Monologue for an Onion Study Guide

Monologue for an Onion by Sue (Suji) Kwock Kim

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Introduction

With her 2003 collection *Notes from the Divided Country*, Suji ("Sue") Kwock Kim became the first Asian American to win the Walt Whitman Award of the American Academy of Poets. In this volume, Kim explores themes of family, nation (the title refers to Korea), isolation, community, emotion, and politics. While her poetic voice is influenced by her experience as an Asian American woman, she strives to write about universal human truths. She draws those truths from the strangled and war-torn history of her family and their native Korea. To add authenticity to her telling of history, she takes on the voices of her parents and ancestors. Kim's poems describe the horrors of war, the struggle to overcome extreme circumstances, and the pain of loss.

One of the poems in *Notes from the Divided Country* is "Monologue for an Onion." In this poem, an onion expresses its thoughts and feelings while a person goes about cutting it up. In the hands of other poets, this premise would be a setup for a humorous poem; in Kim's hands, it is serious and even disturbing. Exploring themes of appearance, essence, truth, and seeking, Kim finds an unlikely speaker in an onion. Because of this poem's accessibility and its unusual subject matter, it is appealing to students who are new to poetry. More advanced students will be rewarded by a close study of the poem that reveals its depth of style and content.

Author Biography

Ethnicity 1: Asian American

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1968

Born in 1968, Sue (Suji) Kwock Kim received her bachelor's degree from Yale University in 1995 and her master of fine arts degree from the prestigious University of Iowa writer's program in 1997. Kim also attended Seoul University. She began writing poetry at the age of twenty-one, when she decided to try a poetry workshop in college. She was drawn to the rhythm and the music of poetry, and she loved refining the craft of writing poetry despite the intensity she often feels when she writes. Her Korean heritage and its culture, language, and art influence her poetry, although she resists categorizing her work as strictly ethnic in theme and content.

In 2002, Kim received a Stegner Fellowship from Stanford University. In 2003, she accepted a position as an assistant English professor at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. Her first poetry collection, *Notes from the Divided Country*, was published the same year. This debut collection won the 2002 Walt Whitman Award from the American Academy of Poets. Prior to its publication, Kim received the *Nation*'s Discovery Award.

Kim has had her poetry published in numerous journals, including *Poetry*, the *Paris Review*, the *National Review*, the *Nation*, *Ploughshares*, the *Threepenny Review*, the *Southwest Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *DoubleTake*, the *Yale Review*, the *Harvard Review*, the *New England Review*, and *Salmagundi*. Her poetry was selected to be in the anthology *Asian American Poetry: The Next Generation* (2004). Kim has also been the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (2001), a California Arts Council grant (2002), a Fulbright scholarship in Korea, and a fellowship from the Fine Arts Work Center of Provincetown. Her poetry has also earned her grants from foundations such as the Blakemore Foundation for Asian Studies, Korea Foundation, Washington State Art Trust, and the New York Foundation for the Arts. While her preferred genre is poetry, Kim also cowrote a multimedia play titled *Private Property*, which was produced in Edinburgh, Scotland, at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and appeared on BBC-TV.

Plot Summary

□Monologue for an Onion□ is written in tristichs (three-line stanzas). The structure gives the poem a sense of order, although each stanza does not always contain a complete or self-contained thought. The lines often extend from one tristich to another. As □Monologue for an Onion□ opens, the speaker is established to be an onion. It speaks in the first person to someone who is busily cutting it up. The onion tells the person, □I don't mean to make you cry.□ The onion then adds that it means the person no harm, and yet the person continues to peel its skin away. The onion cannot help but notice that this process of peeling away the skin and cutting up the onion's □flesh□ brings tears to the person's eyes.

The onion says, □Poor deluded human: you seek my heart□ (line 6). The onion believes that the person's act of peeling and cutting is a search for its heart, apparently not realizing that this is simply how people prepare onions for cooking or eating. The onion then tells the person to keep looking and peeling, but the person will find only more of the same layers as are on the outside. It says, □I am pure onion□pure union / Of outside and in, surface and secret core□ (lines 8-9). This means that the onion knows that it is the same all the way to the center. It is not wearing a false exterior of any kind, and it is not keeping any secrets.

In the fourth stanza, the onion begins to express hostility and judgment toward the person. Because chopping the onion makes the person cry, the onion deems the person an idiot for continuing. Then the onion generalizes the person's behavior, wondering if the person goes through life using his or her mind as a knife that never stops cutting as it looks for a □fantasy of truth□ (line 12) that it will never find. The onion says that this approach to life is destructive, leaving only ruin and tears as □signs / Of progress□ (lines 14-15).

The onion suggests that the person stop the useless cutting and searching, telling the person that □the world is glimpsed / Through veils□ (lines 16-17). Kim uses the onion as a voice of wisdom, revealing truths about the world. The onion notes that seeing the world is possible only through veils, even if they are the veils of the eye and the perceiver.

