The Legend Study Guide

The Legend by Garrett Hongo

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

□The Legend□ is the concluding poem in Garrett Hongo's award-winning book of poetry *The River of Heaven*, published in 1988. In an interview with Bill Moyers in *The Language of Life*, Hongo recalled that the poem was written during an unhappy period in his life, when he was struggling to find direction in his work as a graduate student in literature. On a trip to Chicago, Hongo found himself alone in a hotel room watching a television program on random street violence, which included a segment on an Asian man who was accidentally shot on the street. According to Hongo, the program treated the man as virtually anonymous, vaguely identifying him as Asian. Hongo claimed that the next morning, when he sat down to write, the poem □The Legend□ came flowing out of him spontaneously. In addition to portraying images of incidental street violence, the poem contains a reference to an old Asian legend that Hongo had been told as a child. Hongo regards the writing of the poem as an influential moment for him; in fact, he then decided to leave his graduate studies and instead write a book of poems. This poem in particular guided him in his efforts.

□The Legend□ is a narrative poem with a contemporary, readable style. Although it is not a long poem, it touches upon many ideas important to Hongo, including the alienation and violence of the streets, the difficulties faced by immigrants in America, the poet's own questioning of his ethnic identity, and the mixing of Asian and Western cultures. The poem is dedicated to the memory of Jay Kashiwamura, who may be assumed to be the man featured on the television program seen by Hongo, who perhaps made an effort to seek out the deceased man's identity so as to pay him respect.

Author Biography

Ethnicity 1: Asian American

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1951

Garrett Kaoru Hongo was born on May 30, 1951, in Volcano, Hawaii. His parents were third-generation Japanese Americans. When Hongo was six years old, his father moved the family to California. Hongo attended a working-class, racially mixed high school in Los Angeles, where he was exposed to urban street life and racial divisions that he would later describe in his poetry. Hongo earned a scholarship and attended Pomona College, in California, where he majored in English. At college, he cultivated his interest in poetry and writing and in Asian American culture in general, graduating in 1973. He then moved to Japan for a year, where he worked and studied at a Buddhist monastery in Kyoto. In 1975, Hongo founded a theater group in Seattle called the Asian Exclusion Act, named after laws that had discriminated against Asian immigrants in America. He received attention for a play he wrote and accepted a job in Hollywood as a television writer, which he quickly left. He then enrolled in the University of California, Irvine, to pursue a master's degree in poetry, graduating in 1980.

In 1982, Hongo published his first book of poetry, *Yellow Light*. That same year, he married Cynthia Thiessen, a violinist and musicologist. A year later, Hongo visited Hawaii for the first time since leaving as a child. In 1988, he published another book of poems, *The River of Heaven*, which contains the poem □The Legend.□ Hongo was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for this second book and won the Lamont Poetry Prize from the Academy of American Poets.

Hongo has taught writing and literature at several universities, including the University of Missouri and the University of Oregon, where he was the director of the creative writing program from 1989 to 1993. In addition to teaching, Hongo has been very active in the field of Asian American literature, compiling and editing several anthologies. In 1994, Hongo edited *Songs My Mother Taught Me: Stories, Plays and Memoir*, the work of the Japanese American woman Wakako Yamauchi. In 1993, he compiled *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America*, and in 1995 he edited *Under Western Eyes: Personal Essays from Asian America*. Also in 1995, Hongo published a book of prose nonfiction, *Volcano: A Memoir of Hawai'i*. Hongo's literary honors include fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Rockefeller Foundation. As of 2006, Hongo was teaching in the writing program at the University of Oregon in Eugene.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

Hongo begins “The Legend” by quickly establishing the setting of the poem: the streets of Chicago during a soft snowfall, in the “twilight of early evening.” The narrator uses detailed images to convey a story, with the language focusing on external events. The first image is that of a man carrying a load of laundry, neatly folded within a crumpled shopping bag; the narrator states that the man enjoys the feel of the warm laundry in his hands. Thus, the narrator is one who can make assumptions about the internal state of the character. The narrator then compares the color of the man's face to a Rembrandt painting, alluding to the Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), of the European baroque school of painting. This description reveals not only the color of the man's cheeks but also the character of the narrator: he has knowledge and cultural sophistication. As such, the poet is revealing complexity beyond his simple images. At the end of the first stanza comes an instant of foreshadowing, as the last flash of sunset lends an orange glow to the scene.

Stanza 2

In the second stanza, the narrator describes the man. He is Asian, and the narrator estimates him to be either Thai or Vietnamese. Thus, although the narrator has insight into the character's internal state, he is not omniscient. The man is described as frail and poorly dressed, in a working-class jacket and wrinkled pants. The poem continues to show movement, as the man negotiates the icy sidewalk, opens the back door of his car, and puts his laundry inside. Then, although the man remains nameless, the car is identified as a Ford Fairlane. This is, after all, America, where automobiles have names but people in the streets are anonymous. At the end of the second stanza, the action suddenly intensifies. The narrator mentions a flurry of footsteps and commotion. The Asian man hears shouts from pedestrians, as an armed boy has just robbed the corner package store. The boy fires a pistol and hits the Asian man in the chest, and the man slumps over, surprised.

