself is a form of religion with its own gods and rituals. Though Simpson doesn't draw out his analogy, readers understand that these gods are security and material wealth and that the rituals of the middle class include the "daily grind" of a 9 to 5 job and, for many suburbanites, the traffic-clogged commute.

Class

By linking social class with the suburbs, Simpson's poem perpetuates stereotypes both of people who live in the suburbs and of those who inhabit the middle class. Equating a middle-class life with a "wasted" life, the speaker draws on popular assumptions about what constitutes the middle class.

These assumptions include a certain income, conventional tastes, conformity, an aversion to risk and, paradoxically, a feeling of hopelessness. A life can be wasteful, however, only if there exists an idea of a productive life. Although Simpson never explicitly describes what such a life might look like, he suggests that it would not include middle- class "virtues." A "productive" life might be one in which the individual values risk over security, adventure over stability, the exotic over the mundane, the very kind of life that Walt Whitman explored in his poems more than a hundred years ago.

Style

Analogy

"In the Suburbs" is one short analogy, comparing middle-class life to a form of unconscious devotion. Analogies are similar to similes (they both may use "as" or "like") but often extend the terms of comparison. They also frequently attempt to explain the abstract in terms of the concrete. In this case, the middle-class is the abstraction, and people walking to the temple singing is the concrete term.

Tone

The tone of the poem is both accusatory and despairing. The speaker establishes the accusatory tone through the use of the second person "you," and he establishes the despairing tone through his insistence that nothing can be changed and that belonging to the middle class is only the most recent form of self-imprisonment. Underlying the tone is the image of the last stanza, an image Simpson critic Ronald Moran would argue belongs to the "emotive imagination." According to Moran, such an image creates "a muted shock effect insofar as the reader's expectations are concerned."

Historical Context

R. W. Flint notes that Simpson once told an interviewer that "[i]t's the timidity of suburban life that is so limiting." Timidity aside, Simpson has become a poet of the middle class, at times even heroizing the characters that people his poems. These characters shop, gossip, commute, and go on summer vacations. It is a life Simpson knows well. While contemporaries like Allen Ginsberg were composing loud, often surrealist, poems that screamed out against the conformity of middle-class, mid-century suburban American life, Simpson was busy crafting quiet poems of understatement and wit. At the time Simpson was writing the poems that make up *At the End of the Open Road,* the United States was in the midst of a post-war economic expansion. Beginning in the late 1940s, returning World War II veterans flooded the country and helped to create a new market for inexpensive housing. The overwhelming majority of these veterans wanted their own land and their own *new* house. Using less than top-shelf materials, developers such as William J. Levitt began building on the outskirts of large cities, converting farmland into sprawling housing tracts. Levitt factored the cost of elementary schools into the price of the houses, helping to create genuine communities. Built on fifteen hundred acres of potato fields on Long Island, the first Levittown is often credited with being the model for thousands of suburban developments of the 1950s and 1960s. The uniformity of these developments helped to create the image that many Americans have about suburban life: that it is a place of conformity and blandness, devoid of the rich cultural opportunities and diversity that define many big cities.

A certain conservative ideology also came to be associated with the suburban mindset. As American cities fought poverty, crime, congestion, and general unrest, more and more people fled to the suburbs for peace and security. Historians and social critics termed this phenomenon "white flight" because most of those fleeing cities for the suburbs were Caucasian. Popular television shows of this period, such as *Ozzie and Harriet, Dennis the Menace,* and, later, *The Brady Bunch,* underscore the mainstream middle-class values that came to be associated with the suburban life.