The seventh and eighth stanzas acknowledge that the person who is cutting the onion is a seeker, □hungry to know where meaning / Lies.□ But the onion suggests that the person survey what she has done; it tells the person to taste the onion juice on her hands and look at the onion peels and pieces. Then the onion says, □You are the one / In pieces□ (lines 22-23). The onion tells the person that an insistence on seeking truth that was not there has changed the person. According to the onion, it is the person whose soul has been cut by relentless desire, surrounded by abandoned remnants of the effort to quench the desire.

For all the person's efforts to get to the essence of the onion (or of anything), the person has no core. The person's own heart is a divided organ without a center, and,

metaphorically, the heart will beat the person to death by continuing to create desire that cannot be fulfilled.

Themes

Elusiveness of Truth

According to the onion, the person is peeling and cutting it in an attempt to get past the layers to understand what is at the heart of the onion. The onion states, □Poor deluded human: you seek my heart.□ Although the onion insists that it is hiding nothing and that it is simply an onion through and through (□Beneath each skin of mine / Lies another skin: I am pure onion□pure union / Of outside and in, surface and secret core□), the person keeps chopping. From the onion's perspective, truth is very elusive to the person, because she refuses to acknowledge the actual truth in favor of finding the desired truth. The onion accuses the person of being obstinate: □Is this the way you go through life, your mind / A stopless knife, driven by your fantasy of truth.□ Because the person lives in denial and seeks a fabricated truth, truth will continue to be elusive.

The onion also articulates a related theme of appearances and veils. While the person may appear to be one way but actually be another way, the onion insists that it is pure onion from the outside to the inside. The onion wears its essence for all to see, but it understands that people are not like that. Because the person peeling and cutting the onion is a perpetrator of misleading appearances (□you are not who you are□), she perceives that the rest of the world (and everything in it, including an onion) also wears facades. To find the truth of something, then, requires peeling away the layers of veils to see truth laid bare. The onion ultimately reveals that there is no other way to perceive the world except through veils, meaning that it is impossible to encounter truth in a vacuum. The onion remarks, □You must not grieve that the world is glimpsed / Through veils. How else can it be seen?□ The onion not only says that all things must be seen through veils, but it also goes so far as to tell the person that things can only be glimpsed through them. The person will never be able to encounter the truth with a long, unblinking gaze. There are always veils, if at no other level than that of the perceiver. Everything has a context of some kind.

Determination

Despite the onion's warnings to stop pursuing the truth so diligently (and violently), the person continues relentlessly peeling and cutting the onion. While it is safe to assume that Kim does not intend for this poem to depict an onion actually speaking to a person who hears the onion, the fact remains that the person presses on with the mission to peel and cut up the onion completely. The tears that try to fight off the sting in the person's eyes do not slow the person down at all, and the depiction of the counter littered with onion peel and bits of onion suggests that the person is relentlessly at work. In the second stanza, Kim writes, □the table fills / With husks, cut flesh, all the debris of pursuit.□ The eighth stanza calls attention to the □Yellow peels, my stinging shreds.□ It is a picture of utter carnage and determination.

The onion begins the poem by telling the person that it means no harm at all, and yet the person methodically peels away the onion's layers. The onion says, "I mean nothing, but this has not kept you / From peeling away my body, layer by layer." In the fourth stanza, the onion reveals that the person is not slowed down by the teary eyes; the person continues chopping. In the ninth stanza, the ground is sown with "abandoned skins." Once the object of pursuit, the skins that yielded nothing are merely tossed aside. At the very end of the poem, the onion offers the person a prophecy. Describing how the person's own heart is itself divided into chambers, the onion declares that it lacks a core. The onion believes that the person is driven by the need for a center that will give stability, peace, and reassurance. But the person's own heart does not have such a center, and thus, according to the onion, the heart will one day beat the person to death.

Style

Irony

Kim interjects irony in “Monologue for an Onion” to illustrate the human being's struggle with truth. The onion points out ironies in the person's motives and behavior. For example, the onion notes that while the person peels, cuts, and chops at the onion to get to its heart (“Poor deluded human: you seek my heart”), it is really the person's own heart that the chopper so desperately seeks. The person cutting the onion strives to find the center of something, even if it is just an onion, because the person lacks a center but does not realize it. The onion explains, “And at your inmost circle, what? A core that is / Not one. Poor fool, you are divided at the heart, / Lost in its maze of chambers, blood, and love.”

The onion also points out that the person, after peeling and cutting the onion, is the one who is “in pieces.” Having cut the onion, left its pieces of skin on the counter, and forced out its juices, the person is now covered in the smell, taste, and feel of the onion. Further, the onion adds, in trying to change the onion into what the person wanted, the person ended up being the one who was changed. This is another instance of irony.