Stanza 3

The storytelling mode continues into the third stanza, with images of a crowd gathering and a wounded man struggling to speak. The man makes noises that none of the bystanders can understand; in fact, the narrator remarks that the man's noises mean “nothing” to the crowd, endowing the man with a sense of alienation and inconsequentiality. The boy who shot him disappears into the snowy evening, leaving behind only footsteps in the snow. The reader may get the sense that justice will not be served.

Stanza 4

In the fourth stanza, the setting and tone of the poem abruptly change, as the reader enters the narrator's mind. The narrator states that he has been reading about René Descartes (1596-1650), a French philosopher associated with the European Enlightenment. Descartes theoretically doubted everything in his world except himself, thus elevating thought as the most important function of his being. He is perhaps most widely remembered for the statement □I think, therefore I am.□ Individuals such as Descartes helped free science and philosophy from religious dogma. The narrator considers the □grand courage□ that Descartes possessed with respect to his intellectualization, all of which is extraordinarily remote from the random shooting he has just described. The narrator asserts that he feels □distinct□ from the Asian man; in fact, he feels □ashamed.□ The narrator may be ashamed of his privilege; he is safe and reading philosophy, while a man going about his working-class life is randomly shot and dies in the streets. Implicit in this passage is the connection that the narrator must feel to the dying man; he cannot merely withdraw back into his thoughts about philosophy.

Stanza 5

In the final stanza of the poem, the narrator again changes tone, moving away from thoughts of himself and speaking to the heavens. He offers both a prayer and a eulogy for the dying man, asking the night sky to cover him and provide his final comforts. He then prays that □the weaver girl cross the bridge of heaven□ and take the dying man's hands. The mention of the weaver girl is an allusion to an old legend told in some Asian and Native American cultures on the Pacific Rim. In Japan, this legend is celebrated in an annual festival called Tanabata, which is held on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month of the lunisolar calendar. According to the legend, as explained by Hongo to the interviewer Bill Moyers, the Milky Way is seen as a river of stars in the sky, the River of Heaven. Two young sweethearts, a weaver girl and a goatherd boy, are separated from each other by this river of stars. The weaver girl must remain separated from her true love because she has a huge responsibility: to weave together the fabric of the universe that gives everything existence. The legend is a story of sad separation, except that once a year the heavens take pity on the young couple and provide a way for them to come together, such as by having a flock of birds serve as a bridge over the river of stars so that they can meet. The poem concludes with its reference to this Asian legend.

Themes

Alienation

Alienation is the state of feeling unwelcome in the world, or of experiencing the world as inhospitable, empty, or meaningless. Large, modern cities are a common setting in literary works treating the theme of alienation. In "The Legend," the narrator evokes this theme by presenting the Asian man as alone and lacking in friendship or human contact. The cityscape is described as cold and becoming dark. The crowd that gathers after the man is shot is faceless, and no individuals are described as coming forward to help or to provide human warmth to the suffering man. The man is also unable to communicate to the crowd. When the narrator enters the poem, he, too, seems isolated from the world, watching from a distance and likewise failing to share in human contact.

Anonymity

Anonymity is the quality of being nameless and lacking individuality within a crowd. Whereas alienation is generally a negative emotional response to the inhumanity or emptiness of the world, anonymity is simply the condition one can have within society. The condition is not necessarily a negative one; some people prefer it. The man in "The Legend" is essentially anonymous. He is referred to as a nameless Asian man, without any further depth of description. His appearance is plain, his clothing common. As he lies wounded in the street, the sounds he makes are not understood by the people around him. The narrator of the poem is emotionally affected in witnessing the man's anonymity, eventually registering the feeling of shame.

Identity

Identity is the concept that a person has about himself. Identity can be influenced both individually and culturally; that is, identity stems both from who a person truly is when cultural influences are stripped away and from how these cultural influences affect how a person is perceived. In "The Legend," the narrator questions the identity of the Asian man he is describing. He examines external markers, such as appearance, clothing, and actions, in order to identify the man. To establish his own identity, on the other hand, the narrator refers to his feelings, to the philosophy that he reads, and to an Asian legend.

Mixing of Eastern and Western Cultures

The poem contains elements of two cultures. The language of the poem might be described as common American speech, and the poem is set in a typically American city. The main character in the poem is Asian, while the poet is Japanese American. An American brand name, a Ford Fairlane car, appears in the poem, exemplifying Western

commercialism. An Eastern man owns the car and is presumably living a Western lifestyle, judging from his mode of dress. The narrator makes references to figures from Western history, Rembrandt and Descartes, specifically comparing the Asian man to a Rembrandt painting and himself, in a sense, to the philosopher.