The conservative nature of the suburbs stood in stark contrast to what was taking hold in America's cities in the early 1960s. In 1960, John F. Kennedy, a Democrat, was narrowly elected president. Though remarkably passive at first□considering that Kennedy received more than 70 percent of the Black vote□the Kennedy administration helped to further the cause of civil rights, creating the Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity in 1961 and ending segregation in interstate travel and in federally funded housing the same year. In 1963, Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Council began a sustained campaign against racial segregation in Birmingham, Alabama. Sit-ins and marches antagonized white leadership and law enforcement, and Birmingham police chief "Bull" Connor unintentionally helped galvanize protesters by turning loose police dogs, fire hoses, and his force on the peaceful demonstrators. In August 1963, a quarter million protesters marched on Washington D. C. to urge Congress to pass Kennedy's civil rights bill and to hear King deliver his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

Critical Overview

Like many of the poems in *At the End of the Open Road,* "In the Suburbs" explores the contradictions between America's promise and its reality. Reviewing the collection for *Southern Review,* Ronald Moran writes that although he does not believe that Simpson's longer poems succeed, he enjoys his shorter ones. "In the Suburbs" works because it is a "statement poem" that relies on "a quiet power generated through restrained diction, loose rhythms, and an imaginative interplay between subject and attitude." Commenting on the sadness of the poem, poet and critic James Dickey says that "In the Suburbs" underscores the impoverished inner life of the American individual in the mid-twentieth century, living in a landscape of used-car lots and suburbs. "Nothing can be done," Dickey writes. "The individual has only what he has, only what history has allowed him to be born to." While praising Simpson's poetry in general, R. W. Flint finds the poem confusing, unsure of its meaning. Flint writes, "The ending is unsatisfactory. Does he mean there is a religious temple-haunting dimension to suburbia? The John Cheever gospel? Or does he only mean that things have gone rapidly downhill, that *homo medius americanus* can but dimly understand what he has lost?" The poem's brevity and very American-ness make it a popular choice for anthologies.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition and publishes frequently on American literature and culture. In this essay, he compares Simpson's vision of America in the 1950s to Walt Whitman's vision of it in the middle of the nineteenth century.

"In the Suburbs" is a sour little poem, full of disappointment and unfulfilled expectations. It is, like many of Simpson's poems in his collection *At the End of the Open Road,* a confrontation with the self as much as it is with an America who does not measure up to the writer's expectations. To see America as Simpson does, however, it is necessary to imagine it as he initially did through the eyes of Walt Whitman, whose poem "Song of the Open Road" "In the Suburbs" responds to.

Writing a hundred years before Simpson, Whitman saw America as a land of opportunity and untapped potential, which he expresses in his poem, itself a long, loose catalogue of America's promise. Using the open road as a symbol of life's journey, Whitman focuses on the individual, the single person's experience. His is a romantic vision of the individual's relationship to society and nature. He begins the poem:

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I
choose.

In contrast, Simpson focuses on the group, categorized by social class. Unlike Whitman, whose vision of the American people transcends class, Simpson sees America in the middle of the twentieth century hemmed in by class, by the dictates of a society that provides ready-made dreams that can't possibly be fulfilled. Whereas Whitman begins his journey on the open road "healthy" and "free, the world before me," Simpson opens his poem on a dead end street with "no way out." Simpson's vision of the middle class draws on stereotypes of a class-bound society marked by its pursuit of material wealth. The middle-class life, for Simpson, is marked by "waste," because it neglects the spirit. Whitman's vision, on the other hand, is of a people whose very nature is spiritual. Speaking of life on America's open road, Whitman writes:

I believe that much unseen is also here.
Here the profound lesson of reception, nor
preference nor denial,
The black with his wooly head, the felon, the
diseas'd, the illiterate
person, are not denied;
The birth, the hasting after the physician, the
beggar's tramp, the
drunkard's stagger, the laughing party of
mechanics,

The escaped youth, the rich person's carriage, the
fop, the eloping
couple,...
None but are accepted, none but shall be dear to
me.