The onion fails to notice the irony of its own condition. It claims that it is not guilty of having an exterior different from its interior and that peeling away its layers will only reveal more of the same layers. In other words, its argument goes, the person should stop peeling and cutting altogether, because there is no more truth in the middle of the onion than there is on its outside. The momentum of the poem, however, disproves this. As the person continues the relentless dismantling of the onion, the onion reveals more and more to the person about truth, veils, and desire. If the person had stopped after the first layer, these truths would never have been revealed. It is ironic that the onion is so perceptive about the flaws and ironies of the person, yet so blind to its own.

Metaphor

Kim uses metaphor liberally throughout “Monologue for an Onion.” The entire poem is a metaphor, with the onion representing anything that is pursued and destroyed as a means to an unattainable end. The person represents stubborn, relentless, and often misguided determination. This poem could be read as if the onion and the person were people in an unhealthy relationship, or it could be read as any situation involving sacrifice for a perceived greater good. In the context of the rest of *Notes from the Divided Country*, the onion could be Korea and its people, and the person could be a political system, a war, or an ideology. In such contexts, the peeling away of layers, the cut flesh, the “stopless knife,” and every other image take on new meaning.

Monologue

Kim chooses to use personification and give a humble onion a voice with which it can verbally fight back against its attacker. She chooses to use the form of a monologue to reveal the onion's thoughts and feelings about its situation and the person peeling and cutting it. A monologue is a dramatic form, which gives the reader a strong cue that this is not a humorous piece but one that will present serious, thought-provoking comments. A monologue gives the discourse of only one speaker, so the reader also knows that everything in the poem comes from the onion. Kim gives no insight into the person's thoughts, intentions, or emotional reactions. A monologue differs from a soliloquy in that a monologue reveals what would be told to an audience, whereas a soliloquy reveals the speaker's private thoughts, not intended for listeners. In the case of □Monologue for an Onion,□ the intended audience is the person cutting up the onion. Kim establishes this from the first line, where the onion says □you□ in reference to the person whose eyes are watering from cutting the onion.

Historical Context

North and South Korea

Monologue for an Onion is included in Kim's *Notes from the Divided Country*. The title refers to Korea, from which Kim's family originally came. Since the end of World War II, Korea has been divided into two separate countries, North Korea and South Korea. When the two countries were formed, the Soviet Union occupied the north and the United States occupied the south. In 1950, tensions about political legitimacy between the two countries reached a head when the Korean War erupted. The war between the Communist-controlled north and the United Nations-supported south went on for three years, until an armistice was signed in 1953. North Korea continued to be governed by the Communist leader Kim Il Sung, who ruled from 1948 until his death in 1994. Upon his death, his eldest son, Kim Jong Il, assumed leadership of the country.

After the Korean War, South Korea struggled to secure its political stability, enduring a number of rulers, governments, and coups. In 1987, a more democratic form of government was established with the election of a president. During the 1990s, South Korea grew into a major economy. Despite some setbacks, most notably the Asian financial crisis of 1997, South Korea is, in the early twenty-first century, a stable democracy with a healthy economy.

Although tentative efforts have been made to reunify North and South Korea (beginning with a summit in 2000), it does not seem feasible. Relations between the two nations have grown less hostile, but concerns about North Korea's nuclear weapons capabilities made South Korea, and other nations of the world, cautious. In 2005, North Korea confirmed that it had nuclear weapons.

Korean Americans

Like most immigrant groups, Koreans arrived in the United States in waves. The first wave of Koreans entering the United States began in 1903. Most of them went to Hawaii to work on sugar plantations, although a smaller group went to the continental United States. Another immigration wave came after the end of the Korean War in 1953, when numerous war brides and children adopted by American military personnel came to the United States. Reports estimate that one-quarter of Korean Americans can trace their lineage to a war bride. The last major immigration wave came after the Immigration Act of 1965. As of 2005, there were more than one million full-blooded Korean Americans (as many as twice that number when part-Koreans are included), representing a 35 percent increase between 1990 and 2000. Asian Americans make up 3.6 percent of the American population, with 11 percent being Korean Americans. Well-known Korean Americans include the ABC news anchors Ju Ju Chang and Liz Cho, the comedienne Margaret Cho, the writer Leonard Change, the Grammy Award-winner Joseph Hahn, and the comic actor Bobby Lee.

Critical Overview

Notes from the Divided Country has been well received by critics who review and study it. Critics praise the poems for their eloquence and their balance of wisdom and pain. They regard Kim's poetic voice as fresh and promising, based on her first published collection. Carol Muske-Dukes of the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, calls the volume an "important debut" that "deserves close and celebratory attention." Muske-Dukes finds the poems "unforgettable." Similarly, Frank Bidart of *Ploughshares* hails the book as "brilliant," adding that it is "one of the most remarkable debuts" he has read. He writes that the poems in this collection "surprise not only by their ambition and ferocity but by their delicacy, their sudden reserves of stillness and contemplation."

