My Father's Song Study Guide

My Father's Song by Simon J. Ortiz

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Introduction

Ortiz's poetry first appeared in 1969 in the *South Dakota Review*'s special Indian issue, "The American Indian Speaks." Since that time, Ortiz has been critically acclaimed as among the best of the contemporary Native-American poets, a recognition that extends to Indian circles. While the Native- American oral tradition, which includes song and prayer, has generally been unchronicled, contemporary American Indians such as Ortiz are creating a canon of prose and poetry that draws on this tradition.

Ortiz's poetry, including "My Father's Song," which was first published in 1976 in *Going for the Rain*, is strongly narrative. Ortiz has defended his style, stating, "Indians always tell a story. The only way to continue is to tell a story." This particular poem "continues" by remembering a moment in which his father passed on to him the reverence for the earth and for its living creatures. The language is deceptively simple and conversational, presenting images with full significance. Ortiz has said, "I try to listen to the voices of the people back home and use their sounds to direct my composition." The impulse for "My Father's Song" is the desire to hear his father's voice, engendered by his own need to "say things." In addition to this active practice of the oral traditions of his people and the basic philosophy they represent, Ortiz works to present in his poetry the specifics of his life as a Native American in such a way that the poems can achieve a more universal significance. In other words, the value of his poetry is not in presenting the life of the Native American as a cultural artifact, but in presenting the life of the Native American as one version of a contemporary American life.

Author Biography

Simon J. Ortiz was born in 1941, at the Pueblo of Acoma, near Albuquerque, New Mexico, the son of Joe L. Ortiz and Mamie Toribio Ortiz. Ortiz attended Grants High School in Grants, New Mexico, and then he worked briefly in the uranium mines and processing plants of the Grants Ambrosia Lake area. Ortiz then attended Fort Lewis College, where he became interested in drama and English studies. A leader of the Indian Student Organization, Ortiz became involved in issues of fair treatment for native peoples. Ortiz enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1963, after which he attended the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque. He received a master's of fine art degree from the University of Iowa in 1969. Ortiz taught writing and American Indian literature at various colleges and universities, including San Diego State University, the Institute of American Arts in Santa Fe, and the University of New Mexico. In December 1981, Ortiz married Marlene Foster, and in the following years, they had three children, Raho, Rainy, and Sara. They divorced in 1984. Since 1982, Ortiz has been the consulting editor of the Pueblo of Acoma Press, and, in 1989, he became First Lieutenant Governor for Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico.

Poem Text

Wanting to say things,
I miss my father tonight.
His voice, the slight catch,
the depth from his thin chest,
the tremble of emotion
in something he has just said
to his son, his song:

We planted corn one Spring at Acu□
we planted several times
But this one particular time
I remember the soft damp sand
in my hand.

My father had stopped at one point
to show me an overturned furrow;
the plowshare had unearthed
the burrow nest of a mouse
in the soft moist sand.

Very gently, he scooped tiny pink animals
into the palm of his hand
and told me to touch them.
We took them to the edge
of the field and put them in the shade
of a sand moist clod.

I remember the very softness
of cool and warm sand and tiny alive mice
and my father saying things.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-6

It seems at first that the speaker is missing his father because he expresses a wish to say things to him. However, in line 3, it becomes apparent that it is his father's voice the son misses. He remembers it as a physical thing coming from his father's body. His father's voice becomes through the image of his "chest" a solid physical entity stronger than that "thin chest."

Line 7

This line provides a powerful transition between the two stanzas. The father's voice in the first stanza is speaking to his son, and what is to follow is the persona's "song" to his father, the poem that tells the story developed out of the memories. The two words, however, "son" and "song," by their closeness to one another in sound and sight, communicate that the persona himself understands that he is, in a way, his father's "song" by being his "son."

Lines 8-10

The storytelling technique of repetition functions in an almost incantatory fashion here to lead readers into a place where memory is real. Lines 8 and 9 both begin "We planted," and lines 9 and 10 play on the word "time." It is characteristic of the oral storytelling mode that the teller talk his or her way into the tale, not leaving out the steps to getting there. Western storytelling, in contrast, generally values a more finished story product. Readers follow the persona in this poem through the general statement of line 8, to an explanation that this planting was one of many plantings, finally closing in on the one particular story or memory he wants to relate.

