Ode to a Drum Study Guide

Ode to a Drum by Yusef Komunyakaa

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Included in the first section of Yusef Komunyakaa's 1998 collection *Thieves of Paradise*, "Ode to a Drum" describes an African drum maker talking to the gazelle he has killed, while nailing the gazelle's hide to wood, and the music that results from the drum he creates. The poem was also included in the album *Love Notes from the Mad House*, Komunyakaa's musical collaboration with saxophonist John Tchicai.

"Ode to a Drum" represents many of the themes and subjects Komunyakaa has been known to address in his poetry, particularly the importance of music among African Americans and in African American history. With its short lines, jazz-influenced rhythms, and conversational diction, the poem is also written in a style representative of many of the poems in Komunyakaa's extensive oeuvre. Having grown up in the Deep South listening to blues and jazz artists such as Louis Armstrong and Ma Rainey and having been greatly influenced by such jazz legends as Charlie Parker and John Coltrane, Komunyakaa fuses the rhythms of blues and jazz into many of his poems. Since he grew up in the segregated Deep South, Komunyakaa's poetry often addresses African American issues and historical subjects.

While "Ode to a Drum" is, on a literal level, about a drum maker talking to the gazelle he killed in order to make his drum, it is also a poem about the power of music in the African and African American traditions. The drum maker has killed the gazelle to create the drum, but once the drum has been finished, it can burst into song, giving the gazelle the power to rise up once again, this time not as the hunted but as the hunter.

Author Biography

Yusef Komunyakaa (pronounced "koh-mun-yah-kuh") was born April 29, 1947, in Bogalusa, Louisiana. The oldest of five children, Komunyakaa grew up listening to blues and jazz through a radio in his mother's living room, which, along with the experiences he had in the segregated South, would influence much of his poetry. In 1965, after graduating from high school, Komunyakaa enlisted in the army and began a tour of duty in Vietnam where he would eventually become a correspondent and editor for the *Southern Cross*, the military's newspaper. He was awarded a Bronze Star for his work with the paper, and after leaving the military in the early 1970s, Komunyakaa entered the University of Colorado where he received his bachelor's degree in 1975.

In 1978, Komunyakaa received his master's degree from Colorado State University, and in 1980 he went on to receive his master of fine arts degree from the University of California at Irving. His first two self-published editions of poetry, *Dedications and Other Darkhorses* and *Lost in the Bonewheel Factory*, were released in 1977 and 1979 respectively, and his first commercial book, *Copacetic*, was published in 1984.

In 1985, Komunyakaa married the Australian writer Mandy Sayer, whom he later divorced. In July 2003, Komunyakaa's second wife, poet Reetika Vazirani, and their two-year-old son, Jehan Vazirani Komunyakaa, were found dead from what is believed to be a murder-suicide. Komunyakaa has taught at several colleges and universities and has served as a professor of creative writing at Princeton University.

He is the author of twelve collections of poetry, including *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems*, the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1994, the $50,000 Kingsley Tufts Award, and the William Faulkner Prize from the Université de Rennes. *Thieves of Paradise*, from which the poem "Ode to a Drum" is taken, was published in 1998. He has also edited several anthologies of poems, among them the two-volume *The Jazz Poetry Anthology*, published by Indiana University Press, and his work has been included in many of the nation's premier poetry journals.

In addition to the awards garnered for *Neon Vernacular*, Komunyakaa has received two National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing fellowships; the American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults selection for *Dien Cai Dau*; and a National Book Critic's Circle Award nomination for his 2001 collection, *Talking Dirty to the Gods*.

Plot Summary

Background

Komunyakaa, the author of "Ode to a Drum," is an African American poet, born to working-class parents in rural Louisiana. A profoundly intellectual man who spent time in Vietnam as a correspondent, Komunyakaa addresses a wide range of social, political, cultural, mythical, and intellectual issues and themes in his poems. His poems are often written in conversational tones and often use jazz-inspired rhythms and diction in some significant ways reminiscent of the poems of Langston Hughes and Amiri Baraka, among many others.

