Kindness Study Guide

Kindness by Naomi Shihab Nye

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Naomi Shihab Nye's poem □Kindness□ appears in her first collection of poems, *Different Ways to Pray*, published in 1980. The tone, themes, and ideas presented in this inaugural volume establish Nye's core message as a poet and as a human being: All of humanity is worthy of respect, deserving of consideration, and in need of kindness. □Kindness□ is reprinted in Nye's 1995 collection *Words under the Words*, which compiles selections from her first three books: *Different Ways to Pray*, *Hugging the Jukebox* (1982), and *Yellow Glove* (1986).

The poet's many travels have taken her to some of the world's most prosperous countries and thriving cities as well as to some of the harshest and poorest lands, where violence, hunger, and injustice are common. One such place is Colombia, a country in northwestern South America. In Colombia, the natural beauty of a lush landscape with mountains and rivers is sometimes overshadowed by the ugliness of social oppression, government corruption, drug trafficking, and violent crime. Somewhere within this ironic blend of nature's magnificence and society's decadence, Nye finds a reason to believe in the power of simple acts of kindness. This belief is the inspiration for her poem of the same name, which signs off with the single word □*Colombia*□ below the work's final line. In the original version in *Different Ways to Pray*, the poem ends with □(Colombia, 1978).□

Despite its attention to loss and desolation, □Kindness□ is a positive poem with an optimistic ending. It acknowledges the unavoidable presence of sorrow in human life but points out that one must understand and accept the bad in order to appreciate and achieve the good. The speaker's perspective is based on both personal observation and philosophical musing.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1952

Naomi Shihab Nye was born on March 12, 1952, in St. Louis, Missouri. Her father, Aziz Shihab, was a Palestinian and her mother, Miriam Naomi Allwardt, an American. Nye's upbringing in a household of differing cultures and heritages influenced not only her subsequent writing career but also her entire outlook on life. Nye became interested in reading and writing poetry at a very young age, publishing her first poems in a children's magazine at age seven. Years later, her family moved to Jerusalem, where she attended her first year of high school. More important, Nye experienced her first real connection to the homeland of her father and his Arab heritage. The Shihab family returned to the United States in 1967, settling in San Antonio, Texas.

Nye received her bachelor's degree in English and world religions from Trinity University in 1974, and in 1975, she became a poet in the schools for the Texas Arts Commission. She then held positions as a visiting writer and lecturer at various universities and worked as a freelance writer and editor. Throughout this time, Nye continued to write poetry, both for adults and for young readers. Her first full-length collection, *Different Ways to Pray*, in which □Kindness□ first appeared, was published in 1980. Nye's collection of poetry titled *You and Yours* was published in 2005. Her two volumes for young readers, *Is This Forever, or What? Poems and Paintings from Texas* and *A Maze Me: Poems for Girls* were published in 2004 and 2005, respectively.

Nye traveled extensively, and much of the inspiration for her creative work is drawn from times she spent in the Middle East, Central and South America, and the Native American and Mexican regions of the southwestern United States. The strongest influence on Nye's writing is the wonder, beauty, and honor she recognizes in different cultures and different ethnic environments. Her poem □Kindness□ is a testament to Nye's reverence for humanity, and it is representative of the themes for which Nye has become a notable contemporary American writer.

Nye received numerous awards and honors for her publications, among them, four Pushcart Prizes, the Peter I. B. Lavan Younger Poets Award from the Academy of American Poets, a Witter Bynner fellowship from the U.S. Library of Congress, and several awards for her work in children's poetry and literature, including a 2002 National Book Award finalist nomination in the young people's literature category for *Nineteen Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*. As of 2005, Nye was living in San Antonio with her husband, the photographer Michael Nye.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2

The first two lines of □Kindness□ establish a premise that runs throughout the poem: Before a person knows one thing, he or she must know something else. (The □you□ in this work refers simply to the universal □you,□ or people in general, not to a specific person.) In this case, the real meaning of kindness, which seems easy to understand, is shown to be more complex than one may realize. The speaker suggests, ironically, that to □know what kindness really is,□ first □you must lose things.□

Lines 3-4

Instead of explaining what the opening lines mean right away, the speaker relies on an intriguing metaphor to make the point. (A metaphor is a figure of speech that compares an intended concept or thing to something unrelated as a way to clarify the original intention.) The speaker wants to describe how the future can □dissolve in a moment,□ so she compares it to □salt□ dissolving □in a weakened broth.□ The notion of losing all of one's tomorrows is a frightening prospect, and likening it to something as easy as salt blending into soup makes it all the more chilling. The first thing □you must lose□ to know true kindness, then, is a hefty loss indeed.