Lines 11-12

There is a digression here, as there often is in the rhythms of natural conversation. The persona is telling the story to the reader in line 11 but almost addressing his comment to his father in line 12. The rhymed couplet at the conclusion of the stanza emphasizes the tactile image of the sand.

Lines 13-17

The image of the sand brings the persona to the beginning point of the story, which is signalled by the stanza break. The father bends over the sand, pointing out to his son a place where the plow has overturned a nest of mice. The assonance of the vowel

sounds of "overturned furrow," "unearthed," and "burrow," as well as the rhyme of "furrow/burrow," draw together the strands of this image that is spread over three lines. The effect is of patience, as the father clearly has with his son and the nest of mice and of focus, which is required for anyone to pay such close attention to tiny mice while plowing□ or even to a child while doing adult work. The image of the sand, which houses the nest, closes this stanza and parallels the closing image of sand in the son's hand in the final line of the second stanza.

Lines 18-23

In a gesture that contrasts with the strong hand necessary to plow a field, the father lifts the surprise of these small creatures for his son "to touch." It is interesting to note that it is not enough for the father that the son see these animals; he directs him to touch the mice so that he can feel the life even in something so small. The carefulness of this small gesture is then enlarged upon as the father and the son together move the little animals out of harm's way, out of the hot sun which would scorch them, and back under a clod of cool sand at "the edge / of the field." It is again the physical memory of the sand that closes this stanza.

Lines 24-25

Line 24 characterizes the memory the persona has just related, referring to the gesture of the father, his gentleness toward the mice and to his son. The "softness" from this line moves forward to the tactile image of "cool" and "warm" and movement remembered in the son's experience of touching the mice.

Line 26

The effect of "softness" in the opening line of the fifth stanza is felt in this closing line as well, through the poet's careful lineation into the statement "I remember," then into the tactile image of mice, and finally into remembering the "softness" of the father's voice.

The poem comes full circle here, and the reader realizes with the poet that it is the voice of his father teaching him□"saying things" about tiny baby mice, about the importance of protecting little animals□ that he misses. The tradition of passing on stories, information, about life from one generation to the next is the focus here. While it is typical Native-American oral tradition, hence the emphasis on the father's voice, Ortiz enlarges upon this tradition in his poem. He is not merely relating what he knows to a generation that comes after him, he is presenting the tradition as a valuable lifestyle for everyone.

The poem communicates the understanding that even in the midst of busy adult life with its purposeful action, there must be time to honor even the smallest manifestations of life, even those that innocently get in the way. Ortiz the poet has effectively become the song his father sang to him, which he sings to the reader in this poem.

Themes

Language

Phrases such as "actions speak louder than words" highlight the notion that to be credible language must be accompanied by corresponding behavior. Ortiz's poem underscores this point. Although the speaker opens the poem by saying that he misses his father's voice, he does not say that he misses *what* his father says. Rather, Ortiz emphasizes the physical qualities of voice such as "the slight catch" and "the tremble of emotion" when his father speaks. What he really misses is his father's presence, the way in which he interacted with him. By describing his memory of his father showing him the overturned furrow and placing newborn mice in his hands, Ortiz highlights behavior, not words. The link between the speaker's longing "to say things" and missing his father expresses the link between desire and creativity, for Ortiz does "say things" by the act of writing the poem.

Teaching

The relationship between parents and children is also one between teachers and students. Parents teach their children through example and explanation about the world and themselves. Ortiz describes one such experience, in which his father teaches him compassion for all living things by moving vulnerable newborn mice to a safer place. By first placing the mice in his son's hands, the father bonds the animals to his child. Significantly, it's the tactile sensation that the speaker remembers and not the words that his father says. That the memory is so powerful that Ortiz writes about it years later suggests that his father's lesson was learned. Ortiz keeps his father's memory alive by making it into a poem. Ortiz comes from a culture with an oral tradition, and one means of passing down information about your family and people is by making it into a story which you tell to others

His father's song, ironically, isn't a song at all but an event in which the father teaches the son a lesson about life. Ortiz uses singing, in this sense, figuratively. Songs by definition include music and sometimes words. However, the speaker's father does not sing in the poem. Instead, he shows his son an "overturned furrow" and places newborn mice in his hands.