"Ode to a Drum" takes on themes of African music and traditions that are familiar to readers of Komunyakaa's poetry, and, like much of his work, the poem can be read on several levels. On a literal level, the poem is an account, through the eyes of an African drum maker, of the making of a drum: the killing of a gazelle, the stretching of its hide, the nailing of the hide to the carved wood, and the resulting music from the drum. On another level, "Ode to a Drum" is about the importance of music, particularly the drum, in traditional African societies: The drum maker refers to trouble in his home that the drum will help to drive away. But because of Komunyakaa's own background, one can also read into the poem the powerful influence that music has among African Americans. The gazelle, an animal of prey, is dead at the beginning of the poem, but by the poem's conclusion, through the transformational powers of the drum maker, it has taken on the form of a panther, one of the most feared predators on the African continent. Likewise, African Americans long held down through years of racism and oppression can metaphorically rise up, not as the "hunted" but as proud "hunters," like panthers. Although no direct correlation is implied in the poem with the 1960s and 1970s political and cultural black power group, the Black Panthers, one only needs a basic understanding of African Americans' history of political struggles to understand how this image can resonate among American blacks.

Odes have a long and storied tradition in poetry. From the Greek meaning "song," the form's earliest known examples were written by Sappho around 600 b.c. Among the most famous odes are those of John Keats, the British poet whose "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "Ode to a Nightingale" are among the English language's finest examples. While Komunyakaa's "Ode to a Drum" does not share the elaborate stanzaic structures or technical formality that odes have been known for, it does share the ode's proclivity for addressing important sentiments and ideas. And like "Ode on a Grecian Urn," this poem takes a physical object□in this case, a drum□as the basis for examining those important issues. By offering an ode to a drum, Komunyakaa is extolling the historical, spiritual, and cultural significance for Africans and African Americans of this simple but powerful instrument.

Lines 1—6

Though "Ode to a Drum" has strong lyrical tendencies, as do most of Komunyakaa's poems, the prevalent mode here is narrative. The poem tells a story, from the second-person point of view, of the making of a drum. The first lines of the poem□"Gazelle, I killed you / for your skin's exquisite / touch"□are straightforward and set the stage for the narration. The voice is that of an African drum maker, talking to the spirit of the gazelle as he begins to build his drum. The process of the drum making involves the killing of the animal for its hide, the scraping of the hide, and the stretching of the hide on a flat board, as mentioned in line 4.

Lines 7—16

Standing above the results of his latest hunt ("the meat here at my feet"), the narrator, in a near apologetic tone, explains to the spirit of the gazelle the reasons for his latest kill□the hungry prayers of his child. It is not anger but necessity that compels the drum maker to hunt. These lines provide a clear picture of the respect the narrator has for the animal kingdom. He goes on to compare the killing of the gazelle several weeks earlier to a sexual act, and at the same time he reminds the gazelle of the purpose of his death: "I broke you as a woman / once shattered me into a song / beneath her weight." Just as the man was "shattered . . . into a song," he "broke" the gazelle into a "grassy hush" that will soon, through the drum, also turn into song. Although African music predated and provided the ultimate influence for American blues, Komunyakaa, with the inclusion of the image of a sexual relation with a woman, juxtaposed with verbs like "broke" and "shattered," has instilled a touch of the blues into the poem.

Lines 17—29

On a literal level, these lines continue the narrator's description of his drum making: the tightening of the lashes, the shaping of the hide, and the tacking of the brass nails that help hold the hide in place. However, these lines also underscore the profound belief that the drum maker has in the metaphysical aspects of the drum. Images of body parts are used in the drum's descriptions: a ribcage, the "body's drum," and the carved ebony face of the drum. As the drum begins to take its final form, the drum maker sees the gazelle becoming "whole again." In fact, by the act of shaping the hide around the drum's body and securing it, the drum maker ensures that no "ghosts" can "slip back" in. The gazelle, though no longer in the form of an animal, has begun to take the form of the drum. One more thing to note in these lines is the imagery of the predator that makes its first appearance in the poem. The drum maker compares the lashes he is tightening to "bowstrings." Up to this point, the gazelle has been the prey; from this point forward in the poem, it will gradually become the predator.