The poem also contains two stories that might be seen as representative of Eastern and Western cultures. The first story is typically American, featuring robbery, gunshots, violence on the street, and a fleeing criminal. The second story is an old Asian legend that mentions the existence of the heavens and a compassionate weaver girl in the sky. In certain ways, the poet has attempted to □bridge□ these two stories.

Shame

Shame is a complex emotion. When a person feels shame, a fundamental devaluing or loss of belief in the self is implied. The narrator of the poem notes that he feels shame upon recounting the story of the innocent man's shooting. This shame may relate to his distance from the man on the streets, from his own sense of privilege, or from his observation of the devaluing treatment of the man by the crowd. The shame might also relate to the simple witnessing of a senseless, unjust act. The narrator is unable or unwilling to specify the cause of his shame; because he did nothing to cause the event he witnessed, the shame he feels must have already lain within him.

Style

Allusion

In □The Legend,□ the poet employs allusion several times. An *allusion* is a reference within a story to related people, things, events, or stories. Here, the narrator alludes to a painter, a philosopher, and an old legend. These allusions add meaning to the poem, pointing to deeper meanings and enhancing the descriptions.

Straightforward Diction

The diction, or the poet's choice of words, is simple and straightforward in Hongo's poem. The types of words used by the narrator reveal the kind of person he is and the way he sees the world. The Asian man, meanwhile, is poor and plain in appearance, and the poet uses language that is simple and nonornamental to describe him. In this way, the diction aligns with the meanings of the poem.

Visual Imagery and Plot

Through precise descriptions, the narrator evokes images in the reader's mind. Indeed, Hongo relies on a series of images to tell the poem's story. The poem is organized as a series of verbal photographs, making the poem a highly visual experience for the reader.

Subjective Narration

The poem is told as a story by a narrator who is recounting events. A story's narrator may be a neutral, objective presence, or he may be subjective, presenting a particular point of view. The narrator in □The Legend□ speaks in the first person; he is the poem's □I.□ This narrator comments upon and speculates about the Asian man and is also specific in detailing his own feelings. In relating this story through a subjective narrator, Hongo allows the reader to understand that narrator's particular impressions and sentiments.

Varying Tone

Tone relates to the feelings and moods conveyed by a poem. Hongo twice changes the tone of the poem for effect. In the beginning, when description and images are relied upon, the tone of the poem is detailed and primarily objective. In the fourth stanza, when the narrator is given an identity, the tone changes to become personal and emotional. In the fifth stanza, the tone becomes formal and even reverent, as the poem's final lines serve as a prayer or eulogy for the wounded man.

Historical Context

Discrimination and Asian American History

Hongo's work is grounded in his deep awareness of Asian peoples' history in America, including the struggle of Asian immigrants to gain respect and equality in society. As such, his work has also served to memorialize the various injustices suffered by Asian Americans. For instance, Hongo has written about the Asian Exclusion Laws of the early 1900s, which prohibited Asian Americans from owning property and marrying whites and also barred single Asian women from moving to the United States. In California, the Alien Land Law prohibited Japanese people from owning real estate.

In 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii, bringing the United States into World War II. In 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, requiring the 120,000 Japanese Americans living on the West Coast to be relocated to ten internment camps throughout the nation. Indeed, Japanese Americans faced widespread prejudice and bitterness in society due to wartime tensions. During this time, Hongo's grandfather was taken into custody in Hawaii and questioned by the FBI. Hongo has noted that his parents' generation refused to talk about the relocation camps after the war, preferring to try to forget that episode of history. This aspect of Japanese American history has been an important context for Hongo.

Stereotypes

Hongo has written about how Asians have faced stereotyping in American society. Movies, television shows, and newspaper cartoons portrayed Asians in caricature or in disempowering, voiceless roles during and after the tensions of World War II. Hongo writes in his introduction to the multi-author collection *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America* (1993) that he has been □forever fighting the stereotype, the dehumanized image of Asians in America, the *invisibility* of our historical, social, and cultural presence in this country.□ □The Legend□ relates to this context because it portrays the relative invisibility of an Asian man in American society.

Cultural Denial

Hongo has noted that many of his Japanese American classmates in high school would not talk about the World War II relocation camps, maintaining the cultural taboo set by their parents. As a writer, Hongo has felt impelled to address the suffering endured by Japanese Americans who lost their homes and jobs during that period. Some of Hongo's poems, including □The Legend,□ can be seen as transgressing this cultural denial concerning discrimination and injustice.

The 1980s

By the 1980s, second-, third-, and fourth-generation Asian Americans were contributing to American society. A new generation of Asian American students had attended college and had helped establish Asian American studies departments in many universities. Young Asian American writers were creating literature that addressed their individual and cultural issues, and they were also finding outlets for their work. Dozens of new Asian American poets and writers, including Hongo, published works in literary journals, magazines, and books. In the 1980s, Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* and David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly* were especially prominent Asian American works. In 1989, the U.S. Congress finally made a formal apology to the Japanese Americans who had been held in camps during World War II. Congress also created a permanent entitlement program to financially reimburse those who had endured life in the internment camps.