Lines 5-9

Lines 5 through 9 provide further examples of what one must lose to know kindness. □What you held in your hand□ may be an infinite number of items, but the implication is that it is something significant enough and dear enough that someone would want to hold it close. The subject of line 6 is clearer. □What you counted and carefully saved□ refers to money, a vital commodity in most people's lives. Even these precious items □must go□ before one can comprehend □how desolate the landscape can be / between the regions of kindness.□ In other words, one must give up the good things in life to understand how bad and how barren living can be during times of hardship and sorrow.

Lines 10-13

Line 10 connects directly to line 8, beginning with □How□ and developing the idea that only total loss can remove the blinders that many people wear when it comes to seeing reality as it is. The bus rider is guilty of ignoring the suffering and injustice that others endure by □thinking the bus will never stop□ and believing that the other passengers will continue their pleasant and endless journey while □eating maize and chicken□ and gazing benignly □out the window forever.□ The word □maize□ insinuates that the other bus riders are natives of the land, because it is a word for corn derived from an extinct

Latin American language and translated by the Spanish. Maize is sometimes referred to as □Indian corn.□

Lines 14-16

Throughout the first three stanzas, lines 1 to 13, examples of the opposite side of kindness grow more serious and more depressing: from the future as dissolving salt, losing something once held dear, and forfeiting a life's savings to the lonely, haunting death of an unknown Indian who □lies dead by the side of the road,□ seemingly of no concern to those who pass by. The phrase □tender gravity□ implies the fickle and fragile nature of kindness, and it is this deepest level that one needs to reach to understand kindness. The word □tender□ also is a startling opposite of the senseless inhumanity in letting the dead lie in the street without the benefit or respect of proper treatment.

Lines 17-20

Lines 17 through 20 are perhaps the most poignant in the poem. They make a remarkably strong human-to-human connection between the forgotten dead Indian and every person who passes by□the □you□ in general. The vital message is that what happens to the Indian can happen to anyone in the world. The words □this could be you□ bring the poem's message down to the gut level: Regardless of one's ethnicity or race, economic status, nationality, educational level, or any other defining characteristic, human beings are all □someone . . . with plans / and the simple breath□ that keeps them alive. This theme not only is pertinent in □Kindness□ but also permeates much of Nye's work. Its reflection on her personal life as an Arab American is both unmistakable and intended.

Lines 21-22

In direct and precise language, lines 21 and 22 highlight the opposing poles of kindness and sorrow. They begin the third consecutive stanza that begins □Before you,□ but this stanza ties together the concrete images of the beginning of the poem□salt, broth, bus riders, maize, chicken, Indian, and white poncho□with more contemplative, philosophical aspects. Kindness and sorrow are parallel. Before one can □know kindness as the deepest thing inside,□ he or she must know that it has a real and formidable opposite: Sorrow is the □other deepest thing.□

Lines 23-26

Lines 23 through 26 demonstrate how important it is to realize true sorrow before being able to understand true kindness. To say that one □must wake up with sorrow□ implies how deep the feeling should be ingrained in a human being before he or she can appreciate the beauty of having sorrow lifted through kindness. In lines 24 through 26,

Nye again relies on metaphor to convey the actual depth of sorrow's impact. The message is that everyday talk must be full of sorrow until "your voice / catches the thread of all sorrows," "thread" implying something connecting and growing. When one sees "the size of the cloth" that sorrow becomes, one knows how large a part it plays in the overall fabric of human life.

Lines 27-29

Lines 27 through 29, which begin the fourth and final stanza of "Kindness," mark a turning point in the tone and ultimate message of the poem. After all the examples of how bad ignorance, desolation, and sorrow can be, it is finally "only kindness that makes sense anymore." Kindness is tied to the simple, everyday things that the average human being can relate to: tying shoestrings, mailing letters, buying bread. The common occurrences listed may be misleading in their apparent simplicity. The actual message is that all of everyday life revolves around how people are treated on a regular basis. Sometimes the smaller things a person experiences, such as daily chores, are made possible only by the knowledge that somewhere out there someone else was kind to him or her that day.

Lines 30-32

In lines 30 through 32, Nye uses personification—the technique of bringing a concept or nonhuman thing to life by attributing to it a human form, human characteristics, or human behavior—to describe the relationship between kindness and the "you" in the poem. Kindness "raises its head / from the crowd of the world," implying its uniqueness in an otherwise cold and mean environment. Nye then gives kindness a strong and undeniable existence in human life: "It is *I* [emphasis added] you have been looking for." This line leaves no question about the importance of kindness in people's lives. Kindness purports itself to be the very thing that human beings are seeking.

Lines 33-34

The final two lines of the poem leave the reader with a positive thought, personifying kindness as a welcomed being in anyone's life. Kindness "goes with you everywhere," like a willing partner who aims only to please. At times it may be "like a shadow," something that follows a person around even when he or she is alone. At other times, kindness may be like "a friend," someone who has the person's best interests in mind. Regardless of its role at any given moment, kindness is conveyed as the perfect companion.