Lines 30—39

In the poem's final ten lines, the motivation of the drum maker makes itself known. There is "trouble" in the area, and he must drive it away. As in American blues, the trouble includes poverty: "no kola nut, / palm wine, fish, salt, / or calabash"—all staples to the drum maker and his community. But now, with the help of the drum, he can drive those troubles away, and through the act of killing the gazelle and the making of the drum, he has turned the hunted gazelle into a panther, one of the most feared predators on the continent.

Themes

Africa

Although drum making exists as a craft and as an art form around the world, references to the gazelle clearly place this poem on the African continent. This is important to Komunyakaa's sense of his own identity as an African American. A subtext of the poem is that of political and cultural rebirth, or reincarnation. Just as the gazelle was defeated in the hunt, Africans were defeated at the hands of white colonialists. But like the gazelle who was given new life as a panther through the music of the drum, Africans will also rise up strong again with the help of their music and culture.

Slavery

No direct mention of slavery is made in the poem, but through the evolution of the gazelle from existing as a preyed-upon and hunted animal to a mighty and feared panther, along with references to the "trouble" that exists on the river (the primary way slave traders traveled inland to procure their slaves), Komunyakaa has placed the existence of slavery in the background to the poem.

Cycle of Life

Through the drum maker's gifts, the gazelle has been given a new life. The drum maker also makes reference to his reverence for animal life by telling the gazelle that it was not "anger" that made him kill, but rather it was a need to feed his child whose prayers for meat did not go unheard. In this way, the drum maker recognized the cycle of life that he and his family, along with the animal world, were a part of.

Rituals

Traditional African cultures relied on rituals in their everyday life. The art of crafting a drum, and drumming itself, was a part of rituals that were necessary to keep villages safe.

Man versus Nature

In traditional African villages, men relied on their ability to hunt in order to survive. Without strong and successful hunters, a village could not survive. However, although the hunter found success in a kill, the poem clearly shows the reverence Africans have for the animal kingdom. The drum maker in "Ode to a Drum" has the highest respect for the gazelle, and part of the reason for his craft is to make the gazelle "whole" again through the making of a drum from the animal's hide.

African American Identity

Like Africans before them who were colonized by white Europeans, African Americans suffered their own forms of colonialism through slavery and segregation. After segregation was ruled illegal in the 1960s, the legacy of that history remained, and Komunyakaa addresses that legacy in many of his poems. In "Ode to a Drum," just as the gazelle evolves from a defeated animal to a proud and mighty panther, African Americans, through the strength of their culture, can do the same.

Faith and Spirituality

The drum maker is not simply a craftsman; he is an integral part of his people's belief system. There is great power given to the drum□the power to drive evil spirits away and the power to unite people through song. The drum is an essential component of that belief system, which Komunyakaa brings out through the drum maker's talk with the spirit of the gazelle.

Style

Stanzaic Structure and Lineation

"Ode to a Drum" comprises a single stanza of twenty-nine lines of four to nine syllables each, with the majority of the lines five or six syllables long. Technically, the poem is considered free verse, although Komunyakaa closely controls the poem's lineation (that is, the way each line breaks) to control the poem's rhythm and to emphasize the poem's meaning. Most of the lines also carry between two and four stresses each, which help to give the poem a drum-like drive as it is read, particularly toward the end as the drum maker lists the necessities his family lacks. "Kadoom," the drum sounds, "Kadoom. Kadoom," as if punctuating the mounting emotions he is feeling from all his troubles. The line breaks also help underscore the meaning of the drum maker's monologue. The first line, "Gazelle, I killed you," offers a terse and dramatic opening to the poem, whereas the rest of the sentence goes on to explain the killing as a step in the act of the drum making. Lines 16 through 20 become shorter and tighter to reflect the tension he is creating from tightening the lashes and stretching the hide.