Critical Overview

The River of Heaven was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and won the Lamont Poetry Prize from the Academy of American Poets. Indeed, the poems were well received by the critical establishment and established Hongo as an important voice in Asian American poetry. Robert Schultz, writing in the *Hudson Review*, notes that Hongo's poems show □care to those excluded from whatever the American Dream has become in the 1980s.□

Hongo's rich and versatile style has been especially noted by critics. Schultz comments that his □rich vocabulary and undulant syntax hold his stories of loss and remembrance in a secure, distinctive music.□ A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* states that Hongo skillfully uses language that □ranges from the lyric and elegant to the earthy and everyday□ and that the □poet's song is built on a keen sense of history and purpose.□ Fred Muratori, writing in *Library Journal*, comments that Hongo's □character studies and first-person narratives that speak of life in non-white America attain an authority unobscured by imagistic mannerisms.□ Reflecting Hongo's substantial stature as a poet, Muratori compares him to the renowned poets William Wordsworth and Walt Whitman.

□The Legend□ is considered by critics to be one of the most outstanding poems in Hongo's second collection. Laurie Filipelli writes in her book *Garrett Hongo*, □The poem functions to bestow dignity and intimacy upon a story of anonymous street violence, providing, through legend, an afterlife consolation for unexplainable suffering.□

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Dupler is a writer and college English teacher. In this essay, he discusses the effectiveness of Hongo's poetic style in expressing the themes that are important to the poet.

Hongo's poem □The Legend□ shows the power of well-intentioned brevity, as therein a few incidents drawn from common life reveal meanings beyond their specific time and place. The poet efficiently endows this poem with several levels of meaning, conveying genuine emotion and insight with the use of simple language and a few images economically evoked. Indeed, Hongo has stated his dedication to conciseness of expression and his firm belief in the power of the written word. In *Volcano: A Memoir of Hawai'i*, he expresses this artistic credo in contemplating time spent with a mentor:

I learned that a generation has an emotional note which can be captured in a song, that entire lifetimes of experience . . . could be figured forth in a story of only a few words so long as those were the *right* words, in the right order.

In the first stanzas of the poem, the focus is on the setting, on the exterior qualities of the world as the poet sees it. The narrator begins telling the brief and tragic story of one man's evening on the cold streets. The setting is Chicago, in the heartland, far from the poet's place of birth, in the Pacific. The man being described is alone; instead of human contact, he has only the □warm laundry and crinkled paper□ that he is carrying as a tactile connection to the world. The sun is going down, and the waning light brings a □Rembrandt glow□ to the man's cheek. In the second stanza, this man is identified further, though ambiguously, as □Asian, Thai or Vietnamese.□ He is also identified as poor and shabbily dressed, as any man on the street might be, regardless of nationality or race. Thus, this man represents to the narrator both an Asian man and an everyman, different from the crowd by virtue of his race yet anonymous and alone.

The end of the first stanza and beginning of the second stanza effectively highlight the distance between the narrator and the Asian man. First, the narrator reveals his knowledge of centuries-old European paintings in comparing the light on the Asian man's face to a Rembrandt canvas. In this efficient description, layers of depth can be found. The choice of comparison evokes the issue of class difference. The narrator is educated, almost flippantly revealing his difference from the other man, who in reality probably has little in common with a character in an old European painting. The uncertainty regarding the Asian man's nationality further confuses the issue of identity for the narrator. If the poet is Asian as well, how exactly does he share in identity with the character in his poem? This is a common theme with Hongo; in another poem in the same collection, □The Pier,□ the narrator notes,

I'd see Vietnamese in small, family groups,

or they were Cambodians□Asians as foreign to me

as my grandfathers might have been

to the Yank seaman who stared, stopped

Having established the setting and the subject of "The Legend," the narration quickly moves along in images. The Asian man is hit by a random gunshot from an adolescent robber, a crowd gathers, and the Asian man struggles over his last breaths. In death, the man remains anonymous and not understood by the crowd. His words are "a babbling no one understands," and the people who surround him are "bewildered at his speech." In the next line, the narrator subtly reveals his own anger with and alienation from this uncaring society in concluding, "The noises he makes are nothing to them." The killer escapes, hinting that justice may not be served.

In the fourth stanza, the poem introduces a major shift in perspective. The narrator personally enters the poem for the first time, stating, "Tonight, I read about Descartes' / grand courage to doubt everything / except his own miraculous existence." Again, the narrator is both distancing himself from the subject and identifying himself, with the reference to Descartes bearing several layers of meaning. The narrator is portraying himself as an intellectual. He also seems as lacking in compassion as the people on the street who have witnessed the shooting, jumping into scholarly references as opposed to compassionate plaints. On another level, the reader may be aware that Descartes was a figure of the Enlightenment. Descartes' work is associated with the strengthening of individual intellectual thought and the weakening of the power of religious myth in the Western mind. These ideas further identify the perspective of the narrator.