The poem does not actually end with line 34. One more word is added to give it a more specific identity: "*Colombia*." Even so, identifying a country in which "Kindness" was written or that inspired it does not dilute the relevance of the poem to any nation in the world.

Themes

Human Kindness

The most obvious theme in this poem is revealed in its title: Kindness is one of the most cherished and hard-to-come-by values of the human race. As the work ultimately claims, kindness is the only thing □that makes sense anymore.□ This conclusion is drawn from Nye's assessment of the negative observations she has made and her firm belief that good can triumph over bad.

□Kindness□ is, essentially, a poem that speaks for itself. It is not mysterious or difficult to understand, and it uses simple, straightforward language to make its points clear. The central theme, however, is played out carefully in a series of both philosophical and graphic examples. For instance, Nye theoretically writes about feeling the □future dissolve□ and about the □desolate . . . landscape . . . between the regions of kindness,□ but she also very specifically details bus riders □eating maize and chicken□ and □the Indian in a white poncho□ who □lies dead by the side of the road.□ This juxtaposition of theory and reality does not hinder the message of the poem but actually enhances its credibility in defining human kindness.

The very nature of kindness as a desirable yet sometimes elusive trait gives it a broad range of interpretations, especially when one is trying to pin it down to a certain definition. In philosophical terms, there may be a □tender gravity of kindness,□ or kindness may be the □deepest thing inside.□ In more direct terms, however, it may be the thing that □ties your shoes / and sends you out in the day to mail letters and purchase bread.□ This abrupt shift between the meditative and the practical demonstrates the multiple values of human kindness.

It is no secret that one of Nye's most critical concerns□in both her writing and her life in general□is to promote compassion and fairness throughout the various populations of the world. □Kindness□ unmistakably advocates for deeper human sympathy among citizens of various countries, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or even placement within a local community. The unfortunate Indian depicted in the poem may well have died among his own people within his own town or village, but he is still unjustly ignored, as though his body is a foreign object that no one wants to acknowledge. Only kindness, the poem suggests, can prevent such wretched treatment of a fellow human being.

Balancing Opposites

A second theme in □Kindness□ may not be as obvious as the first, but it is just as powerful. To grasp the full meaning and benefit of kindness, human beings must first comprehend its opposite: losing things. In doing so, one can find the delicate balance

between what is truly good and what is truly bad. This idea is introduced in the first two lines, but only the subsequent specific examples bring it into clear focus.

What the "you" riding the bus must lose is the notion that the other riders will keep enjoying their maize and chicken endlessly instead of eventually reaching their less-than-desirable destinations in dilapidated homes or violent communities. What the more general "you" must learn is that no matter how pleasant or "tender" one's own life may be, somewhere in the world a forgotten soul "lies dead by the side of the road" and that he could just as easily "be you," if circumstances were only a bit different. This message is perhaps the strongest one in the poem regarding opposites: There is a very thin line between the haves and the have-nots. The former could quickly become the latter if events were to unfold a different way.

"Kindness" suggests that balancing opposites is more beneficial than simply choosing one thing and trying to squash the other. A person who decides to see only the good things in life and to ignore the bad is living with blinders on, and the real meaning of "good" is lost in a world of illusion and make-believe. On the other hand, if one accepts that bad and sorrowful aspects of life can carry as much weight as the wonderful, happy events, then the positive moments are all the more appreciated because of the very real possibility of the negative.

Style

The free-verse style of poetry began in the late nineteenth century with a group of French poets, including Arthur Rimbaud and Jules Laforgue, who balked at the long-held system of composing verse according to strict patterns of rhyme and meter. Their vers libre, or free verse, movement relaxed all □poetic□ restrictions and allowed poets to use more natural language and voice to express common human concerns. Contemporary free verse simply takes the original free verse a step closer to even more relaxed language and voice as well as an anything-goes attitude about subjects and themes. In short, contemporary free-verse poets use direct, everyday language to address matters that affect them, regardless of how controversial the topics may be. The concentration is more on subject than on style.

Nye uses no rhyme scheme or specific meter in □Kindness,□ but she creates her own pattern of language within the work to give it a subtle rhythm. There are four stanzas of varying lengths, but the first three (lines 1 through 13, 14 through 20, and 21 through 26) begin with similar or matching words: □Before you know,□ □Before you learn,□ and □Before you know□ again. Each opening line follows with the overall message about kindness: Before one understands what kindness is, one must understand what it is not. Although each stanza takes a different turn in how it supports the overall themes, Nye makes general but strong use of metaphor in all of them. From the □desolate . . . landscape . . . between the regions of kindness□ through □tender gravity□ to the □thread of all sorrows□ that makes up the total □size of the cloth,□ each comparison provides an interesting and revealing definition of both kindness and its opposite.