Diction and Tone

"Ode to a Drum" is written in the second person, from the point of view of a drum maker addressing the spirit of the gazelle he has killed. The drum maker, from a traditional African village, does not have a formal education, as we know it, but neither is he considered "simple." He must be a wise man with a reverence for the work he is doing, and the diction must reflect that. As a result, Komunyakaa uses a conversational, informal diction in the poem. The words are simple, but not overly so, and as a result the tone of the poem reflects the reverence the drum maker has for the life he has taken. He is neither angry nor sad over what he is doing; he knows this act is necessary for his survival, and he clearly respects the gazelle's role in this act.

Rhythm

The combination of stress and short lines gives the poem a driving rhythm, with the stresses punctuating the reading like a drum punctuating the air. Komunyakaa has tight control over the rhythm of each line, stretching some lines further, as the meaning of the poem dictates, and shortening others.

Imagery

"Ode to a Drum" is very much about re-creation: the drum maker has turned the gazelle into a mighty panther through the making of his drum. As such, the drum he has created is not merely a fabrication of hide and wood; it also possesses the soul of the gazelle. The drum itself is described, using images from the body□a ribcage and face, in

particular. There is also an undercurrent of sadness, an infusion of the blues, in the poem, and words like "broke," "shattered," and "pressure" help underscore that connection. As the drum maker begins to use the gazelle hide on the drum, he compares his work to that of stretching "bowstrings," which helps to highlight the fact that he is turning this animal of prey into a mighty predator who will be ready for the hunt and who will protect his people from troubles.

Historical Context

Komunyakaa is a product of the segregated Deep South. As a young boy who loved to read, growing up in rural Louisiana in the 1950s and 1960s, he was not allowed into the public libraries or many other public places, because of his race. The one cultural form of expression he had direct access to was music, through his mother's radio, and it was through that contact that he came to love jazz and the blues. And as he advanced in his writing career, those influences, along with his reading of African and African American literature and history, came to play major roles in his verse. Poets like Langston Hughes and Amiri Baraka, both known for the ways they fused music with their poetry, came to influence Komunyakaa's work significantly.

"Ode to a Drum" is very much a reflection of Komunyakaa's experiences and influences. In it, the influences of African history, music, and political and social struggles are apparent, all taking form in an allegory about a drum maker, an allegory that can also be read in the context of the struggles African Americans have had in the United States, the struggles that he grew up around and understood from firsthand experience. Through the power of culture, and music in particular, African Americans have the same potential powers as the panther; they do not have to think of themselves as gazelles waiting to be hunted down.

Drum makers and drummers were, and continue to be, vital members of traditional African societies. (And, of course, in American jazz and blues music, drummers are essential to the African American tradition as the ones who maintain the beat.) Drumming has long been used for rituals in cultures around the world. The poem makes reference to keeping "troubles" away with the drum. These troubles can range from plagues and pestilence to enemy invasions. Drumming, dancing, and singing, as well as hunting, played and continue to play sacred roles in traditional African societies.

Though the poem clearly takes place in Africa, it is significant that the actual date in which the poem takes place is indeterminate. It could be during the time of slavery; the "troubles" the drum maker refers to could be slave traders coming up the river. Or the "troubles" could be colonial administration officials in the early twentieth century coming to take away the village land to build a road to the rubber plantations. Or perhaps the setting is more contemporary, and the drum maker is referring to AIDS or some other infectious disease moving into this area. The point of the blues is that troubles have always been and will always be but music itself helps people survive. This, as much as any other idea, is the point that Komunyakaa is making in "Ode to a Drum."