The narrator quickly recovers the faith of the reader when he acknowledges the distance he feels from the wounded man, admitting to feeling "distinct" from him. The narrator then becomes emotionally deep and honest, claiming that shame lies beneath his sentiments, pervading his perceptions. The reaction is interesting, as the narrator could have then revealed many emotions, including compassion, anger, fear, sadness, or guilt. Yet shame overshadows all of these responses. The narrator explains no further, saying only, "I am ashamed." Once again, the narrator's statement contains various layers. He is a member of a society where adolescents commit murder and innocent people die, regardless of race, while his own life has lifted him above these troubles on the streets; he has become insulated in a world of ideas. The narrator also ethnically identifies with the wounded man suffering on the street, his words neither heard nor understood by the crowd.

Perhaps the silencing of the dying man is the greatest source of shame for the narrator. A recurring theme in Hongo's work has been ethnic Americans' lack of voice in greater society; indeed, he has personally struggled to claim that voice. In *Volcano*, he discusses shame as it relates to his people:

I learned that what mainstream society perceived as "shame" and we younger Japanese Americans called "silence" or "passivity" was actually a great burden of pain and disappointment. . . . After the dispossession of the war, after the loss of farms, businesses, and homes and half a lifetime of building a life, the Issei [first-generation

Japanese Americans] who'd translated themselves over into becoming Americans were simply heartbroken and exhausted. . . . Perhaps detachment, a Buddhist recommendation, was the most they could muster.

Had the poet ended the poem after this admission of shame, it would have been a very different poem□one of grieving and emotional damage. Instead, in the three concluding lines of the final stanza, the poet achieves an outcome of redemptive emotional expression. Rather than succumbing to shame and defeat, the poet reaches as deep inside himself as possible. He appeals to the sacred and to forces that are beyond himself and the dying man; he appeals to the heavens, assuming a tone of prayer. He asks the night sky to the cover the dying man, recognizing a force of nature that is beyond culture and race and that will cover everything equally in due time.

When the narrator prays for the □weaver girl□ to □cross the bridge of heaven□ to comfort the dying man, he moves beyond his shame to affirm his own existence. He does this by giving words to one of the oldest legends of his ancestors, thus honoring his cultural past and his ethnicity and more deeply accepting himself. He also moves beyond his Western rationality, which was exemplified by the reference to Descartes a few lines earlier. That is, the rational questioning and individualism of Western tradition is no solace for him in that moment. By appealing to an old Asian creation legend, the narrator appeals to the realm of the transpersonal and the mythic. The legend referred to by the poet is a story that upholds a compassionate universe. This legend is an antidote to the despair the poet has just witnessed and to the shame that he feels. Like the Romantic poets to whom he has been compared, Hongo affirms the power of the word to make peace with, and even transcend, human prejudice, suffering, and limitation.

Source: Douglas Dupler, Critical Essay on □The Legend,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature. In this essay, he examines how Hongo avoids sentimentalizing the situation in this poem by openly admitting his own shortcomings.

Poetry is based on the practice of observation. Poets tend to view the world in greater detail than the average person, in an effort to render it in a few words that might match the intensity of living. When poetry carefully reconstructs the physical world, the things that are considered commonplace or even ugly reveal their inherent beauty. Poets create their most convincing statements on the nature of the universe not by theorizing but by looking at things carefully and accurately reporting what they see.

The same dynamic applies when poets want to address social situations. While it might be tempting for a poet to discuss rather than unveil□to proclaim theories about the way things are instead of giving readers evidence with which to reach their own conclusions□this only leads to weak poetry. Literary works that try to force a particular religious, political, or moral perspective on their readers are labeled □didactic□ and often put aside and ignored. Still, poets will always try to control readers' opinions. If writing is at heart communication, it is natural for a writer to want to tell people how the world seems to operate and offer an individual perspective. But readers live in a time when every available space is being used to sell them something, and they are cynical about anything, even a well-meaning poem, that tries too hard to persuade. Sometimes the well-meaning poems can be the most annoying, coming across as pious and condescending.

This is why Hongo's poem □The Legend□ is such a remarkable accomplishment. The poem's main focus is an ordinary man who is going about his mundane business, leaving a laundromat with just-washed clothes, when a gunman fleeing a holdup shoots him dead. The man is so ordinary that he does not have a name: he has no identity other than being the victim of this brief event. In the hands of another poet, this situation could be used to emphasize the writer's extra-large ability to empathize with a hapless victim and to point out the obvious unfairness of a man's being killed while minding his own business. When Hongo shifts the focus from the character to the author, though, it is not to give credit to the author for being able to appreciate the fate of a small person who others would have failed to notice; it is instead a lament for his own inability to empathize, even when a situation is so obviously tragic.