The fourth stanza, lines 27 through 34, does not begin with the same words as the first three stanzas, but it is full of metaphor, more so than the others. Kindness is described in terms of personification, or attribution of human characteristics to inanimate objects or concepts. In this case, kindness □ties your shoes / and sends you out into the day,□ as a loving parent may do for a child. Kindness also has a □head□ to raise above the □crowd of the world□ and to speak directly to □you□: □It is I you have been looking for.□ Kindness is *like* a human being, and its characteristics are so vital to the poet that it actually *becomes* a human being.

Historical Context

Political Turmoil in Colombia

Only by the brief identifier at the end of □Kindness□ in *Different Ways to Pray* can one attribute a specific time and place to both the setting and the inspiration of the poem. □(Colombia, 1978)□ implies that this work resulted from one of the poet's many travels, in this case to South America. It is interesting that the date is omitted in the version of □Kindness□ that appears in the later collection *Words under the Words*. This omission may simply be a matter of preference or change in editorial style, but it may also suggest that the message in the poem is timeless.

Despite the fact that Colombia has had three military takeovers and two civil wars in its history, the country has a long and enduring democratic tradition, marred sporadically by violent and effective insurgencies. During the mid-twentieth century, the second civil war cost nearly 300,000 lives and was resolved in the late 1950s with the formation of the National Front. This resolution called for a compromise between the warring conservative and liberal factions, the position of president rotating every four years between the two parties. The agreement allowed Colombia to prosper economically with increased exportation of goods such as coffee, oil, minerals, and fruit.

During the 1970s, Colombia suffered setbacks both politically and economically when a campaign of terrorism began. Various rebel groups attacked military leaders, government officials, and innocent civilians. Many outlaw groups became involved in drug trafficking and eventually made Colombia one of the world's major suppliers of cocaine. Since at least 1978, the main focus of the besieged government has been to defeat terrorist guerillas, drug lords, and reportedly Cuban-backed revolts. Both liberal and conservative leaders have shared the burden of ridding their country of violent insurgents who have weakened Colombia's overall economic and political stability. A once flourishing tourist trade has dwindled dramatically over the years, although some people, such as Nye, are willing to risk the dangers in order to experience the underlying beauty of both the land and its people.

Social Inequality in Colombia

A strict sense of class structure has existed in Colombia for centuries. The original racial groups that helped form the country□Indians, blacks, and whites□eventually melded into a mixture of these groups, adhering to a class system that dates to the one created by Spanish colonizers centuries ago.

The Spanish settlers found the native Colombian people relatively easy to conquer and take advantage of because the indigenous population was widely scattered and not united by a sense of community or shared destiny. As a result, the Indians and the black slaves brought by the Spaniards were readily cast as the lowest rung on the social

ladder. Between a top and a bottom, however, there is always a middle rung, and Colombia's society eventually divided into four distinct classes that could easily be labeled by the late 1970s and early 1980s. The classes are labeled upper, middle, lower, and the masses.

White professionals dominate the upper class and traditionally hold the highest government positions as well as top careers in law, medicine, architecture, and university teaching. The middle class is made up largely of self-employed shopkeepers, clerks, and managers. These families are able to find adequate housing, food, medical attention, and a decent education for their children. The lower class typically consists of domestic servants, unskilled workers, taxi drivers, and various repair service people. Often, these families go without sufficient means to meet their housing, nutritional, medical, and educational needs.

The class distinctions in Colombia are similar to those in many other countries, and the lowest level suffers as greatly as that anywhere. In Colombia, impoverished Indians and blacks make up the □masses,□ and they, along with the lower class, constitute the majority of the population of the country. Even so, there is still a distinct class divide between the lower class and the masses. Whereas members of the lower class typically hold jobs and have an increasing level of political and social awareness, the masses usually live on the fringes of society, are largely illiterate, and lack job skills and employment. Their illness and death rates are high because they lack adequate nutrition and medical attention.

Because cocaine trafficking became a dominant industry for Colombia's illegal factions in the 1970s, it has also become a deadly yet attractive source of income for many of the country's poorest people. Members of the masses who resort to cultivating coca plants are often murdered by guerrilla groups if the planters refuse to sell to the group or if they sell to a rival gang vying for drug profits. As disturbing as they are, these facts may well account for the plight of the Indian in a white poncho, whose sorrowful death is apparently just as negligible as his life has been.

Critical Overview

Nye's work has been highly critically acclaimed from the time her poems started to appear in print. Critics praise Nye's poetry, children's literature, and essays for their pertinent social and humanistic messages and the effectiveness of the direct, unadorned language with which Nye conveys them. Although her style is straightforward and her themes readily understood, Nye is not considered a simple or unsophisticated writer. The opposite is true: Her talent lies in presenting profound and complex human emotion and behavior in a refreshingly uncomplicated manner.