Nature

The Acoma people are tied to the land, and Ortiz himself has commented that every aspect of his life is related to the natural world. "My Father's Song" underscores this relationship, emphasizing that one's own identity and purpose depends on an understanding of nature's processes and humans' relationship to other living beings. By choosing the incident of corn planting at Acu to figuratively describe his father's song, Ortiz zeroes in on that incident's significance. The feel of the "soft damp sand" and the

"tiny pink animals" in his hand and the sight of the overturned furrow reinforce the connection between his own body and the earth's. Just as the tiny newborn mice need to be protected and nurtured in order to live, so too does the memory of Ortiz's father.

Poetry

Teachers of poetry and fiction are fond of telling their students that good writing *shows* readers something rather than *tells* them about it. Ortiz's poem follows this advice in both form and content. His father shows him the beauty and preciousness of living beings by placing the mice into his hands, just as Ortiz the poet shows readers his love for his father through description rather than explanation. The concrete images he chooses such as "sand moist clod" and "tiny alive mice" provide readers with a detailed image that sticks in their minds long after they've finished the poem.

Style

"My Father's Song" takes the shape of a simple first person childhood memory story. It is structured into five stanzas of varying length. The syntax is conversational, with the punctuation simply marking pauses and stops.

The poem is framed by the first two lines, "Wanting to say things, / I miss my father tonight," and the concluding stanza, which begins "I remember. . ." and ends with "and my father saying things." In between are memories, each stanza bringing the memory to a solid physical reality of "the soft damp sand," "the soft moist sand," and "a sand moist clod."

In the first stanza, there is the physical memory of the voice moving out of his father's "thin chest." The second stanza is the memory of the specific activity of planting corn. The memory deepens in the third stanza, with the discovery of a nest of mice. The fourth stanza focuses the memory more closely by the appearance of the "tiny pink animals." The final stanza connects this memory back to the father's voice.

Historical Context

Native-American History: 1960s-1970s

During the late 1960s and early 1970s in America many oppressed groups, including African Americans and women, protested economic and social inequality and demanded greater representation. This was a time of idealism and youthful enthusiasm, when a just future for all seemed possible. By the mid-1970s, Americans had developed a hardened cynicism, born from their failure in Vietnam and the debacle of Watergate.

Around the time when Ortiz was writing the poems that appeared in *Going for the Rain* (1976), Native Americans were rebelling against centuries of oppression by the United States government. Then, as now, most Native Americans lived on impoverished reservations, their land and many of their traditions taken from over a few hundred years by European colonizers. In 1969, a group of Native- American activists occupied vacant Alcatraz Island, off the coast of San Francisco, for eighteen months. The group demanded that a cultural and educational center for Native Americans be built on Alcatraz, formerly the site of a federal prison.

In 1972, another group of activists led a march to Washington, D.C., to publicize the numerous treaties between the United States government and various Native-American tribes that had been broken. They called this march "The Trail of Broken Treaties," alluding to the forced migration of the Cherokee Indians from the eastern United States in 1838-1939 called "The Trail of Tears." Once in Washington, they occupied the offices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs for a week.

A more radical group of activists, the American Indian Movement, seized the village of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1973 to protest the collusion between the government and what they claimed was a corrupt tribal leadership. The federal government agreed to negotiate with the Indians after 71 days, but they refused to reopen treaty negotiations. Two AIM leaders, Russell Means and Dennis Banks, were arrested and indicted for their part in the siege. These actions gave Native Americans across the country courage to battle the federal government, and many tribes took the federal government to court in an attempt to reclaim land and demand enforcement of treaties. The Sioux, for example, sued to reclaim 1.3 million acres of land in Black Hills, South Dakota, and the Passamaquoddy and Penobscot tribes in Maine won a $37 million dollar settlement from the United States government.

Native American Publishing

In the 1960s and 1970s, many Native-American authors published their writing to public acclaim. Kiowa Indian N. Scott Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1969. In 1971, Ortiz published a chapbook of poems, *Naked in the Wind*, followed by *Going for the Rain* (1976), and *A Good Journey* (1977). This was also

the year that Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko published her startling first novel, *Ceremony*. Other important novels of this period include Blackfeet Indian James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974) and *Riding the Earthboy 40* (1976).