Hongo establishes the main character's sympathetic qualities through the use of simple, uncomplicated touches. First, of course, is the main character's anonymity: having no name makes him a kind of everyman, a traditional literary character used for centuries to allow one person to represent the common fate of all humanity. Then there is the murderer, identified by Hongo as □a boy□that's all he was□; the situation is dampened by the fact that the killer is not even particularly evil, just young. The murder is presented as a scene that could take place in any northern city where it snows: even though the first line specifies Chicago as its setting, there is nothing particularly relevant

about where it happens. The fact that the man does his laundry at a commercial laundromat indicates something about his economic situation, in that he does not have laundry facilities in his home, just as the fact that he drives a Ford Fairlane, a car that has not been manufactured since 1970, marks him as a salt-of-the-earth guy who is willing or required to struggle to keep an old car running.

There are a few touches to his personality, however, that ought to incline the poem's speaker to bond in empathy with the main character. For one thing, the victim is identified as □Thai or Vietnamese.□ Readers who know even the least background information about Hongo know that he is Japanese and that his poems frequently muse on his ethnic identity. Writing about an Asian character puts the poet in a unique social position in relation to his character: they are not of the same background, but readers can assume that there is a closer innate bond between them than the poet might feel for a non-Asian. Along these same lines, the poem specifically mentions that the man is carrying, in addition to his laundry, □crinkled paper.□ The character in the poem is someone who reads or possibly even writes, an endearing trait to writers. The poet can naturally be expected to empathize with another person from his race who shares a similar interest.

The first three stanzas focus on the man and the pointless death he suffers, with snow already covering him as soon as he has fallen, surrounded by people who cannot even understand his final words. In the fourth stanza, though, the focus shifts to the person telling this story. Having established the facts that should make the fallen man sympathetic to all people and to a person like Hongo in particular, the poem becomes an apology for the poet's inability to sympathize.

Intellectual abstraction is presented as the main divider. Hongo's admiration for the French philosopher René Descartes' dictum □I think; therefore I am□ and all of the philosophical implications that follow from it leads him to pronounce Descartes as □courageous.□ Courage, in this case, stems from Descartes' willingness to recognize the fact that we are all ultimately alone, unsure of anything in this world except our individual existence. Hongo realizes that one result of this courageous stance is that he cannot relate to the other man, who by all other indicators he should feel a bond of kinship toward. For feeling so alienated, so □distinct,□ he admits, □I am ashamed.□ Another poet might celebrate his ability to empathize as much as he has with the stranger, but Hongo steers the poem away from self-congratulations and toward his own failure. He manages to avoid wallowing in unearned sentiment by admitting that empathy for another person, even when the subject is carefully and fully realized by sharp writing, just might not be possible at all.

If another writer bathed his subject with the glorifying light that Hongo uses to illuminate the man in the poem□from the twilight he steps into to the orange of his cheeks to the □Rembrandt glow on his face□ to the darkening night sky that covers him in the end□it might be a matter of painting the lily or gilding gold (as Shakespeare put it), or unnecessarily adding decoration to something, like a flower, that is already beautiful anyway. Hongo avoids this by changing the reader's assumptions. There is no need for a reader to point out that the poet does not really understand the significance of the

murdered man's life: he is the first to admit it. The prayer, in the last stanza, that this man should be carried off to heaven, is not an unearned comment on the man's worthiness but rather a wish for his well-being despite all that Hongo is unable to feel about him. It is a prayer for all people, who are helplessly isolated from each other because of the metaphysical limits that Descartes' dictum identifies.

Thus the poem's title, □The Legend,□ is perfectly appropriate. At first glance, it may seem to anticipate a poem that will talk about a larger-than-life figure, a person who commits amazing feats. After reading the poem, one might take that title to be the sort of praise for the common man that poets, with their attention to fine detail, like to confer upon situations that would slip by the average person's attention. What it really means, though, in the context of this poet's shame, is that a writer is inclined to create a legend around a situation, regardless of whether it actually describes something unusual. This is not a poem about whether or not a stranger deserves to be elevated in status; rather it is about the fact that there is something in us all that is able to recognize others' humanity only from afar, to understand that each person who is a mystery just might deserve to be made into a legend.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on □The Legend,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #3

Goldfarb is a published writer with a Ph.D. in English. In the following essay, he explores the themes of alienation and connection in The Legend.

Hongo, a poet of Asia and America who draws on the heritage of both West and East, begins this poem very much in the West. The setting is Chicago, and the poem's opening seems to echo the attitude of a famous poem in the Western canon, William Wordsworth's "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802," with its description of the sleepy calm of London as it first awakes, wearing the "beauty of the morning."

Hongo's poem similarly begins with what at least seems to be a quiet, peaceful scene: It is "snowing softly," and a man who at this point is not further described is carrying his laundry to his car and enjoying the feel of the "warm laundry and crinkled paper." It seems a Wordsworthian portrayal of a charming, mundane scene, meant to lift one's spirits through the enjoyment of one of life's everyday moments. Even in the opening lines of Hongo's poem, however, there are hints that all is not well, that there is something ominous lurking in the twilight. For one thing, it is twilight, the symbolic end of the day, not morning as in Wordsworth's poem. Also, it is only "for a moment" that the man enjoys the feel of the laundry. Something is about to happen, and not something good.