Kim's readers find that the struggle and pain described in her poems are equaled by the restorative power of the verse expressing them. The *Georgia Review*'s Amy Schroeder remarks that Kim's "goal is to shape-change trauma into art without losing emotional ferocity, and she does accomplish this in the majority of her poems." Schroeder praises Kim's introduction of other voices in her poems as a way to express other perspectives. Although Schroeder finds that *Notes from the Divided Country* weakens toward the end, losing its momentum and focus, she ultimately concludes that the volume is an "achievement; she [Kim] manages, almost throughout, to unite the divided countries of personal experience and political truth without relying on the easy bridge of sentimentality."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Jennifer Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature and is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she discusses the hostility and violence in Kim's poem.

In Kim's □Monologue for an Onion,□ the unlikely speaker is an onion that is being peeled and chopped by an unnamed person. The onion pleads with the person to stop, citing the irrationality of the person's actions. While, on the surface, this may seem like a humorous premise for a poem, Kim's monologue is actually quite violent and disturbing. The person and the onion are at war, and they are using very different weapons; the person uses brute force, while the onion tries to defend itself with philosophy. The metaphorical landscape of this poem is rich and deep, but without the dark, violent tone of the poem, the reader is less likely to delve deeper into it. Because of the context, the violence of the poem is so surprising that readers are caught by surprise and are driven to look at the poem more closely.

Both the person and the onion are hostile figures. They are truly at war with each other, and they have no common ground on which they can end the violence. With nothing in common, they both press on with their preferred weapons; for the person, it is a knife, and for the onion, it is reason. Because they each want something from the other that they will not get, the poem ends with the realization that neither will find satisfaction or even peace. According to the onion (who, as the poem's only speaker, is the reader's only source of information), the person is peeling, cutting, chopping, and hacking at the onion in order to get to the heart of the onion. The person seeks the truth and the essence of the onion, driven by the belief that there is much more to it than the surface layers of onion skin. The person is willing to endure stinging eyes and onion juice on his or her hands in the interest of acquiring the elusive truth of the onion. The person will never get what she wants from the onion, however, because she seeks something that does not exist. Even though the onion assures the person that there is nothing more to it than more layers of the same onion, she continues this relentless and destructive pursuit.

As the person's pursuit gains momentum and she fails to get what she wants from the onion, the violence toward the onion becomes more severe. The violence perpetrated is physical, the exercise of brute strength and power over the onion. The verbiage Kim uses to describe what the person does to the onion is startling. In line 3, the onion describes having its body peeled away □layer by layer.□ Two lines later, the onion describes □husks, cut flesh, all the debris of pursuit.□ In line 13, Kim uses alliteration to bring special emphasis to the violence: □slashing away skin after skin.□ She adds in the next two lines, □ruin and tears your only signs / Of progress? Enough is enough.□ Near the end of the poem, in line 26, the onion comments on the □ground sown with abandoned skins.□ Kim's use of imagery in describing the destructive wake of the person's pursuit is disturbing. Many of the words Kim uses, such as □body□ and □skin,□ call to mind human suffering. The reader may be surprised at feeling not only

compassion but even empathy for the onion. In its trials, the adept reader sees the suffering in human history.

Just as the person who is cutting will not get what she wants from the onion, the onion will not get what it wants from the person either. The onion's desire is simple and, despite its bent for philosophy, no deeper than basic survival. The onion only wants the person to stop peeling and cutting. The sum of the onion's desire is mere survival. Although it has the ability to understand and recognize ideological and psychological motives, its only concern is existence. Just as the person will not get from the onion what she wants, the onion will not get what it wants from the person. The person will not stop dismantling the onion, and the onion is powerless to stop the dismantling.

Although the onion is powerless to defend itself in any physical way, it still displays its own brand of violence. Where the person is physically violent and uses power to subdue the onion, the onion uses philosophical and intellectual power to try to defend itself. The only physical defense the onion has is its ability to sting the person's eyes and make the person weep. This is significant, because it is a passive defense (the onion does not will itself to release the chemicals that make the person's eyes water), and it is an inadequate defense. The person's eyes may water, but that is not nearly a strong enough defense to make the person stop peeling, cutting, and chopping. Faced with its basic weakness, the onion fights back with sarcasm, berating and belittling the person for the pointless violence. Positioned as the intellectually superior figure, the onion hopes to ridicule the person into stopping the attack. When that does not work, the onion ultimately strives to teach the person the errors of her ways. By helping the person understand herself better, the onion hopes to help itself survive the attack.