In an article for *American Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide from Colonial Times to the Present*, the reviewer Daria Donnelly notes that □*Different Ways to Pray* attends to human landscapes□ and that □Nye's attention to the simple acts of human communion wherever and however they occur springs from a generosity and acuity forged by a sense of her own multifaceted identity.□ A poem such as □Kindness□ certainly supports Donnelly's assertion, and its reappearance in the later collection attests to its continuing relevance.

In a review of *Words under the Words* for *Western American Literature*, Bert Almon claims that □Nye is one of the best poets of her generation□ and that she is □always vigilant: the rhythms are sharp, the eye is keen. She excels at the unexpected and brilliant detail that underwrites the poetic vision.□ Almon goes on to say that □the title of her collection, *Words under the Words*, expresses a confidence in ultimate meaningfulness of our descriptions of reality. If we listen, we can hear the inner meaning.□ These comments are typical. As much as Nye continues to focus an ear on the pain, sorrow, kindness, and joy of humanity, her readers focus on what she hears.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Pamela Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, she discusses how "Kindness" is one of the most apt examples of Nye's works because it adheres to a core principle of both the poet's writing and her daily life: The "words under the words" are of utmost importance.

When a poem from a first collection is chosen to appear in the poet's later volume of selected works, the implication is that the poem is worthy of an encore appearance. "Kindness" is one such poem. When another work from the first collection not only makes a second appearance in the selected works but also shares its title with that of the entire book, this poem must carry thematic significance or divulge some idea of the author's overall message. "The Words under the Words" is that kind of poem.

Nye is completely forthcoming about her vision of how the world should be and how human beings should treat one another. A deep concern for humanity lies at the base of nearly all she writes and all she does. She also knows, however, that not every vision or every hope or every human experience is always plainspoken and accessible. Sometimes one must pay keen attention to seemingly insignificant occurrences or conversations in order to discover and learn from the importance that lies beneath. This is the case for everyone"not just poets and other writers"as Nye points out in an interesting story about a man she met on a bus on September 11, 2001.

In an interview with Angela Elam for *New Letters*, Nye talks about her long bus ride home after the terror attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., had closed airports across the nation. Her seatmate was a man who had been released from prison that day and who knew nothing of the attacks. The man spoke mostly to himself but occasionally commented to Nye that he did not remember buses being so crowded. Elam's response to this story is to say, "What a wonderful thing to have happen to a writer. That's almost something you couldn't even invent." Nye's reply sets the interviewer straight: "I think they happen to everybody; writers are just in the habit of listening to them in a certain way or believing there's something to hear, to pay attention to." In other words, writers look for what is not visible on the outside and listen to what is said in silence: the words *under* the words.

"Kindness" is full of these kinds of words, and its premise is based on discovering one thing by examining another. This fundamental, philosophical idea is inspired in part by Nye's beloved Arab grandmother, Sitti Khadra, who lived to be 106 years old. This woman has great influence on the poet's life, even though the two spent little time together because the grandmother lived on the opposite side of the world. The poem "The Words under the Words" bears the dedication "for Sitti Khadra, north of Jerusalem" and is a reflection of the grandmother's life in Palestine and the wisdom she imparted to the poet. Sitti Khadra, however, was probably unaware of her tremendous influence on her Americanized granddaughter.

In □The Words under the Words,□ Nye attributes the notion of listening for hidden messages to the teachings of her grandmother. The following lines acknowledge human inadequacies when it comes to true understanding: □She knows the spaces we travel through, / the messages we cannot send□our voices are short / and would get lost on the journey.□ The final lines of the poem quote the grandmother directly: □'Answer, if you hear the words under the words□/ otherwise it is just a world with a lot of rough edges, / difficult to get through, and our pockets full of stones.'□

In □Kindness,□ the world is definitely full of rough edges□so rough that a man can lie dead by the side of the road without anyone bothering to cover his body, much less give it a proper burial. It is a world where people ride buses to and from their squalid homes, eating their simple meals along the way. It is a world where the future can □dissolve in a moment□ and where the landscape □between the regions of kindness□ is bleak and barren. It is also a world where the good and the kind are matched equally by the bad and the mean-spirited. This world is the one Nye finds in her travels to Colombia, but on a deeper level it is a world that spans the globe.

Although the message in □Kindness□ is obvious, its language is compelling, if not complex. Nye forces the reader to look beneath the surface of the words to find a more profound meaning of kindness than one may have ever considered. The idea that human beings should be kind to one another is simple enough, but the poet makes the point by encouraging readers to take a look at what kindness is *not*, to reach a better understanding of it by concentrating on its opposite.