Whitman cultivated his reputation as a man of the people. His vision of inclusion, of a society where everyone, regardless of race, gender, class, or profession is accepted, defines the very essence of a progressive politics where worth is determined by one's very existence, not by one's work or possessions. This is the vision of America to which Simpson's poem cynically replies. It inverts Whitman's world. In his autobiography, *North of Jamaica,* Simpson writes about his response to Whitman's poetry when he emigrated to the United States from Jamaica in 1940:

I found Whitman's poetry almost intolerable; celebrating progress and industry as ends in themselves was understandable in 1879, for at that time material expansion was also a spiritual experience, but in the twentieth century, the message seemed out of date. The mountains had been crossed, the land had been gobbled up, and industry was turning out more goods than people could consume. Also, the democracy Whitman celebrated, the instinctive rightness of the common man, was very much in doubt. Now, we were governed by the rich, and the masses were hopelessly committed to an economy based on war. It was a curious thing that a man could write great poetry and still be mistaken in his ideas.

Because Simpson expected so much from America, it's understandable that when he arrived he would be disappointed. The optimism Whitman expressed for the country's future no longer seemed possible or, rather, seemed possible only in a limited, economic sense. The vision of America in the 1950s when Simpson wrote most of the poems in *At the End of the Open Road* is one of a country that had traded its soul for material success. Suburbs had sprouted everywhere, as developers rushed to build cheap housing for World War II veterans and their families. These cookie-cutter neighborhoods gave the impression (which was often right) of a people who were not as interested in defining their own individuality as they were of acquiring things that would make their lives easier and provide them with the social status they sought. The 1950s was also the age of the "corporation worker." After the war, the country turned to private corporations to help rebuild the economy. Big business successfully lobbied the government to lift wartime regulations. They bought up government wartime plants and shouldered out many smaller businesses. Millions of people went to work for transnational corporations, which were redefining not only the American economy but the world economy as well. Living in the suburbs, these newly minted "corporate drones" commuted to their 9 to 5 jobs. To do this comfortably, they needed comfortable cars, which they also had to buy, thereby cementing their relationship to their work even more strongly.

Simpson's friend, Allen Ginsberg, a Beat poet who had also been strongly influenced by Whitman, similarly lamented America's sad state of affairs at mid-century in his poem "A Supermarket in California." Like Simpson, Ginsberg questioned the deterioration of

American values, its obsession with money and security, its neglect of the greater good and of self-enlightenment. But whereas Ginsberg questioned the country as a whole and the direction in which it was headed, Simpson singles out the middle class as his target of disdain, claiming that "There's no way out" of the endless cycle of consumption and production the middle class had brought into the country. For Simpson, America's future had arrived; there was no going back. Simpson echoes Ginsberg's concern about America's lack of spirituality, but he does so ironically by comparing middle-class life to ritualized religion itself. Addressing himself as much as he is those among whom he lives, Simpson writes:

You were born to this middle-class life
As others before you
Were born to walk in procession
To the temple, singing.

The comparison is odd, but right. It also tells readers that for Simpson ritualized religion is *as* imprisoning as a middle-class life. Where, then, one might ask, does Simpson see hope? The answer is nowhere. In this poem and others in the collection, middle-class life is accepted at the same time it is scorned. The characters and speakers of Simpson's poems not only inhabit the middle class, but they are aware of what this means□to their relationships, to their desires, to their tastes. They are imprisoned not only by their class but by their awareness that there is no hope. At the end of Whitman's and America's open road in the middle of the twentieth century, Simpson sees a vapid land of wasted potential, a land for which there is no redemption. The only "choice" left is to make a religion of it, to embrace one's misery. Simpson has made a career out of just such an embrace.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "In the Suburbs," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Blevins is a writer and poet who has taught at Hollins University, Sweet Briar College, and in the Virginia Community College System. She has published poems, essays, and stories in many magazines, journals, and anthologies. In this essay, Blevins examines how Simpson uses free verse or open form as opposed to fixed verse.