The onion never fully acknowledges its own powerlessness but perseveres in its verbal attacks. Again, Kim uses startling language, putting harsh words in the mouth of the onion as it tries in vain to defend itself. At first, the onion's language is gentle and understanding. Its first appeal to the person is that it means no harm and does not deserve to be attacked. Then the onion says, □Poor deluded human: you seek my heart□ (line 6). This seems genuinely compassionate and insightful. But when this approach does nothing to stop the attack, the onion becomes more angry and judgmental. By the fourth stanza, the tone has changed: □Look at you, chopping and weeping. Idiot. / Is this the way you go through life, your mind / A stopless knife, driven by your fantasy of truth, / Of lasting union.□ The onion resorts to name-calling and revealing the person's personal failings and ignorance. The onion criticizes the person's entire approach to life, accusing her of seeking unity and truth based on lies and self-delusion. The ideological attacks continue, and the imagery remains violent, as when the onion tries to make the person realize that there is no way to perceive the world without veils. The onion says, □How will you rip away the veil of the eye□ (line 18). Then the onion points out to the person that for all of the cutting, she is □the one / In pieces□ (lines 22-23), □Your soul cut moment to moment by a blade / Of fresh desire□ (lines 25-26). In revealing to the person how insistence on destroying the onion has brought about the person's own destruction, the onion uses violent imagery. This is appropriate, because the situation is hostile. Throughout the poem, the onion tries to reach the person by speaking truth.

The layers of metaphor in "Monologue for an Onion" are deep. Within the context of Kim's work, it is appropriate to apply a reading of this poem as a metaphor for a people being savaged by their own rulers. Kim's family is from Korea, and much of her poetry preserves the struggles of her family and her nation as it has endured war, social strife, and political instability. In "Monologue for an Onion," these themes are clear. The person cutting the onion represents an unjust ruler, motivated by an ideology that is doomed to fail because of its own confusion and lies. The onion represents the people, basically powerless to defend themselves and yet trying to survive by fighting back with truth. Oppressive governments almost universally sacrifice their own people on the altar of their ideology. The people become the means to an elusive end, and they suffer greatly as a result. There are many incidents in history in which the cutting and slashing has been literal, and there have been many in which it has been figurative. The "onion-juice" on the person's hands in line 21 represents the blood on the hands of dictators and murderous regimes. As with the person cutting the onion, the governments generally find themselves destroyed in the end.

In the poem, the person desperately pursues a core, a center of stability. But the onion reveals to the person that even her own heart, her own core, is divided and unstable. The same can be said of unjust regimes; lacking truth and goodness at their core, they are doomed to instability, division in the ranks of the power-hungry, and an eventual loss of focus. Within this context, Kim suggests that true wisdom is readily available among the people, who long to guide and correct their rulers. The violence and hostility of "Monologue for an Onion" is a chilling reminder of the lengths to which rulers have gone to oppress their own people. And the people, for all their anger and hostility, have the ability to respond with wisdom and insight. They possess the ability to understand just power, and their suffering does not have to be meaningless.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "Monologue for an Onion," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Neil Heims is a writer and teacher living in Paris. In this essay, he argues that the poet represents her feelings by comparing herself to an onion.

Because onions do not talk, it is reasonable to deduce that “Monologue for an Onion,” which features a talking onion, is using the onion as an imaginative substitute for a person, who can talk. Consequently, there is a central utterance that, despite the title, has been left unsaid. It is implicit and essential: “You make me feel like an onion when it is being peeled.” The poet is saying, using the metaphor of an onion, “I feel as if you are tearing me apart.” The feelings that the onion being peeled and the speaker comparing herself to an onion being peeled experience are rage and contempt for the person doing the peeling and tearing.

Although the poem is a monologue, it is a two-character poem. There is the speaker, and there is the person to whom she is speaking, the “you,” silent throughout the poem, who is the cause of the monologue. This “you” has, presumably, just finished speaking, and the poem is a response. The reader must reconstruct his previous words and his behavior from what the speaker says. The speaker's monologue, indeed, reveals as much about her interlocutor as it does about her.

“I don't mean to make you cry,” undoubtedly is uttered in response to the other person's tears. As with an onion, his tears come not from what she is doing to him but from what he is doing to her: tearing her apart. Tears, although they often genuinely express grief and sadness, often also can be, even when genuine, used in an attempt to manipulate. Tears can express the demand that someone else capitulate to us, give in to our wish. They can express frustration and anger as well as grief. Tears can be aggressive, even if sincere. The silent crying person in “Monologue for an Onion” is demanding from the speaker, by those tears, that she yield herself to him, that she be as he wants her to be. But the speaker is like an onion with regard to her suitor. She has nothing to show him but the surface he is tearing at as he tries to find something solid and deeper. She is not, at bottom, his idea of her. She is only herself. He finds only layer under layer of the same thing as he tries to penetrate to her depths. Her defiant assertion is that there is no depth. She is what she seems to be, not what he wishes to find in her.

“I mean nothing,” she says, backing away from an undesired involvement. “But this has not kept you / From peeling away my body, layer by layer,” she reminds him. You are looking, she says, for something in me that is not there, something you want to get from me that I do not wish, that I do not *have*, to give. The “lasting union” he desires she calls a “fantasy.” When he cannot find what he wants in her, he keeps “slashing away skin after skin,” tearing at her, deluded by the belief that if he tears off one more layer of her being, he will find what he wants, her heart, and possess it. But an onion has no heart, no center, no core. There are only the spiraling layers of skin that he discards in the “hunt” for the heart. An onion is only surface straight down to its

nonexistent center. The speaker of the monologue is nothing more than what she appears to be.