In the first stanza of the poem, lines 1 through 13, a deep sense of loss is the opposite of kindness. From money to the future itself, one must experience losing things in order to □know what kindness really is.□ This approach provides a much more interesting perspective than simply trying to define kindness in typical terms. For instance, one may say that volunteering in the community, making donations to charities, and mowing the lawn for an elderly neighbor are all acts of kindness, and arguably everyone would agree. When people are challenged to think about all of their tomorrows fading away □like salt in a weakened broth,□ however, the notion of such tragedy makes the thought of kindness all the more vital. Most human beings can understand how wonderful it is to have something good happen□no matter how small□when times are otherwise difficult to handle.

Later in the poem, it is profound sorrow that is the opposite of kindness. From the concrete physical description of the Indian's body along the roadside to the more metaphoric treatment of sorrow in the third stanza, lines 21 through 26, the message again is that kindness is more explicitly defined in terms of what is not normally associated with it. Sadness and desolation can darken the human spirit as much as kindness can brighten it. It is fitting, then, to consider how low one may go in order to appreciate how high one can rebound. In this stanza, Nye suggests that people need to make sorrow a part of their daily routines so that they can grasp its full presence. □You must wake up with sorrow□ implies the depth that grief and anguish must reach inside the human being in order for one to take kindness to the same depth. When both the

good and the bad are capable of going the same distance, it is up to the individual to decide which will exert the greatest influence over his or her life.

In the last stanza of □Kindness,□ lines 27 through 34, Nye makes heavy use of personification to explain the importance of kindness in human life. She also uses it to stress the need for finding the words under the words□those that may go unnoticed if one pays attention only to what is spoken instead of what is not spoken. If kindness is the thing that □ties your shoes / and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,□ what are these words really saying about the role of goodness in everyday human life? More important, where would humanity be if charity and compassion were largely nonexistent? Certainly, the idea in the poem is that the role of goodness lies at the very base of all people do, including the simple tasks of daily living.

Nye claims that her grandmother, Sitti Khadra, acknowledged □the spaces we travel through□ and □the messages we cannot send.□ But the elderly woman also understood that if the human race is content to let such negative impulses guide human behavior, then the world's population is doomed □with a lot of rough edges□ and □our pockets full of stones.□ The better solution, she suggests, is to □Answer, if you hear the words under the words.□ *Answering* is precisely what Nye tries to do with the poem □Kindness.□

The major theme of □Kindness□ is obvious, but the fact that the message is made more subtle by the enticement to look deeper into it suggests that the overall idea is more complex than it appears. Nye's dedication to humanistic affairs is well known. Her ability to relay that sentiment in such an intriguing manner speaks not only to her abilities as a poet but also to her unwavering commitment to humanity in general.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on □Kindness,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Anna Maria Hong has published poems in numerous journals and is the editor of the fiction and memoir anthology Growing Up Asian American *(1993). In the following essay, she discusses how Nye uses metaphor and personification to define what kindness is and how it is achieved.*

Nye's □Kindness□ is a philosophical poem that defines kindness as a way of living life. In the poem, Nye proposes that rather than being a random and discrete act, kindness is a mode of being arrived at through a series of basic human experiences. The poet argues that kindness is also the inevitable conclusion of feeling one's life deeply, as she elucidates three essential steps to achieving kindness. Throughout the poem, Nye uses metaphor and personification to emphasize her ideas.

Nye begins each of the first three stanzas with similar phrases, each stating that one must know or learn something before knowing what kindness is. In the first stanza, the speaker proposes loss as a prerequisite to understanding what kindness is. The poem opens with the speaker saying, □Before you know what kindness really is / you must lose things, / feel the future dissolve in a moment / like salt in a weakened broth.□ In these lines, Nye suggests that a sense of great loss is necessary to knowing what kindness is. The simile □like salt in a weakened broth□ powerfully conveys a sense of sudden and final dissipation. The speaker follows this line by adding that one must lose everything in order to understand how bleak life is in the absence of kindness. The speaker notes that one should lose those things that one took precautions to save.

In line 9 of this opening stanza, the speaker defines kindness as a kind of place, as she refers to □regions of kindness.□ She concludes the stanza by comparing the feeling of loss without kindness to riding a bus that you think will never stop, as you believe □the passengers eating maize and chicken / will stare out the window forever.□ This metaphor underscores the sense of helplessness and isolation that accompanies loss, with the words □maize and chicken□ conveying the sense of riding a bus in a foreign country. The feeling of being different in a strange land is compounded by the fact that people going about their daily business do not pay attention to one another but instead look out the window. In this opening stanza, Nye establishes the idea that a sense of intense loss without relief is the first step toward kindness.

In the next stanza, Nye asserts that empathy is the second prerequisite to knowing kindness. In lines 14 to 16, she continues the bus metaphor, as the speaker states, □Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, / you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho / lies dead by the side of the road.□ By describing it as □tender gravity,□ the poet introduces the idea of kindness as a powerfully attractive force. She also casts kindness once again as a place that one travels toward, as on a journey in an unfamiliar land.