Louis Simpson's "In the Suburbs" is a criticism of American suburban life□an expression of the poet's feelings of hopelessness about a country of people who "are too slow for death, and change / to stone." Simpson expresses this same sentiment about more specific Americans in another poem included in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *At The End of the Open Road,* which also contains "In the Suburbs." In its criticism of middle-class America, "In the Suburbs" is akin to many poems of the 1950s and 1960s, recalling the opinions of other poets of Simpson's generation who struggled valiantly to discover new poetic forms in an effort to more accurately record the country's changing attitudes and moods.

James Wright's "Lying in a Hammock in William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island Minnesota," which was published five years after Simpson's *At the End of the Open Road,* is among the most famous of poems expressing the view that man leads a pointless life, though its main rhetorical device is a comparison between the natural world and the self rather than the present period in cultural history and a more ancient one. Wright also implicates *himself* in "Lying in a Hammock," whereas Simpson implicates American culture in "In the Suburbs." In this poem, Simpson is certain he is powerless to change and alter his own circumstances.

Unlike Wright, who ironically claims to have "wasted his [own] life," Simpson tells us that he "was *born* to waste [his] life," suggesting that he was□as by implication we all are□destined to live meaningless lives. The similarity of feeling in a good many poems written by poets of Simpson's generation reveals the cultural unease many American poets of the period experienced and articulated. This unease ultimately served to transform American poetry formally, as a close look at the composition of "In the Suburbs" will reveal. In "In the Suburbs," Simpson moves from making a series of statements to a single image, while Wright moves "Lying in a Hammock" from a whole series of images to his famous last statement, "I have wasted my life." The movement or tension in Simpson's poem between the first stanza□which is very direct and plainspoken□and the second stanza□which is almost pure image□ reenacts the comparison that is being made between what the speaker feels he was "born" to do and what "others before" him did. By investigating the devices at work in this poem, we can uncover the way the poem's form mimics or gives birth to its meaning. Since Simpson moves away in *At the End of the Open Road* from the more traditional forms and meters he used in his earlier books to free verse, investigating the way "In the Suburbs" reveals what it says, by looking at how it says what it says, might be the best method of testing the vitality of Simpson's use of free verse or open (as opposed to fixed) form.

"In the Suburbs" is, first of all, a comparison. That is, its rhetorical stance is a comparison between the way the speaker lives (and feels he has no choice but to live) and the way people used to live. The use of the second person "you," which is the point of view of direct address, suggests that the speaker of the poem is addressing a specific person unknown to us, or, following the conventions of self-address, is speaking to himself. Although it is impossible to know for sure who the speaker in "In the Suburbs" is addressing, the mystery makes little difference to the poem's effect, since the immutability of the statements Simpson makes controls the poem's tone. That is, the emphatic nature of "There's no way out" and "You were born to this middle-class life" takes precedence over the issue of who's speaking to whom because it is so solidly closed to options: it does not matter if Simpson is addressing himself, the entire world, or a friend: by implication, it is clear that Simpson is suggesting in this poem that those "born to" the middle class have no way out. One of the poem's mysteries, though, is Simpson's use of the same phrase□"born to"□in the poem's second stanza. Since this phrase suggests that the people who came before present generations were also predestined to live the lives they lived, it's possible to read the second stanza as a statement much like the first: perhaps Simpson is suggesting that "others before" him were "born to waste" their lives, as well. Simpson's use of the word "procession" leans toward this meaning as it undercuts the sense of individual purpose that most Americans (and poets) value. Yet the way the poem opens up *formally* in its second stanza suggests a more positive reading of the poem. This opening or expansion toward the poem's closure is what the poem's form contributes to how the poem is read in this essay and reveals the famous inseparability of form and content.