As the monologue develops, protest becomes accusation. Your pursuit of me is an assault against me, the speaker says. The peeled-off skin of the onion is likened to chunks of the speaker's flesh, □all the debris of pursuit.□ The pursuer is depicted as □chopping and weeping.□ The self-centered aggressor appears to feel that he himself is the victim. The actual victim of his attack, the speaker of the monologue, can preserve herself only by practicing something like the martial arts strategy of using the force of the attack against the attacker rather than exerting force against him. The speaker turns accusation into instruction:

Is this the way you go through life, your mind

A stopless knife, driven by your fantasy of truth,

Of lasting union□slashing away skin after skin

From things, ruin and tears your only signs

Of progress? . . .

The questions are reproaches. Seeking his idea of union and progress, her tormentor creates only □ruin and tears.□

In the sixth stanza, the metaphor of the onion is extended. The layers of onion skin become veils, and the idea that there is something deeper and truer underneath, which is being hidden by what is on the surface, is explored and exploded. The veils, the layers of onion skin, the surface of the person who is encountered, these the poet says constitute reality and constitute their own real meaning. They hide nothing; they are the textures of being. What her interlocutor wishes to do□□to grasp the heart / Of things, hungry to know where meaning / Lies□□is a mistake. His aggression does not yield what actually is, what things mean. Ripping off the veils does not get to the heart of the matter, to a place of one essential truth. Rather its end is a place where□the poet suggests by the way words are distributed on the lines□meaning □lies,□ that is, deceives. Meaning is not an attribute of the onion or the speaker but the fantasy of the person who tears at the speaker as if she were an onion. Like an onion, the speaker does not *mean*; both merely *are* and can yield nothing more than what they are.

In □Monologue for an Onion,□ the idea that existence is a transparent absolute is reinforced by the structure of the poem itself. The sentences of the poem are like a winding layer turning around upon itself. Each successive word seems to be a peeling torn from previous words. This effect of layering and unwrapping is accomplished primarily by a combination of rhyme, assonance (the repetition of similar vowel sounds), and consonance (the repetition of similar consonants). The rhymes do not come in their traditional place at the end of lines, and they do not provide the customary stopping point or give a sense of completed individual units. Instead, the rhymes appear inside the poem and roll into each other. In the lines □Is this the way you go through life, your

mind / A stopless knife, driven by your fantasy of truth,□ the rhymes □life□ and □knife□ have been removed from their generally accepted position at the end of the lines and placed in each line where the caesura (the pause that divides a line of verse into two sense and breath units) occurs. The end word, □truth□ resonates as a slant rhyme, an imperfect rhyme. It recalls the □f□ sound in □life,□ □knife,□ and □fantasy□ distorted in the □th,□ and it recalls the □oo□ sounds in the word □through,□ which precedes □life□ on the first line.

A similar dislocation of rhyme occurs in an earlier tercet (a group of three lines of verse): □Hunt all you want. Beneath each skin of mine / Lies another skin: I am pure onion□pure union / Of outside and in, surface and secret core.□ The first line begins with the slant rhyme of □hunt□ and □want,□ making it seem as though the word □want□ is being peeled off the word □hunt.□ The repetition of the word □skin□ in the first and second lines does not make for a rhyme, but it does give a hint of something diaphanous, especially because of the intervening end of the line, □mine,□ and the aural similarity □Lies□ has to □mine.□ The echo in the language suggests the transparent skin of an onion and the phenomenon of surface revealed beneath surface. The word □in□ coming right at the caesura of the third line, however, provides a true rhyme with the word □skin□ in the middle of the line above. Between those two rhyming words twisted into the circle of the poem (between □skin□ and □in□), Kim twice lets the □in□ sound reverberate in the words □onion□ and □union.□ Each echoing sound seems to lie beneath a preceding similar version of that sound like the layers of skin that make up an onion.

Establishing the authenticity of the onion by constructing the poem like an onion, Kim contrasts the seamless unity of the onion with the divided character of the monologist's silent interlocutor. □Whatever you meant to love, in meaning to / You changed yourself: you are not who you are.□ He is □divided at the heart.□ He demands to have the speaker be the way he wants her to be, not really as she is. He wants her, but he does not want *her*. That sets him apart from himself as well as from her. It divides him into the person who thinks he loves but who actually does not love. He loves the one he is set on having only if she conforms to his image, his truth, of how he wants her to be and takes on the meaning and, consequently, the identity he has assigned her despite herself. Her last words to him, consequently, that his heart □will one day beat you to death,□ do not just state a fact of life but also express an angry wish.

Source: Neil Heims, Critical Essay on □Monologue for an Onion,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #3

Bryan Aubrey holds a PhD in English and has published many articles on contemporary poetry. In this essay, he discusses Monologue for an Onion as a metaphysical poem about the human quest for knowledge, fulfillment, and love.