Over the next few decades, numerous Native- American poets and fiction writers gained an audience for their writing. Some of the most important include poets Joy Harjo, a Muskogee Creek; Adrian Louis, a member of the Paiute tribe; and much-lauded novelist Sherman Alexie, a member of the Coeur d'Alene tribe. Writing in the late 1980s in *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*, Ortiz himself notes:

It has been only a little more than twenty years since
Indian writers began to write and publish extensively,
but we are writing and publishing more and more;
we can only go forward. . . . we persist and insist in
living, believing, hoping, loving, speaking, and writing
as Indians.

Critical Overview

Andrea-Bess Baxter extols the 1991 publication of *Woven Stone*, which includes "My Father's Song," as "a testament to Simon Ortiz's influential career." Baxter emphasizes the importance of this volume as a collection of previously published poetic works that "use oral histories, narratives, and stories" and are based on "memories of a traditional upbringing at Acoma Pueblo, New Mexico," intertwined with contemporary experiences. She notes Ortiz's clear commitment to "native survival and endurance," but contends that "Ortiz's gift lies in making us aware of our own personal responsibility." This manifests itself powerfully in the simple story told in "My Father's Song."

Many critics see Ortiz's work as part of a contemporary Native-American renaissance. Ortiz himself has suggested that such a critical evaluation denies the ongoing oral tradition intrinsic to Native-American culture. He has discussed the oral tradition of Native Americans as "not merely a simple matter of speaking and listening, but living that process." "My Father's Song" embodies this philosophy.

Willard Gingerich indicates that the oral tradition and the voice of Ortiz's father are inextricably linked, so that "There is first his father . . . and there is the private song of that voice." Gingerich indicates that "we touch here the sacred core of what oral tradition means to those who carry it, not only in the grand affairs of religion and culture, but in the small, everyday acts of family life." In fact, Ortiz's poetic language springs from "the language and tones of his own background." He has indicated that "his formations with regards to language was . . . the way [the Acoma] spoke," and that it is listening to the voices of his people that directs the composition of his work.

Nevertheless, the authenticity of his composition is not consistently appreciated by critics. Harold Jaffe, for example, has expressed concern for what he views as the problematic syntax in Ortiz's work that seems "fractionally off, as if the English were adapted from another language." Gingerich, however, notes Ortiz's "remarkable transparency of language whose range and freshness is worth serious attention . . . [calling to mind] the conversational rhythms of Ezra Pound." But more than that, Gingerich claims, the voices of people in Ortiz's work establish "a new rhythm to English poetry." And as Ortiz himself says, "A new rhythm is a new idea."

Indeed, many may overlook the impact of Ortiz's work on the literary tradition of English poetry. There is a tendency to mistakenly read Ortiz as an example of a Native-American writer, or even read him almost anthropologically to find significance in his poems as cultural artifacts which tell about life as a Native American at the end of the twentieth century. But as Gingerich has said, just to be Native American does not ensure a writer of a place in any literary tradition, Native American or otherwise. In fact, although Geary Hobson points out that Ortiz's primary concern in his poetry is with both the history and contemporary circumstances of his own Acoma Pueblo Indian heritage, Ortiz asserts that he writes as an ordinary human being. Even so, Karl Kroeber insists that "there is no such thing as ordinary experience" and ultimately "My Father's Song"

stands as testament to the fact that very particular expressions of human experience transform the ordinary into the universal.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition. In this essay, Semansky considers the relationship between purpose and language in Ortiz's poem.

Most poets claim that their writing arises out of a necessity, that they have no choice but to write. Some see the act of composing poems as therapeutic, while others believe such a notion is heretical to the very idea of art. Other poets compare writing poems with building something well and derive satisfaction from perfecting their craft, while some consider writing a means of intellectual exploration. Still others use poetry as a means of political protest and view their work as a way to effect social change. A driving force behind the writing of many Native-American poets, such as Ortiz, is the desire to share the history of their people. "My Father's Song" is an example of such a desire.