The second stanza in "Suburbs" is partly achieved because the poem's first stanza is so plainspoken and unadorned. That is, the poem's first lines are so closed (rhetorically) that any change of pattern or mode in the second stanza would be pleasurable. Here again we see a comparison at work, but this time the comparison is not rhetorical but musical. That is, Simpson's use of line and linebreak contributes to the way the poem gradually opens up. The poem's first two lines are completely end-stopped□"There's no way out. / You were born to waste your life." That these two lines come to complete stops reinforces how emphatic Simpson's statements are. They enact the feeling of being trapped□of being born to something like waste. In comparison to these lines, the lines in the poem's second stanza are enjambed, or break at more unexpected places. The lines "As others before you / Were born to walk in procession / To the temple, singing" explain formally or *musically* the difference between life in the American suburbs and life in more spiritual times. The hesitation created by the end-stopped lines at the ending of the first two lines in the last stanza actually produce space, implying in this formal way the emotional differences between the feelings of entrapment expressed in the first stanza and the far more divine feeling of walking to a temple with others "singing" in the second.

It's also worth noting that the poem's onestanza break is not end-stopped. That is, the shift from end-stopped line to enjambed line begins at the end of the first stanza rather than at the beginning of the second. The use of the enjambed line in this section of the poem also contributes to the feeling of expansion in the second stanza. We might also notice that Simpson's use of syntax in this poem contributes to the feeling of expansion.

The poem's first two sentences are very short: the first is only four words long while the second is seven. The poem's last sentence is much longer, however□it's twenty-one words long. That gradual syntactical expansion of phrase also helps the poem spread out in its last three lines. The way the poem expands in its second stanza is also partly achieved because of the way Simpson has used the image. That is, Simpson's *imagerestraint* in his first stanza contributes to the differences he wishes to express between life in suburban America and life in simpler, more spiritual times. In his second stanza, Simpson is using the comparison, too: he *tells* readers what he wants them to *think* in his first stanza and *shows* them what he wants them to *feel* in his second. The sense of community in this image□the idea of a community of people who "were born to walk in procession / to the temple, singing"□produces pleasure partly because it's a shift from the imageless pattern established in Simpson's first stanza and partly because it actually acts out a kind of walking toward something. In comparison to the first stanza made up of ideas that are not even substantiated with examples, the second stanza produces the physical sense of movement with the word "walking" and of sound with the word "singing." The only comma in Simpson's poem shows up in his last line. This comma, or little halfstop, produces a break in the middle of the poem's last line and contributes to the feeling of joy in the last stanza because it suspends that final word□ "singing"□for a brief moment. That feeling of joy chimes at the end of the poem because it is so noticeably unlike the feeling produced in the poem's first stanza. But it also contributes to the poem's sense of closure, finalizing Simpson's argument in a way that is as musically unchallengeable as was the poem's use of rhetoric in its first stanza. And yet there is an undercurrent of irony in Simpson's poem in that he has even *expressed* his disappointment in American culture in this short poem. In *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry,* the American poet Edward Hirsche says:

The lyric poem is a highly concentrated and passionate form of communication between strangers□ an immediate, intense, and unsettling form of literary discourse. Reading poetry is a way of connecting□ through the medium of language□more deeply with yourself even as you connect more deeply with another. The major irony of Simpson's argument against middle-class suburban life is that there is this *poem* in the world□this statement on record of one poet's take on life in the suburbs of America, circa 1963. Thus, despite how solidly the poem expresses the feeling of hopelessness and entrapment, there is an odd feeling of hope seeping out of it, inspiring us to behave and believe as though we were born to infuse our lives with some kind of meaning and purpose.

Perhaps it's Simpson's use of free verse or open form that really lets this hope release, since by its various techniques of comparison it points ironically toward the alternative to waste, which is song.

Source: Adrian Blevins, Critical Essay on "In the Suburbs," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

Watershed Tapes released an audiocassette, titled *Physical Universe,* of Simpson reading his poems in 1985. Watershed Tapes are distributed by Inland Book Company, P. O. Box 120261, East Haven, CT 06512.

In 1983, New Letters on the Air released an audiocassette of Simpson reading his poems on National Public Radio. To obtain a copy of this tape, contact New Letters at the University of Missouri at Kansas City, 5100 Rockhill Rd., Kansas City, MO 64110.