Critical Overview

Thieves of Paradise, the collection in which "Ode to a Drum" is included, was Komunyakaa's tenth book and the first since his Pulitzer Prize—winning *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems*. As a highly anticipated volume, the book was widely reviewed in mainstream and poetry publications, though very few reviewers made direct mention of "Ode to a Drum."

Writing in *Poetry*, John Taylor describes Komunyakaa's poetry as bristling with "vitality, vibrancy, and an admirable concern for human suffering." The poems in *Thieves of Paradise*, Taylor writes, are at times "[s]o compelling . . . that only second readings reveal his tours de force."

In a brief *New Yorker* review, the anonymous reviewer writes of the book's "surrealist riffs, with their almost hallucinatory lushness [and] their power to convince us that the individual imagination is more than equal to the most excruciating historical burden." Similarly, *Publishers Weekly* describes Komunyakaa's language as "lush" and concludes that the "resulting vision of [Komunyakaa's] paradise . . . is a compelling one."

Poet Kate Daniels, writing in the *Southern Review*, offered one of the rare criticisms of Komunyakaa's collection, citing what she calls a "weakness in [his] aesthetic in the way he represents women." Daniels's critique focuses on the shallow dimensions the poet's female figures take on. On the one extreme, they are viewed as objects of desire, and on the other they are "too often like the casually homicidal lioness in [Komunyakaa's poem] 'Ecologue at Twilight'" who is described in the act of casually devouring her mate. However, Daniels concludes her review by recommending Komunyakaa's work. "Like the blues music he loves, Komunyakaa takes us down, then pulls us up again on the tidal rhythms of grimly powerful images," she writes.

Although "Ode to a Drum" was not mentioned directly in major reviews, several reviewers touched upon themes directly pertinent to the poem. Donna Seaman, writing in the *Booklist*, says, "The full weight of history is felt in these poems, sonorous works that echo the myths and revelations of many cultures but which revolve around the paradoxes of African American life." Poet Rafael Campo, in a review for the *Washington Post*, comments on the poet's technique and the way he uses "unusual syntactic constructions and meaning-packed line breaks," as opposed to traditional forms, to create his art. And, Campo writes, "Komunyakaa creates what every great poet must: a language that is at once utterly specific and universally recognizable, one that ultimately engenders in his reader that most elusive of all human emotions, empathy itself."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Mark White is a writer and editor running an independent press in Seattle, Washington. In the following essay, White discusses Komunyakaa's use of blues and jazz in "Ode to the Drum" and offers an allegorical interpretation of the poem.

In "Ode to a Drum," Yusef Komunyakaa enters the mind of an African drum maker as he tacks the hide of a gazelle to a drum of wood and begins to make music. On a literal level, "Ode to a Drum" takes the form of a heartfelt monologue of an artisan voicing his concerns and problems to the spirit of a dead gazelle as he performs his craft. But a closer reading of the poem reveals that Komunyakaa has fused elements of traditional blues with the form of the ode to address nothing less than the profound political, historical, and spiritual significance of the drum to African and African American cultures. And in doing so, he has used the modest voice of a lone drum maker to create an allegory and an anthem of political and cultural renewal and rebellion.

To understand the allegorical meanings of Komunyakaa's richly textured poem, a basic understanding of the role of drumming in African and African American cultures and an overview of the relationship of blues to traditional African music are necessary.

In his study of delta blues, *Deep Blues*, Robert Palmer describes how as the African slave trade evolved, several traditions and styles of African music made their ways to the American South with the slaves. In the early years of slavery, traders focused their efforts on the section of West Africa they called "Senegambia"□a region that extended from the dry northern areas of Senegal down to the northern coastline of Guinea. Because most of the area bordered the Sahara desert, there were few trees, and as a result, drums were far less prevalent than were the more Arabic-influenced stringed instruments. It was not until the slave trade moved farther south to the more heavily forested region that came to be known as the "slave coast"□the coastal regions now known as Sierra Leone and Liberia□and then even farther south to the mouth of the Congo River to what is now Angola that traders encountered Africans whose music was steeped in the rich percussive sounds and drumming that has come to define African music for most of the West.