That something happens at the end of the second stanza, when the man is shot by a robber fleeing the scene of his crime. Even before that, however, the second stanza introduces a decidedly darker tone than that found at the beginning of the poem. The man turns out to be poor and skinny, wearing rumpled pants and a dingy coat that is too large for him. He seems not to fit his clothes, and perhaps he also does not fit into this urban Chicago landscape. He is Asian, the speaker notes, and has trouble with a slick of ice. In the first stanza, the softly falling snow of the Chicago winter seems almost comforting; now the winter is the source of a difficult patch of ice.

That the man is Asian seems significant. He is a member of a minority; he is Thai or Vietnamese, from a culture different from the majority one in Chicago, a fact brought out in the third stanza when the man falls "babbling" to the ground, uttering sounds that "no one understands." Perhaps this in part simply means that he is making the sounds of death, which living bystanders cannot comprehend. There is also a suggestion, however, that the sounds are Asian words that the bystanders cannot comprehend because they do not know Asian languages. There is a sense of alienation here, of separation between cultures and a lack of connection. It is perhaps significant that the only other individual in the poem, the only other character who takes on an individual existence, is the boy who shoots the victim. Everyone else is just part of the uncomprehending crowd, suggesting that the only connection this poor Asian man can find in Western society is a violent one; he is separated from everyone except for the man who shoots him down.

This might suggest that there is anger in this poem, and, as Barbara Drake notes in her article on Hongo in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, there is outrage in some of his works. But there is no outrage here. The attitude in this poem is best expressed by the word Hongo uses to describe the reaction of the Asian man after he is shot. He is □dumbfounded,□ Hongo's speaker says at the end of the second stanza, and the whole poem seems dumbfounded, taken aback, bewildered by the sudden eruption of violence that takes the life of the innocent Asian man.

In addition to this dumbfounded feeling, there may be a feeling of relief or fear. After describing the death scene of the Asian man, the poem's speaker switches suddenly to talking about himself. In stanza 4, he reports that he has just read about the famous Western philosopher René Descartes. He says that reading about Descartes' philosophical approach of believing in nothing but his own existence led him to feel distinct from the dying Asian man. It is as if the speaker fears suffering the fate of a fellow Asian man□if the speaker is Asian himself, which seems probable because the speaker is the voice representing the Japanese American Hongo. Reading about Descartes allows the speaker to feel his individuality at the expense of his fellow feeling for the Asian victim; it allows the speaker to distance himself from the suffering.

Although this distancing may offer some comfort, it also makes the speaker ashamed. He turns away from this Western philosophy of individualism and instead utters an invocation, calling on the night sky to cover the dying man and then calling on □the weaver girl□ to come comfort him or at least □take up his cold hands.□ The weaver girl is a character in an ancient Chinese myth about a supernatural being (the weaver girl) who falls in love with a mortal. Her union with the mortal displeases the gods, who cause them to be separated and placed as the stars Vega and Altair in the sky, where they are to be perpetually separated by the Milky Way. However, one concession is offered them: once a year, magpies fly up and create a bridge so that the two lovers can be together.

Alluding to this bridge, Hongo's speaker calls on the weaver girl to □cross the bridge of heaven□ and perhaps in some way to create unity or connection instead of separation. The weaver girl myth is about restoring at least some connection in the midst of separation; at the end of this poem about alienation, separation, and death, Hongo seems to be seeking a way to overcome these negative states and to create connection. Of course, in the weaver girl legend, the weaver girl and her lover are not dead, so it is possible to restore a connection. In Hongo's poem, the Asian man is dead or dying. It is harder to see how a connection might be restored. This is perhaps why the ending of the poem has a sighing, elegiac tone, as if after all there is nothing much that can be done. And yet there is also a feeling of hope, or at least wishfulness□a wishing for something better, a yearning for connection. It is a connection the Asian man himself seemed to be trying to make. He was living in America; trying to adjust to an American winter; driving an American car (a Ford Fairlane); and wearing a plaid mackinaw, a coat bearing a North American Indian name and featuring a Scottish pattern.