Kim's □Monologue for an Onion□ is a witty and biting critique of the ways in which humans seek to know and to love, their earnestness matched only by the ignorant stupidity with which they go about their task. The poem does not present any optimism at all about the human condition, and its tone is relentlessly mocking. Humans are viewed as lost creatures, wandering in a maze, divided against themselves, seeking understanding but unwittingly ensuring that they will never find it.

Those who read the entirety of Kim's collection of poems *Notes from the Divided Country* will not be surprised to find the poet presenting such a bleak picture of human folly and blindness. For the most part, the book is a long song of suffering, conveyed with a visceral immediacy that scalds the mind and heart. The divided country of the title is Korea, and in many of the most powerful poems, the poet imagines herself back into the turbulent history of her country of origin, including the period of the Japanese occupation, from 1932 to 1950, and the Korean War of the early 1950s. These are poems that record, to use the Scottish poet Robert Burns's phrase, □man's inhumanity to man□; reading them is like stepping into a war zone and hearing the cries of the wounded, seeing the rotting corpses of the dead, and feeling the anguish of survivors who have lost their loved ones. The images are harrowing, and the poet refuses to flinch or to turn away from sights that, once burned into the retina, will not easily be removed.

It is this kind of imagery□of mutilation and torn, broken bodies, of the anguish of separation and loss□that carries over, in a rather different context, to □Monologue for an Onion,□ which is really a metaphysical poem about the human quest for knowledge, fulfillment, and love. The human mind is presented, like the knife that cuts the onion, as a □stopless knife,□ cutting and slashing, crudely violating the very things it is trying to understand: the nature of human experience and the meaning of life. It is also making a mess of the attempt to love, to forge that elusive union with another human being.

Although one would not describe Kim as a Romantic poet, there is nonetheless something in this aspect of the poem that suggests the romantic rebellion against reason. Romanticism was a nineteenth-century literary movement that decried the overreliance on the rational intellect at the expense of intuition and the unifying values of the heart. Reason, the capacity of discrimination, fragments life into compartments but misses the wholeness of things. It knows differences but not unity. William Wordsworth, in his poem □The Tables Turned,□ called it the □meddling intellect.□ This is perhaps what is suggested in the poem's image of a person peeling an onion as a metaphor for the desperate but fruitless search for knowledge. The mind □slash[es] away skin after skin / From things□ but produces only □ruin and tears□ instead of progress. Humans flail away at life, □hungry to know where meaning / Lies,□ seeking

frantically to understand. But like a man standing in quicksand, whose every struggle to escape only pulls him deeper into trouble, the more they try to attain knowledge, the more profound their ignorance becomes. Read with some of Kim's other poems in mind that tell of horrific events endured by people helpless to avert their fate, these mocking lines in □Monologue for an Onion□ become particularly telling images of the smallness of humans, their frailty and inadequacy as actors in a cruel universe, trying to understand the mystery of why things happen as they do but succeeding only in constantly adding to their misery and bewilderment.

At one point in this grim indictment of the folly of humans, the poet seems to offer a piece of advice: □You must not grieve that the world is glimpsed / Through veils. How else can it be seen?□ She seems to suggest that the essence of things and people is unknowable, and that this should not be cause for distress. She counsels acceptance. It is as if she is saying, Be content with the way things are. Do not try to penetrate beyond the veil, for it is the human condition to see only in part. Restless seeking and striving, in an effort to □grasp the heart / Of things,□ will never yield the desired result. Instead, they serve only to bind a person's chains tighter and leave them even more confused.

If the aforementioned lines might be construed as a piece of well-meaning advice, it is the only such example in the poem, which is otherwise a merciless assault on what the onion□in the poet's witty conceit□regards as a misguided, pitiable creature. Humans not only do not find the knowledge or the love they seek, they fragment themselves in the process (□You are the one / In pieces□). Lost and floundering, people do not know who they are. They have become ignorant of their own selves, torn apart by one conflicting desire after another. The poet sounds an almost Buddhist sensibility when she writes, □you are not who you are, / Your soul cut moment to moment by a blade / Of fresh desire, the ground sown with abandoned skins.□ At the core of Buddhism are the Four Noble Truths. The first is that life is suffering; the second, that the suffering is caused by attachment to desire. Every moment of a person's life, the wheel of desire turns. Fulfillment of each desire leads to only a moment's satisfaction before the next desire arises in a never-ending chain. There is neither peace nor rest.