If it were written by another poet, Ortiz's poem might be considered yet one more of the many "workshop" poems pumped out every year by aspiring writers in creative writing programs across the country. Such poems typically recount some seemingly inconsequential experience of the speaker, who is indistinguishable from the author. According to Greg Kuzma, who criticized the workshop poem in his essay "The Catastrophe of Creative Writing," these poems lack "a sense of necessity or urgency." While Ortiz's poem certainly contains markers of the workshop poem, such as the reliance on the "I" and the description of a seemingly trivial event, his purpose is larger than merely asserting the importance of the self or wallowing in the past. The remembering "I" in Ortiz's poem does not merely put the experience at Acu out there for readers to ooh and ahh at but to explain the process through which the Acoma Pueblo Indians pass down their own culture.

The transmission of cultural knowledge is one of the primary themes of *Going for the Rain*. The collection is structured as a four-part cycle detailing elements of a Pueblo rain ritual. These elements include "Preparation," "Leaving," "Returning," and "The Rain Falls." "My Father's Song" is included in the "Preparation" section, with other poems addressing Native American creation myths, fatherhood, survival, and language. In the prologue, Ortiz describes the act of preparation as follows:

A man makes his prayers; he sings his songs. He considers
all that is important and special to him, his
home, children, his language, the self that he is. He
must make spiritual and physical preparation before
anything else. Only then does anything begin.

Images of preparation and training appear throughout many of the poems in this section and in "My Father's Song." Planting corn, for example, shows the son the importance of the land to one's survival, and protecting the newborn mice shows the son the value of all living things, the interconnectedness of all life. These acts prepare the boy to be a man, giving him the tools required to lead a productive and meaningful life. These acts also help the boy to develop a sense of identity, as the lessons he learns are vital to the

values of the Acoma people. All of this preparation is necessary for the individual before he sets out on his journey through life, before he wins the right to bring back the rain to his people. In an interview published in *Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indians*, Ortiz underscores the importance of land, of place, in constructing an identity:

I can't really see any value in not knowing a place.
You have to have it. Otherwise you are drifting. You
remain at loose ends and you're always searching
without ever knowing where you are or what you're
coming to. I guess the background, the heritage of
Native American people at least offers this opportunity
to have a *place*.

This kind of earnestness, this seemingly simple approach to life is at odds with the often densely ironic and allusive poetry practiced by today's poets. And though Ortiz's poem purports to describe actual events, it is not confessional poetry, at least not in the way that term is conventionally used to describe poetry that concerns itself with exposing the lurid details of its speakers, often relating to sex, drugs, or mental instability. Ortiz's poetry is a poetry of celebration, of lightness and hope. His voice is not singular and his poems don't set out to prove how the speaker is unique, original, or different from others. Rather, it is a communal voice, determined to show the love that all boys have for their fathers and how they remember them. In this way, the poem also represents an idealized relationship. In the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, critic Marie M. Schein notes that the poems in *Going for the Rain* emphasize:

the essential values that constitute the foundation of
Ortiz's poetry; the belief in transmitting the gift of
culture to the children, the importance of language
and words, the respect for nature and for elders, and
the harmony of the botanic, animal, and human
worlds.

By packing all of these themes into his narrative poems, Ortiz creates a kind of moral urgency that seems neither moral nor urgent. His quiet voice and selection of details that show rather than tell the reader these values, give his words an easy, natural quality, as if he's merely reminding readers what they have always known. Ortiz's audience is not only other Native Americans. His stories of Acoma people and their culture are also meant to inform those unfamiliar with the Acoma way of life in particular, and the Native American experience in general. In this way, his poems serve an educational purpose. His book, after all, was published in Harper & Row's Native American publishing program. Categorizing his work as "Native-American Poetry" rather than simply "poetry" at a time when there were very few Native-American writers signed to large publishing houses gave Ortiz's work a kind of exotic appeal. His poems became representative of the Indian experience.

By writing narrative poetry, Ortiz also taps into the universal significance of storytelling to all human cultures. Schein notes that when asked to explain why he writes, Ortiz

said: "Because Indians always tell a story. The only way to continue is to tell a story." The stories of the Acoma are different in their particulars than the stories of other cultures, but they share the same drive to make sense of life, nature, and the future as other cultures.