It seems as if the Asian man was trying to fit into North American society. The message of the poem might be that there should have been some attempt to meet him halfway. Perhaps that is why Hongo ends with an Asian legend. He might be suggesting that Western society needs to turn a bit away from the individualistic philosophy of Descartes in order to adopt a more connecting philosophy, such as the one underlying the tale of the weaver girl. In this connection, it is interesting to consider the other reference in the poem to a major figure in Western cultural history, the reference in the first stanza to the Dutch painter Rembrandt von Rijn. In that stanza, in first describing the Asian man, the speaker says that he has □a Rembrandt glow on his face.□

The speaker here is referring to Rembrandt's characteristic technique of singling out certain figures in his paintings by making them seem to glow brightly against a dark background, as if bringing them out of obscurity. In the context of the poem, however, the Asian man is brought out of obscurity only to be killed. In this case, too, the □Rembrandt glow□ is associated with the □flash□ of sunset that □blazes the storefronts.□ In other words, the characteristic effect of a famous Western painter is here associated with violence, with a flash and with blazes. Just as the reference to Descartes seems negative in the end, so does the reference to Rembrandt, emphasizing the underlying message of the poem that perhaps it is time to turn to non-Western guides in an effort to escape violence and individualism.

Source: Sheldon Goldfarb, Critical Essay on □The Legend,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Adaptations

Hongo reads his poetry aloud and is interviewed by Bill Moyers on *The Power of the Word with Bill Moyers*. This six-part television series, broadcast on public television in 1989, features a variety of contemporary poets and their poetry. Produced and directed by David Grubin, the video recording was published by Films for the Humanities and Sciences in 1994.

Topics for Further Study

Research the Tanabata festival of Japan and other Asian countries. Create a presentation that discusses the customs and ceremonies surrounding the festival. Provide photographs, if possible, and show how various countries celebrate the festival differently. In your presentation, compare the story of the weaver girl to the Western idea of heaven, noting the differences and similarities between the two stories.

In □The Legend,□ the author refers to two figures from European history, Rembrandt and Descartes. Research each figure and write an essay for each, describing the time and place in which they lived, summarizing the contributions that each made to their cultures, and explaining why these contributions are important.

Think of an event that you heard about on the news that affected you emotionally. Write a poem in which you tell the story of this event with photographic detail and, within the poem, also try to relate that event to your own life, describing the emotions that the story brought out in you.

Hold a group discussion on the issue of teenagers, street violence, and firearms. Compile a list of incidents that have involved these elements and then compile a list of specific factors that contribute to the problem of teenage violence. Finally, list various courses of action that might help prevent such incidents in the future and discuss and debate the positives and negatives of these courses of action.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: The United States sees a wave of immigration from Asia and the Pacific Islands. According to the 1990 U.S. census, the number of persons of Asian and Pacific Islander descent increased from 3.7 million to 7.2 million between 1980 and 1990, nearly doubling.

Today: The fastest-growing ethnic minority in the United States is Asian Pacific Americans. The population of this group is projected to grow to more than forty million by the year 2050. The largest group of Asian Pacific Americans is formed by those of Chinese descent (23 percent), followed by Filipinos (19 percent), Japanese (12 percent), Koreans (11 percent), and Indians (11 percent).

1980s: The U.S. Congress issues a formal apology to the Japanese Americans who were relocated and confined to internment camps during World War II and also creates a reimbursement fund for those who were detained.

Today: The sixtieth anniversary of the atomic bombing of the Japanese cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima by U.S. armed forces during World War II is observed in 2005. There is public debate as to whether the United States should issue an apology over the bombings and the deaths of Japanese civilians in those cities, but no formal apology is forthcoming.

1980s: Gun-related deaths in the United States reach epidemic proportions, averaging more than thirty thousand per year throughout the 1980s, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Today: The rate of gun deaths in the United States is decreasing slightly, after peaking in the early 1990s, but gun deaths still claim about thirty thousand lives per year, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

What Do I Read Next?

The Floating World (1989) is a novel by Cynthia Kadohata. Set during World War II, it tells the adventures of a Japanese American family in search of a home.

The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America (1993) is a book of poetry edited by Hongo. It features the work of dozens of Asian American poets and an introduction by Hongo that details the development of Asian American poetry.

Volcano: A Memoir of Hawai'i (1995), an autobiographical work by Hongo, is a detailed and beautifully written account of the people and places that have touched the poet's imagination.

The Woman Warrior (1976) is Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiographical collection of stories about growing up Chinese in America. This book is a classic of Asian American literature.

Yellow Light (1982), Hongo's first book of poetry, introduces Hongo's perspective on the Asian American experience and his rich poetic style.

Further Study

Bulosan, Carlos, *America Is in the Heart: A Personal History*, Harcourt, 1946.

This is an autobiographical account of the inspiring life of a Filipino American. The author grew up as a migrant worker in the American West and later became a writer and labor activist.

Hongo, Garrett, ed., *Under Western Eyes: Personal Essays from Asian America*, Anchor/Doubleday, 1995.

A compilation of essays from many Asian American writers, this book provides a contemporary perspective of Asian America.

Moyers, Bill, *The Language of Life: A Festival of Poets*, Doubleday, 1995.

This book features many poets talking about their poems, lives, and careers while being skillfully interviewed.

Yamauchi, Wakako, *Songs My Mother Taught Me: Stories, Plays, and Memoir*, Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1994.

This collection presents stories, plays, and essays by a Japanese American woman who lived through tumultuous times.

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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.

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“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.

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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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