Wonderland, released in 2001, is director John O'Hagan's documentary of Levittown, Long Island. The film explores the idea that 1950s suburban developments were part of the baby boomers' quest for middle-class bliss.

Topics for Further Study

Compare Simpson's poem to John Ciardi's poem "Suburban." How does Ciardi's poem support or contradict Simpson's assumptions about the suburbs?

Interview people in your neighborhood about how they perceive their own class status. Does their description of themselves match the way you perceive them? Why or why not?

Class in America is a contentious subject, with some people even claiming that America is a "classless" society. Make a list of the criteria you would use to determine a person's or a group's class. How widely do you believe other people share these same criteria?

Do you consider yourself a part of the middle class? Another class? On what do you base your inclusion?

Compare the caste system of India to the class system of America. What similarities and differences do you notice? What does this tell you about your own country?

Write an essay about how the suburbs are depicted in popular films. Consider the movies *Edward Scissorhands, Truman, Pleasantville,* and *Wonderland*.

Simpson's poem suggests that people are born into their class and that there is little hope of changing one's desires. Write an essay addressing the idea of history as a constraining force.

Compare and Contrast

1963: United States unemployment stands at 6.1 percent.

Today: A decade-long economic expansion lowers the United States unemployment rate to 4.1 percent.

1961: In the United States, 87.5 percent of all families are married couple families, and 10 percent are headed by females.

Today: Married couple families account for 79.2 percent of all families in the United States, and 16.5 percent of all families are headed by females.

1967: In his book *The Medium Is the Message,* writer Marshall McLuhan introduces the idea of the Global Village, claiming that advances in transportation and communication enable people to live as if time and space had vanished. People now communicate as if they lived in the same "village."

Today: The World Wide Web collapses time and space even further, enabling people simultaneous, ubiquitous and, for those in economically developed countries, inexpensive communication with others throughout the world.

What Do I Read Next?

Ships Going into the Blue: Essays and Notes on Poetry collects Simpson's own iconoclastic views on poetry, both his own and others. It was published in 1994 by the University of Michigan Press.

Story Line Press issued an anthology of critical essays on narrative poetry in 1991 titled *Poetry after Modernism,* which discusses, among other subjects, the "New Narrative." Simpson is often cited as a major voice of "New Narrative" poetry.

Jerome Klinkowitz's *The American 1960s: Imaginative Acts in a Decade of Change* (1980), makes intriguing connections between the political life of the country and the imaginative lives of artists during the 1960s.

In *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (1982), Herbert Gans offers a historical look at the original inhabitants of America's most celebrated suburban development.

Further Study

Baxandall, Rosalyn Fraad, and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened*, Basic Books, 2000.

The authors, academics who commute from Manhattan to Old Westbury, Long Island, explore the stereotypes of suburban life, concluding that it is not the cultural wasteland or place of privilege that others have often described.

Lensing, George S., and Ronald Moran, *Four Poets and the Emotive Imagination: Robert Bly, James Wright, Louis Simpson, and William Stafford,* Louisiana State University Press, 1976, 2000.

Moran and Lensing argue that these poets constitute a school of poetry in that their work is defined by what they call the "emotive imagination." Their poetry relies on associative leaps of logic and is linked to deep image poetry.

Simpson, Louis, *The King My Father's Wreck,* Story Line Press, 1995.

Simpson's memoir recounts the poet's childhood in Kingston, Jamaica, his expectations in coming to America, and the reality of living in the United States.

Stepanchev, Stephen, *American Poetry since 1945,* Harper, 1965.

Stepanchev's literary history is a highly readable account of the aesthetic and ideological movements in American poetry after World War II.

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Stitt, Peter, *The World's Hieroglyphic Beauty: Five American Poets,* University of Georgia Press, 1985.

Wright, James, *Above the River: The Complete Poems,* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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