Following her description of the stark, somewhat transcendent image of the dead Indian in a white poncho, the speaker says that the reader must see how that person could be

him or her and how the Indian was once also a person □who journeyed through the night with plans / and the simple breath that kept him alive.□ In these lines, Nye suggests that one must feel empathy in order to feel kindness. Since the Indian in the white poncho is an iconic figure, presumably different from most readers of the poem, the poet also implies that one must learn to be empathetic to all people, no matter how distant they seem from oneself. In particular, she proposes that one must understand that death comes to all of us and that the knowledge of one's own death is also a prerequisite to achieving kindness. She suggests that this knowledge paves the way to recognizing others as fellow travelers in life.

The experiences of loss, empathy, and recognition of death as a universal experience are connected with the final prerequisite to embracing kindness, sorrow, which is the subject of the third stanza. In lines 21 to 22, the speaker invokes the opening refrain of each stanza by saying, □Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, / you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.□ Here, Nye asserts that sorrow or an intense sadness is the deepest or most basic part of human experience. Since sorrow follows loss and empathy with another's death, the poet suggests that sorrow comes from experiencing loss in a deep and profound way.

The speaker goes on to personify sorrow as someone who must be lived with every day and spoken to until □your voice / catches the thread of all sorrows / and you see the size of the cloth.□ In these hopeful lines, Nye implies that by really grappling with sorrow, by experiencing one's sense of loss and sadness fully, one can break through and feel how universal suffering is. One can see that one's own sorrow is part of a larger scheme, whose size is all-encompassing. By personifying sorrow and using everyday images such as thread and cloth, Nye also suggests that sorrow is not an aberration but a part of normal daily life.

In the fourth and final stanza, Nye concludes the poem by casting kindness as the inevitable outcome of the experiences of loss, empathy, and sorrow. In line 27, the speaker says that after living through these things, □Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore.□ In the previous stanza, Nye intertwined kindness with sorrow by positing both as the deepest human emotions, the things that remain inside in the wake of loss and death. Here, she asserts that after recognizing the inevitability of one's own death and the universality of sorrow, one will logically conclude that kindness is the only mode of being that makes life bearable.

Here again, she personifies kindness, this time as a force that animates people to go about their daily tasks, as kindness □raises its head / from the crowd of the world to say / It is I you have been looking for, / and then goes with you everywhere / like a shadow or a friend.□ In personifying kindness, Nye describes it as a type of salvation and emphasizes kindness as a crucial aspect of humanity. Rather than describing a simple act with no motives, she portrays kindness as the ultimate companion against loneliness, a way of being that abates the sense of helplessness and desolation we would otherwise feel. She argues that by embracing kindness, and only by embracing it, we are never alone.

Although the poet never spells out what kindness is, she suggests that it is a mixture of all the things she illuminates in the course of the poem: the recognition of personal loss, the inevitability of one's death, and the magnitude of sorrow that results in empathy. She defines kindness not as selfless act but rather as a rational mode of living, as only generosity and gentleness toward others can provide a sense of solace in our solitary journeys through life.

Source: Anna Maria Hong, Critical Essay on □Kindness,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

In 1995, Nye appeared on *The Language of Life with Bill Moyers*, an eight-part series on PBS featuring interviews with poets. The interviews are available on a single audiocassette from Random House Audio.

Topics for Further Study

□Kindness□ relies on a specific setting to give credence to its poignant message. Rewrite this poem basing it on your own community. Give descriptions that make the poem sound as though it is meant for your particular time and place. Emphasize the details that are crucial to your environment and that ultimately suggest the need for kindness.

Nye bases many of her poems and essays on the places to which she has traveled, both near and far away from her home in Texas. Make a class presentation on a place you have visited and talk about its differences from your own environment. Do you find it easy or difficult to speak objectively about the environment of the place you visited? Explain to the class why you find it one way or the other.

As a person of both American and Arab descent, Nye faces a particularly difficult task in blending reverence for the two cultures into her work and into her life in general, especially after September 11, 2001. Write an essay about a similar experience you have had in dealing with cultural differences and prejudices, either your own or those of an acquaintance.

If you were running for an important political office in Colombia, what would you concentrate on in your speeches to the Colombian people? Research the history of this nation and then present a campaign speech on important national matters. Consider points such as how Colombia has become known as one of the illegal drug capitals of the world as well as one of the countries most terrorized by insurgent groups. Why has this predominantly democratic country fallen prey to these groups over and over again? What will you do to help end the cycle?

Have you ever known of a person whose death seemed to affect no one? Write an essay on what that person's circumstances were or may have been, why he or she seemed discarded in the end, and how your own life may have been affected by this somber yet ignored passing.