Although Komunyakaa does not refer directly to a "tribe" or region in his poem, one can deduce from this basic overview that the drum maker in "Ode to a Drum" is from one of the more southerly regions of the West African coast. In fact, one could further deduce, though not definitively, that the drum maker is from the Congo River region and that the "[t]rouble on the river" he refers to in the poem could very well be slave traders. The Congo River and its many tributaries allowed easier access to the inner villages of the mainland than did the difficult and dangerous African terrain, and they became the main routes to and from the ships for many traders. (Because a time frame is not mentioned in the poem, it is conceivable, though unlikely, that the poem takes place in the present day, and the "troubles" could be contemporary issues such as AIDS or another infectious disease. However, the poem's setting does not affect its allegorical interpretation.)

In traditional African villages, drumming and music making played a role in virtually every aspect of daily life. Palmer points out that, although there were the individual shepherds who serenaded their flocks and lone musicians who played to entertain themselves, music was by and large a communal affair that was included in every activity of the village. And within each body of music that defined those activities, there was little distinction between the musician and the audience. Whether it was what we know now as a "call and response" or a method of harmonizing called "hocketing," the forms of music Africans played relied heavily on full, communal participation. It was those communal aspects of the music, as much as the music itself, that was important for Africans. Music kept villages close to one another, and it kept the people in those villages together. And often the drummer was the only "musician," per se, with the "audience" turning their bodies and voices into accompanying instruments.

As slaves populated the American South, their music slowly evolved and not only came to incorporate the divergent sounds of the many traditions represented by the slaves themselves, but it also came to merge with classical and contemporary European music so that by the late nineteenth century the musical forms that we now know as the blues and jazz had begun to take shape.

Komunyakaa, an African American, had little access to the public culture that his white contemporaries had growing up in the segregated Deep South. For instance, although he was an avid reader as a young child, the whites-only library was off-limits to him. However, one bit of culture that Komunyakaa had access to growing up in the 1950s and 1960s was jazz and the blues. Through his mother's radio, the young Komunyakaa was exposed to the sounds of such jazz and blues greats as Louis Armstrong and Ma Rainey, and it is those influences that can be very clearly seen in this poem.

Blues, as the name implies, is a form of music whose lyrics and sounds are largely defined by difficult times. Originating among slaves in plantations and spreading throughout the antebellum South during years when the practice of slavery was illegal but the many practices of severe racial discrimination, including lynching, were not, the blues came to be defined by its sad, soulful sounds and lyrics. Blues lyrics often address the poverty of the musician, the law he was running from, the liquor he drank too much of the night before, and the sex that was both a source of comfort and a source of pain for him. Yet far from being a springboard into "deeper blues" for the musician, the music he created (most of the early known blues musicians were men) helped both the musicians and their communities to deal with their difficult plights. Continuing the communal traditions of their African forefathers, blues musicians, like the griots, or storytellers of African villages whose stories, according to Palmer, came to "constitute a kind of oral history of their people," grew to become the voices of their communities. And it was through their music and the communal voicing of sorrows that blacks could find strength from one another.

"I heard my daughter praying / for the meat here at my feet," the drum maker tells the spirit of the gazelle, referring to the hunger his family is experiencing. And later in the poem, echoing what is a typical refrain for a blues lyric, he intones a litany of troubles he is experiencing:

Trouble in the hills.

Trouble on the river

too. There's no kola nut,

palm wine, fish, salt,

or calabash.

The drum maker's family is hungry, staples of his life are scarce, and trouble surrounds him. This is the blues.