The irony of Ortiz's poetry is that he adapts the oral tradition to tell his stories in print and in English. But this too is a survival strategy, as it helps to preserve the culture of a people who increasingly use English more and Acoma less. In *Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing*, Ortiz notes:

Using the English language is a dilemma and pretty
scary sometimes, because it means letting one's mind
willfully□although with soul and heart in shaky
hand, literally□into the Western cultural and intellectual
context, a condition and circumstance that one
usually avoids at all costs on most occasions.

However, it is also the best and surest way to reach the widest audience possible. Poems such as "My Father's Song" are important because they provide the reading public with insight into the traditions and culture of a people who have historically been neglected, demonized, and ignored. The real language in evidence in Ortiz's poem is the language of compassion and of hope, a language desired by all, though not always accessible to all. Ortiz, as poet and voice of the Acoma, is also like the shiwana (rainmakers) in the song that opens his collection. His poems are his prayers and his hope.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "My Father's Song," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature at Oakton Community College. In this essay, Kelly examines Ortiz's achievement in making readers recognize the father's "song" while avoiding references to music or words.

In "My Father's Song," poet Simon J. Ortiz accomplishes a very difficult task. The poem manages to render a nonverbal experience in printed words. This is something that poems usually try to do, but "My Father's Song" does so by pointing to the connection between experience and song while avoiding any direct reference to music. On the face of it, this is as hollow as using only colors to explain how language works, but Ortiz somehow succeeds. He leaves his readers feeling how they might after actually hearing a song that the speaker's father taught him, but this illusion is just the sign of his skill as a poet. Actually, the father's words are reproduced nowhere in the poem, and only a few of his actions are referred to directly. Ortiz redefines the word "song" to include manners and attitudes that his father passed along to him, broadening readers' perceptions of what might be considered music in the same way that deliberate, precise action is sometimes figuratively referred to as "poetic."

Ortiz was raised in the tradition of the Acoma tribe of New Mexico. The Acoma had no written language throughout most of their history, although they have always had a rich culture, which has been carried on from one generation to the next through oral storytelling. This influence is seen throughout Ortiz's poetry, to such a strong extent that it even seems a little too overly simple to draw attention to the many obvious storytelling elements in his poems. He does see the act of telling a story to be more significant and wideranging than just a transcription of events, as he has discussed frequently when talking about his work. In a 1985 interview, for instance, Ortiz addressed how the oral storytelling tradition of the Acoma affects those who have been raised within the tribe:

The oral tradition is not just speaking and listening. . .
[I]t obviously includes everything within it, whether
or not it's spoken about or acted out, or worked out,
or how people respond to each other personally and
socially.

To capture this sense of a world without writing, Ortiz's poetry has to show examples of the Acoma worldview in action. The "song" that the poem's speaker ascribes to his father in this poem is actually a feeling, caused by the father's behavior, which has a song-like effect on the poem's speaker.

This sense of "telling" and "song" that is unfamiliar to European sensibilities is indicated in the way that the poem uses the gangling phrase "saying things." In the first line, the speaker is struggling to "say things," apparently unsuccessfully□he is a poet whose words fail him, and the frustration of this situation is what brings a particular memory of his father to mind. Throughout the poem, the father's words are never directly presented to the reader. His voice is described in the first stanza after it has already come and

gone, with a reference to "something he has just said"; and in line 20 the poem mentions him telling the son something, but it does not render his exact words. The absence of direct quotation becomes conspicuous at the end, when the poem repeats the idea from the first line, using the similar phrase "saying things." Readers are forced to broaden their understanding of what it means to "say" when they see that the father has not actually said anything, at least not in the traditional sense. The poet's failure to say things, contrasted with the father's nonverbal success at it, leads to the conclusion that "saying things" is not as dependent on words as one might at first assume.

The father's song takes a different form than what readers ordinarily understand a song to be. This is emphasized in the poem by the way that this particular story of this particular day is introduced. In line 7, the poem uses the word "son" as if it is an unsuccessful, truncated attempt to say the word "song," which is spelled the same except for one final letter. The staccato, one-syllable words of the phrase "his son, his song" could give the impression of the poem's speaker stammering, choking on the expression the first time before completing it, leading to the conclusion that the two similar words are really the same thing. This structure certainly compels readers to look at how close these two words are, and doing so draws attention to how close they are in concept. Then, after "son" and "song" are united in this way, a third element is added. At the end of line 7, the colon indicates that what follows, the story of the mice in the cornfield, *is* the song and is also, then, by extension, related to the word "son." The poem's central event is therefore more than just something that happened once to the poet, it is in fact a part of his identity. The father's song is both the way that he handled the situation in the cornfield and also the person that the speaker of the poem grew up to be.