For the Buddhist, however, there is hope, because the third and fourth Noble Truths state that freedom from suffering comes when attachment to desire ceases and that this freedom can be achieved through the Eightfold Path. But □Monologue for an Onion□ offers no such hope. It is not a religious poem. It offers no prospect of salvation or transcendence. There is no nirvana existing beyond the senses. On the contrary, humans are presented as embodiments of a kind of blind desire, forever reaching out in the darkness but never attaining what they seek. Unlike the onion, which is □pure union / Of outside and in, surface and secret core,□ humans are divided against themselves and possess no stable center from which self-knowledge might emerge: □At your inmost circle, what? A core that is / Not one.□

The masterly last three lines of the poem make clear, however, that humans are not empty at the core; on the contrary, they are too full; they cannot cope with all that courses through their hearts: □Poor fool, you are divided at the heart, / Lost in its maze of chambers, blood, and love, / A heart that will one day beat you to death.□ These lines

artfully combine the physical characteristics of the human heart and the role it plays in the body with the emotional qualities associated with it. The assonance (repetition of similar vowel sounds) in the words □blood□ and □love□ links them ominously together. The heart is the source of innumerable connections with other people and their fates; it is the mysterious seat of life, its pathways secret and unknown and its passions unruly, divisive, often painful, and ending only in death. The heart, too, is a □divided country.□

Such is the verdict of Kim's metaphorical onion, and there cannot be many poems in the English language that interrogate the human mind and heart with this degree of cool, detached ruthlessness. □Monologue for an Onion□ may be grimly pessimistic, but its assault on human folly has a kind of uncompromising purity to it, like a sheet of clear ice.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on □Monologue for an Onion,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Write a companion poem for “Monologue for an Onion” that presents the other side of the story. What are the thoughts and intentions of the person who is peeling and cutting the onion? Are the tears merely the result of cutting the onion, or do you imagine something else going on in the person's mind?

What characteristics of an onion make it a good choice for Kim's poem? Can you think of anything else that would have worked? Organize your thoughts on these questions and prepare a lesson for a poetry workshop about choosing suitable subject matter for poetry.

Throughout “Monologue for an Onion,” Kim introduces startling and sometimes violent imagery. Look for pictures from magazines, newspapers, and books to create a slideshow or PowerPoint presentation, combining the text of the poem with visual images to bring it to life. If you are artistically inclined, you may include original drawings, but your artwork should not make up more than half of the project.

Research the history of Korea, with particular attention to the division of North Korea and South Korea. Be sure to read about the Korean War, the political struggles in both nations, and the cultural consistencies and differences. Take what you know and interpret the poem as a political piece. Write an essay about the role of literature as a reflection of a nation's history, using this poem as your primary example. You may include other works but only to illustrate specific points.

Choose one other poem from *Notes from the Divided Country* as a contrast to “Monologue for an Onion.” Look for differences in content, themes, language, form, or voice. Lead a small-group discussion about the two poems, focusing on what you learn about Kim as a poet and what you learn about poetry in general through the two poems.

What Do I Read Next?

Edited by Marilyn Chin and Victoria Chang, *Asian American Poetry: The Next Generation* (2004) includes not just the work of Kim but also the work of other young Asian American poets.

O Taste and See: Food Poems (2003) is edited by David Lee Garrison and Terry Hermsen. This anthology is a collection of poems about food and its meaning, rituals, and roles in everyday life.

The Asian American journalist Helen Zia shares her personal memories and her research of Asian American history in *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People* (2001). With this book, Zia hopes to fill in the gaps in American history and give Asian Americans better insight into the experiences of their forebears.

Amy Tan's second novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), is the story of a Chinese woman, Winnie, and her strained relationship with her American-born daughter. As the novel unfolds, Winnie reveals the terrible struggles of her past in China and how she overcame them.

Further Study

Doran, Geri, *Resin: Poems*, Louisiana State University Press, 2005.

Doran's collection is the 2004 winner of the Walt Whitman Award and contains poems of grief, struggle, and perseverance. She visits the devastation of such places as Chechnya and Rwanda, bringing the pain of modern history to her poetry.

Kerber, Linda K., and Jane Sherron De Hart, eds., *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

In this widely consulted anthology of women's history in America, Kerber and De Hart offer almost one hundred essays and documents relating the events and experiences of this particular historical perspective. The editors include selections that give insight into a wide range of experiences from colonial to modern times and include factors such as race and class.

Lim, Shirley, ed., *Asian-American Literature: An Anthology*, NTC, 1999.

By compiling poetry, memoirs, plays, and short stories by Asian American writers, Lim introduces readers to this unique segment of writers. Especially for students new to studying the literature of this American ethnic group, this anthology serves as a good introduction.

Myers, Jack, *The Portable Poetry Workshop*, Heinle, 2004.

This spiral-bound book guides beginning and intermediate writers through the process of writing poetry. Because it uses a workshop format with lots of exercises, the text engages writers and helps them take steps toward writing better poetry.

Xun, Lu, *Wild Grass*, Chinese University Press, 2003.

Xun is acknowledged as one of the preeminent voices of modern Chinese literature. After abandoning a career in medicine in favor of writing, he has concentrated his efforts on short fiction and prose poems that address China's problems. Xun is pained by the struggle of his fellow Chinese and explores its meaning in his writing.

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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.

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

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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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