Another common element of the blues, an element clearly derived from the African tradition, is the merging of the sacred and the profane□the fusion, often, of a prayer to the Lord and a reference to relations between the sexes, as described by Palmer:

Man-woman relationships, probably the most persistent concern of blues lyrics, are also important in traditional African villages, where social harmony is often considered synonymous with or dependent on harmony in the home. And the mixing of the sacred and the profane in black American song lyrics is more easily understood once one realizes that in precolonial Africa these two fields of human activity were not generally thought of as polar opposites.

Komunyakaa consciously weds the sacred with the profane in "Ode to a Drum." The act of making the drum is a ritual that transcends cultures. Many Native American traditions, for instance, considered the drum to be a sacred instrument. In the poem, out of respect for the sacred, the narrator of the poem takes on a respectful, almost reverential tone as he addresses the gazelle. "You know it wasn't anger / that made me stop my heart / till the hammer fell," he tells the gazelle almost apologetically in reference to another animal he has killed to feed his child. And as he ties the gazelle's hide to the wooden drum, he assures it that now "Ghosts cannot slip back / inside the body's drums." The drum maker is not only working to create a drum, but he is also performing the act of making the gazelle "whole" again.

And yet, as he describes the actual act of killing the gazelle, the drum maker evokes a crude image of the sexual act. "Weeks / ago, I broke you as a woman / once shattered me into a song / beneath her weight," he tells the gazelle.

The incorporation of the blues with the ode is not merely an academic exercise for Komunyakaa. Traditionally, odes have been written for special occasions or to address objects or important ideas. In this case, the object being addressed is, of course, the drum, and the idea being addressed is nothing less than the revitalization of African and African American culture. By using the blues, Komunyakaa is acknowledging both the debt the blues has to African tradition and the importance of blues to African American tradition and history.

In "Ode to a Drum," the gazelle, an animal of prey, has been killed by the drum maker for the purpose of bringing it back to "life" as a drum, of making it "whole" again. Once "whole," the gazelle, in the form of the drum (which, significantly, is made of ebony, a deep-colored, almost black, wood) will help the drum maker and his people drive their "troubles" away. In the context of postcolonial African societies, one can equate the gazelle with the Africans themselves, whose societies and traditions were nearly destroyed by European colonialists. The drum maker, in this reading, represents the power of traditional African culture, a power through which Africans can regain their former stature, not as "gazelles," but as one of the most feared predators on the continent□as panthers.

Similarly, in the African American context, the gazelle can be viewed as representing the descendants of slaves whose culture has constantly been under attack by whites. Black culture has often been dismissed as unworthy of white mainstream consideration. In the poem, the drum, representing the music and traditions of African Americans, is used to bring life back to blacks, and it is through that music that African American culture can be revitalized.

Culture can be a powerful force in a people's history. In repressive situations or in difficult times, cultural traditions can unify communities and keep hope alive. By evoking the ages-old power of the drum, along with African music and the blues, Komunyakaa has brought peoples and traditions once considered as hapless as slain gazelles to once again walk the earth as proud and mighty panthers. And like the gazelle, the traditions that once defined Africans and African Americans and made them strong, can one day come back to life.

Source: Mark White, Critical Essay on "Ode to a Drum," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Adaptations

Komunyakaa, along with many international poets, can be heard reading several poems in the Rhino/World Beat CD entitled *Our Souls Have Grown Deep Like the Rivers: Black Poets Read Their Work* (2000).

As part of the acclaimed Lannan Foundation series of readings, Komunyakaa reads from *Thieves of Paradise* and is filmed in conversation with poet Tori Derricotte in this one-hour video.

"Ode to a Drum" is set to music, along with several other poems, in the CD *Love Notes from the Mad House* (1998). The CD is a collaboration between Komunyakaa and saxophonist John Tchicai.

Topics for Further Study

During slavery times, whites passed a law prohibiting the ownership of drums by blacks. Research other laws slaveholders passed that affected the ways blacks practiced their culture or religions. Write a paper detailing these laws. When did these laws change? What was the immediate impact?