Much of this poem's power is derived from Ortiz's use of repetition. This would be true, of course, of any poem, where important points are emphasized by making readers feel the strange familiarity of having seen them before, but it is a technique that is especially important for a poem like "My Father's Song" where, as in a song, the main point comes from its mood, not its ideas. Ortiz ties the elements of this brief poem together with indistinct echoes.

There are echoes of metaphor, which are likely to have an impact on readers whether they are conscious of them or not. Of these, the most obvious is the one of planting seeds for future growth. The story this poem tells takes place when they are planting corn in spring, the traditional time of fertility. In fact, the author adds an extra line to point out "we planted several times," which shows this family's continual togetherness and also puts emphasis on the family's interest in growth. The symbolic connection between planting corn and the lesson that the father gives his son is easy enough to recognize, especially in light of the poem's circular shape: starting with the son wanting to say things and ending with the memory of the father saying things is just another way to say that the father planted the idea of oral tradition in the son's head, for future harvest. The fact that the mice are babies is symbolic enough of growth in and of itself, but the poet ties this symbol to the other one of cultivating corn by having the father place the baby mice in the soil, like seeds.

There are also echoes in the ways that Ortiz returns to one specific image at the end of every stanza in the poem's flashback story. In line 11, he refers to the memory of "the soft damp sand"; in line 17, the mice are found in "the soft moist sand"; in line 23, the father puts the baby mice into the shade next to "a sand moist clod." All of these physical images of sand are tied up in the poem's last stanza, where the reference is to "the very softness / of cool and warm sand and tiny alive mice." Earth and infants combine to capture the speaker's feelings about his father's song. The poem is tied together by the feel of sand, in some places cool and in some warm, but always soft and nurturing, reflecting its theme of how he learned from his father without words.

One final way that repetition is used to hold this poem together is in Ortiz's use of recurring sounds. There is only one direct instance of rhyming at the end of lines, at the end of the second stanza where he pairs "sand" with "hand." In addition to that, he uses some near rhymes, such as "catch" and "chest" in the first stanza and even "time" and "times" in the second: though the latter is not technically an instance of rhyme, it is definitely a case where two words sound similar, and so it serves the purpose of rhyme, which is to give the poem a sense of interconnectedness. The poem's most clever use of repeated sounds occurs in its middle stanza, where "furrow," at the end of line 14, is echoed by "burrow" in the middle of line 16, and they are surrounded by "show" and "plow[share]," which are not related by sound as much as they are by their visual presence. These subtle touches are useful for letting any poem show that an author's hand is firmly in control, but they are especially significant in a poem about a writer finding a faint, barely recognizable trace from his past repeated in such a subtle way that he can hardly believe that the connection between past and present is real.

It is through his subtle use of repetition, to such a degree that most readers are not aware of his command of technique until attention is given to them, that Ortiz is able to raise the idea of a "song" without being too specific about how the elements of singing might relate his father's thoughts and actions. Though it is not a traditional song, the father's handling of this situation is nonetheless recognizable as a song of some kind. It has musical elements in its repetition, and the artistic elements that characterize nonverbal communication in the way that it touches on universal truths. The various parts and the whole all fit together with a mathematical precision, all steering toward the one main idea of raising seeds, or mice, or cultural identity, out of the sand beneath one's feet.

The poem's greatest mystery is that it is about the oral tradition, and it is called a song, but the singer is silent throughout it. The father's words are obscured by the author's summary of what he said, so that readers experience what happened without seeing much of how he behaved. Action has priority over any one person in the world of this poem: this could be a sign of the relative insignificance of individuals, or it could be a sign that the speaker of the poem is so secure with the memory of his father that he takes it for granted. In either case, "My Father's Song" gives readers with European-based sensibilities a rare opportunity to experience how life looks from the perspective of one of the many world cultures that developed to maturity without the use of written language.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "My Father's Song," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

In 1993, Audio Literature of Berkeley, California, released *A Circle of Nations: Voices and Visions of American Indians*, an audiocassette of Ortiz and Joy Harjo reading from their work.