Compare and Contrast

1970s: Colombia becomes one of the international centers for illegal drug production and trafficking. Drug cartels virtually control the country, which provides 75 percent of the world's cocaine.

Today: The United States invests $3 billion into □Plan Colombia,□ a joint U.S.-Colombia coca antinarcotics plan, which started in 2000. Officials claim that as of 2005 the program has eradicated more than a million acres of coca plants, but Colombian drug traffickers still manage to supply 90 percent of the cocaine used in the United States□the same percentage supplied when the program began.

1970s: Marxist guerrilla groups organize against the Colombian government, most notably, the May 19th Movement, the National Liberation Army, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. They plunge the country into violence and instability.

Today: The United Nations declares that Colombia is suffering the worst humanitarian crisis in the Western Hemisphere. More than two million people have been forced to leave their homes, and several Indian tribes are close to extinction. Colombia now has the third-largest displaced population in the world because of guerrilla violence and the fear its population endures on a daily basis.

1970s: Andean Indians such as the Guambianos weave their own clothes, grow their own food, and glean a meager income from tourists, who are eventually driven away by guerrilla and paramilitary forces waging regular shoot-outs in the region. Eventually, the Indians resort to growing poppies for the illegal cocaine industry in order to make a living.

Today: Colombian president Alvaro Uribe promises the Guambianos that the government is taking a tough approach in combating guerrillas, paramilitaries, and drug traffickers and that the Indians will be paid well to destroy their poppy plants and return to legitimate farming. So far, unkept promises have resulted in the indigenous people's disillusionment in the government and, for some, a return to growing poppies for the drug lords who they know will pay for the effort.

What Do I Read Next?

Nye's work as an editor demonstrates the same tireless dedication to promoting tolerance and humanity throughout the world as her own writing does. *This Same Sky* (1992) is a collection of the poems of 129 poets from sixty-eight countries with an overall theme of how much human beings have in common, regardless of different physical environments, ethnicities, and religions.

Edited by Nathalie Handal, *The Poetry of Arab Women* (2001) is a collection of the work of more than eighty women poets translated from the original Arabic, French, English, and other languages. From work by Nye to that of relatively unknown American graduate students, this volume presents a number of views that share a common voice.

Arabs in America: Building a New Future (1999) is Michael Suleiman's collection of twenty-one scholars' writings on the status of Arab Americans in North America. Suleiman's overall contention is that this ethnic group is largely ignored, except when words like □terrorism□ and □extremism□ come up, yet Arab Americans have contributed to Western culture for centuries. The writers work in a variety of fields, including anthropology, economics, history, law, literature, political science, and sociology.

Indian Givers: How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World (1989), by Jack Weatherford, is a thought-provoking and easily read account of the many □gifts□ that native peoples of all the Americas have given to the entire world. From gold and silver works, agricultural techniques, and medicine to economics and the concept of personal freedom, the contributions of Indians from North, South, Central, and Latin America are crucial to the development of cultures and governments worldwide.

Further Study

Bushnell, David, *The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself*, University of California Press, 1993.

Bushnell contends that there is much more to Colombia than the drug trafficking, kidnappings, and terrorism that have dominated the news about the country over the past few decades. While acknowledging the prolific cocaine trade, violence, and unjust class system, Bushnell highlights a steady economic growth, a democratic government, and Colombia's artists and writers.

McBryde, John, Elaine Smokewood, and Harbour Winn, □Honoring Each Moment: An Interview with Naomi Shihab Nye,□ in *Humanities Interview*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Winter 2004, pp. 1, 14-17.

In this lengthy interview, Nye focuses on the important role that poetry plays in her everyday life. As the title suggests, she contends that poetry has the ability to slow down people's daily lives if they will take the time to read a little and to pay attention to and □honor□ each moment as it comes.

Nye, Naomi Shihab, *Never in a Hurry*, University of South Carolina Press, 1996.

This collection of autobiographical essays provides a solid look at Nye's perspective on her childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. From her Arab American heritage through living in Jerusalem as a teenager to settling in Texas as a wife, mother, and poet, these writings offer many interesting insights on the author.

□□□, *Yellow Glove*, Breitenbush Publications, 1986.

Several of the poems from this volume are included in *Words under the Words*, and the overall theme of the work is closely tied to that of the later collection. Nye contemplates the tragedy of a world in which people hate one another without even knowing one another. She addresses the Palestinian-Israeli conflict specifically in some of the poems, calling for peace, kindness, and humanity in very inhumane times and places.

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□□□, □Kindness,□ in *Words under the Words: Selected Poems*, Eighth Mountain Press, 1995, pp. 42-43.

□□□, □The Words under the Words,□ in *Words under the Words: Selected Poems*, Eighth Mountain Press, 1995, pp. 36-37.

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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