Odes have a long and storied history in poetry. Odes have been used to address important objects and ideas, and they were often written for important occasions. In contemporary times, poets have come to use odes ironically. Research the poetry of the past twenty years and find examples both of the serious uses of odes as well as ironic uses. Then, try writing each type of ode yourself using techniques you have read about.

Drum making and playing were considered sacred to many African societies. Research the backgrounds of African and Native American drumming and drum making. What are the similarities between the uses of the drum, and what are some of the differences?

The poem makes a reference to ghosts. Research how different cultures view ghosts and spirits. Write a paper comparing your findings. Consider how religious, economic, and racial influences affect a culture's belief in ghosts. Have people's ideas about ghosts changed from generation to generation?

Both in the opening and closing lines of the poem, animals are mentioned. How is Komunyakaa using these animals and for what purpose in his poem? How is he making use of personification? How is the speaker showing respect to both these animals? Why do you think Komunyakaa specifically refers to the gazelle and the panther? What kind of symbols are attached to these animals? Look into how different cultures treat animals and write an essay about your findings.

What Do I Read Next?

Komunyakaa's Pulitzer Prize—winning collection *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems* (1994) includes a generous sampling of Komunyakaa's previous collections and is perhaps the best collection available that gives the reader a strong overview of his career.

The Jazz Poetry Anthology (1991), edited by Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa, is a two-volume collection of poems, written by a wide range of poets inspired by jazz and the blues.

Two other anthologies worth looking at are *Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep: An Anthology of Poetry by African Americans Since 1945*, edited by Michael S. Harper and Anthony Walton, and *Invited Guest: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Southern Poetry*, edited by David Rigsbee and Steven Ford Brown. Both collections provide strong examples of poems in their respective categories and both include pieces by Komunyakaa that help contextualize his work.

Though Komunyakaa appears widely on websites throughout the Internet, the most useful site can be found at http://www.ibiblio.org/ipa/komunyakaa, a conservancy of available information on art, music, and cultural studies. The site is a collaboration between the Center for the Public Domain and the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill. The site devotes a page of live recordings, including one of "Ode to a Drum," as well as critical essays on Komunyakaa's work.

Further Study

Clytus, Radiclani, ed., *Blue Notes: Essays, Interviews, and Commentaries*, University of Michigan Press, 2000.

As part of the acclaimed University of Michigan Press's "Poets on Poets" series, this collection includes Komunyakaa's views on music as well as commentaries on his poetics.

Feinstein, Sascha, *Jazz Poetry: From the 1920s to the Present*, Greenwood Press, 1997.

Covering the entire history of jazz poetry, this book discusses the major poets and jazz musicians who fused poetry with music, along with the movements that they inspired. Komunyakaa has cited many of the figures included in this book as inspirations for his poetry.

Harris, William, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000.

Amiri Baraka, aka Leroi Jones, was a strong influence on Komunyakaa and is cited as one of the premier poets to fuse jazz with the written word. This collection was compiled in collaboration with Baraka and is the best place to begin a study on the influential poet's craft.

Palmer, Robert, *Deep Blues*, Viking Press, 1995.

Written by late music critic Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* traces the history of blues in America. An early chapter explores the influences African music had on the blues, as well its role in the liberation struggles of blacks.

Rampersad, Arnold, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, Vols. 1—2, Oxford University Press, 1986—1988.

One of Komunyakaa's greatest influences was the African American poet Langston Hughes. Rampersad's two-volume biography is the most extensive study of Hughes available.

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Daniels, Kate, "Old Masters," in *Southern Review*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Summer 1999, pp. 621—34.

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Palmer, Robert, *Deep Blues*, Viking Press, 1981.

Komunyakaa, Yusef, *Thieves of Paradise*, Wesleyan University Press, 1998.

"Forecasts," in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 245, No. 8, February 23, 1998, p. 70.

Seaman, Donna, "New Works by African American Poets," in *Booklist*, Vol. 94, No. 12, February 15, 1998, p. 970.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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