Topics for Further Study

Research the Acoma Pueblo Indians and prepare a presentation for your class. Include a simple map detailing where the Acoma have lived. What is their relationship to nature, language, and community?

Write a poem about one event that characterizes your own relationship to your mother or father; then, read it to your class.

Watch and compare Westerns released in the 1940s and 1950s with those released in the 1980s and 1990s. What differences do you notice between how Native Americans are represented and how do you account for these differences?

Rewrite Ortiz's poem from the point of view of the father. How does this change the themes and the meaning of the poem?

The speaker of the poem says that he wants "to say things" and that he remembers his father "saying things," yet such things are never mentioned. Rewrite the poem using dialogue instead of reported action. Does this diminish the impact of the poem? How or how not?

Research the language of the Acoma and prepare a short list of vocabulary with a pronunciation guide for your class. Include the following words from the poem: voice, corn, sand, father, hand, mice, sand, alive, damp, time.

In pairs, dramatize the poem, taking as many liberties with the "script" as you deem necessary. One person plays the father, one the son. Perform your interpretations for the class and then discuss variations.

Compare and Contrast

1970s: The Indian unemployment rate is 10 times the national average, and 40 percent of the Native- American population live below the poverty line.

Today: Half the total Native-American workforce remains unemployed, and nearly one-third live in poverty compared to 13 percent of the total U.S. population.

1970s: Native-American life expectancy is just 44 years, a third less than that of the average American.

Today: Life expectancy for Native Americans remains virtually unchanged.

1970s: The American Indian Movement leads urban Indians, traditionalists, and young Indians along the "Trail of Broken Treaties" to Washington, D.C., seizes the offices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C., and occupies them for a week in order to dramatize Indian grievances.

Today: Most Native Americans maintain an uneasy relationship with the BIA, which is responsible for managing Indian affairs, claiming that the BIA restricts their freedom and continues to demonstrate a paternalistic attitude towards Native Americans.

What Do I Read Next?

Going for the Rain: Poems by Simon J. Ortiz, published in 1976, contains many of Ortiz's most anthologized poems, including "My Father's Song" and "Hunger in New York City."

Fight Back: For the Sake of the People, for the Sake of the Land, published in 1980, contains prose and poetry by Ortiz. Ortiz focuses on Grants, New Mexico, and the surrounding communities, detailing the exploitation of the land and the people from the Spanish conquistadors and missionaries to contemporary lumber, railroad, and mining companies.

N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1976) details Momaday's journey to find out about his people, the Kiowa. The book combines poetry, fiction, history, and meditation, and weaves Kiowa mythology with the legends and memories of Momaday's own family.

The People Named the Chippewa: Narrative Histories (1984), by critic and novelist Gerald Vizenor, collects essays, mythological tales, and personal interviews to bring to life the Native- American people known by three names: the Chippewa; the Ojibwa; and, what they call themselves, the Anishinabe.

Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* (1995) tells the story of blues musician Robert Johnson, who returns from the dead and appears on the Spokane Reservation in eastern Washington. Alexie is widely considered to be one of the leading Native-American novelists writing today.

Further Study

Allen, Paula Gunn, ed., *Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs*, Modern Language Association of America, 1983.

Allen offers not only insightful essays on Native-American writers but suggestions on how to design courses in Native-American literature. Sample syllabi are included.

Niatum, Duane, ed., *Harper's Anthology of 20th Century Native American Poetry*, Harper, 1988.

This collection contains more than 350 pages of poetry from some of the leading voices in Native-American poetry, including that of Ortiz.

Smith, Paul Chaat, and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee*, New Press, 1996.

This engaging collection of documents chronicles the turbulent years from 1969, when members of the American Indian Movement took over Alcatraz Island, to 1973, when AIM sympathizers held off federal agents for eight weeks at Wounded Knee, South Dakota.

Wiget, Andrew, *Simon Ortiz*, Boise State University Press, 1986.

Wiget's critical biography is indispensable for scholars of Ortiz's writing. Wiget's accessible study makes connections between Ortiz's life and work, while providing intelligent readings of individual stories and poems.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535