Omen Study Guide

Omen by Edward Hirsch

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

Contents

Omen Study Guide....1
Contents....2
Introduction....3
Author Biography....4
Plot Summary....5
Themes....7
Style....9
Historical Context....10
Critical Overview....12
Criticism....13
Critical Essay #1....14
Critical Essay #2....17
Topics for Further Study....21
Compare and Contrast....22
What Do I Read Next?....23
Further Study....24
Bibliography....25

Introduction

Poet and critic Edward Hirsch began his career with an energetic collection of poems titled *For the Sleepwalkers* (1981). Since then, he has emerged as one of America's most prominent poets. It was with his second volume of poetry, *Wild Gratitude* (1986), that he began to delve into autobiographical themes and to reach the level of sophistication for which he is now known. The success of this second collection is in great part due to personal, direct, and moving poems such as "Omen," an elegy for Hirsch's friend Dennis Turner, who died in his late thirties. "Omen," which first appeared in *The Missouri Review* in 1985, comments on such themes as grief, childhood, and insomnia and uses the conventions of a contemporary elegy to describe the feelings of a man anticipating the death of his close friend.

One key aspect of "Omen" is its meditation on fate and God, anticipating Hirsch's later explorations in this area. The poet uses flashbacks to the speaker's childhood and imagery of the powerful and overbearing night sky in order to suggest the presence of a higher power that works in predetermined natural cycles. Hirsch's specific implications about fate and God are not necessarily clear, and the poem is also important simply as an exploration of the emotion and fear related to impending death. Interpreting these emotions based on the realm of experience from his childhood, the speaker comes to feel extremely close to his friend at the same time as he is preparing to never see him again.

Author Biography

Edward Hirsch was born on January 20, 1950, in Skokie, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. He attended Grinnell College in Iowa, graduating in 1972. He then embarked on a Watson traveling fellowship to study the relationship of violence to poetic form in England, Wales, and France. Hirsch earned a Ph.D. in folklore from the University of Pennsylvania in 1979, two years after marrying Janet Landay. During his doctoral program, he was an instructor with Poetry in the Schools programs in New York and Pennsylvania. Afterward, Hirsch taught at Wayne State University and then at the University of Houston.

Hirsch's first book, *For the Sleepwalkers* (1981), is a collection of energetic and imaginative poems that frequently depict insomnia and comment on themes such as art, survival, and loss. In 1986, Hirsch published his second collection of poetry, *Wild Gratitude*, which includes "Omen." It was a critical success, winning a National Book Critics Circle Award in 1987. Hirsch's *The Night Parade* (1989) carries on the personal themes explored in *Wild Gratitude*, but this collection has a different poetic style, seldom employing regular block stanzas. In *Earthly Measures* (1994), Hirsch focuses on religious issues, while *On Love* (1998) engages voices of diverse poets from the past in an imaginary discussion about love. *Lay Back the Darkness* (2003) continues Hirsch's exploration of mythological and political themes.

Hirsch has also published a variety of prose works, including his successful *How to Read a Poem: And Fall in Love with Poetry* (1999). As a poet, literary critic, and editor, Hirsch has been involved with a variety of magazines and journals, including *Wilson Quarterly*, *Paris Review*, and the *New Yorker*. He has received numerous awards and fellowships, including the Rome Prize (1988), the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in literature (1998), a Guggenheim poetry fellowship (1985—1986), and a MacArthur Foundation fellowship (1998). In 2002, Hirsch began serving as the president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

Plot Summary

Stanzas 1 and 2

"Omen" begins with a speaker lying on his side in the "moist grass," drifting into a "fitful," or restless, "half-sleep." It is nighttime. Given that Hirsch's first two poetry collections tended to focus on insomniacs, a reader familiar with the poet might assume that the speaker of "Omen" is regularly unable to sleep at night. During his half-sleep, the speaker listens to the wind in the trees and, in stanza 2, notices the moon coming out.

Describing the moon as "one-eyed," Hirsch uses a poetic technique called "personification," or the attribution of human qualities to something that is not human. The speaker says the moon "turns away from the ground, smudged," as though looking at the ground has marked its "glassy" eye. Getting ready to describe the October sky and how it relates to his thoughts, the speaker then notes, "the nights are getting cold."

Stanzas 3 and 4

In the night sky, which is "tinged with purple" and "speckled red," the speaker watches clouds gather above the house "like an omen"□a phenomenon that portends a future event. The speaker cannot stop thinking about his closest friend, which suggests that the omen of the gathering clouds is somehow related to this friend, who the reader learns in stanza 4 is suffering from cancer. The speaker goes on to describe the "small, airless ward" of the downtown hospital, where his friend, who is thirty-seven years old, is suffering.

The fact that the speaker says the hospital is downtown implies that the speaker is in the suburbs, perhaps the suburb of Skokie, Illinois, where Hirsch grew up. The speaker says his friend is "fingered by illness," which implies some greater fate has chosen the friend as a victim and increases the sense of foreboding that the friend is marked for death. Describing his friend as "boyish," "hunted," and "scared," the speaker makes his friend seem like an innocent child about to encounter something horrible, which sets the speaker thinking about his own childhood.

Stanzas 5 and 6

It is significant that the speaker first thinks back to the "immense" summer nights of his childhood, as opposed to the cold October nights he experiences in the present. The speaker compares these "clear . . . pure, bottomless" nights to a "country lake," and he compares the stars to "giant kites, casting loose." This language emphasizes the great freedom and possibility of childhood nights, and the four-dot ellipsis at the end of stanza 5 reinforces the image of the kites casting loose, off the edge of the line.

Stanza 6 provides a sharp contrast to the summer nights, describing the autumn nights of the speaker's childhood as "schoolbound, close," and full of "stormy clouds" like those that have appeared as a bad omen. The speaker associates the fall nights of childhood with "rules" and the indoors, which reminds the reader of the small ward of the hospital. With the rain banging against his house like a "hammer," the speaker's fall childhood nights close him in and confine him, seeming to take away the possibilities promised by the summer nights.

Stanzas 7 and 8

Stanza 7 continues the thought at the end of stanza 6. This technique of running one line of a sentence or phrase onto the next line is called "enjambment." The speaker says that the rain beat against his head during these autumn nights, and he recalls waking up from a "cruel dream" to find that he is coughing and unable to breathe. Again, this description reminds the reader of the speaker's friend in his "airless" ward, as does the speaker's feeling that he was "lost" after these dreams.

Stanza 8, which describes the pain the speaker's friend feels, is a smooth transition, since the autumn night and the hospital are similar in a number of ways. The friend's pain, for example, which is "like a mule" repeatedly "kicking him in the chest," is like the rain "banging" and "beating" against the speaker. With the phrase "Until nothing else but the pain seems real," the friend seems more distant from the speaker's childhood remembrances, as though nothing can be as important or pressing than the friend's current situation. In effect, this phrase brings the speaker out of his wandering thoughts and reminds him of the present autumn night.

Stanzas 9 and 10

In the present, lying in the grass, the speaker says that the wind is whispering "a secret to the trees," which he describes as "stark and unsettling, something terrible." The reader expects this secret to have something to do with the speaker's friend, and it seems likely it is related to the omen of the clouds gathering above the house. Like the friend, the yard is trembling, which causes the trees to shed leaves. Unlike the giant kites from the summer nights of the speaker's childhood, which were cast loose into the sky, the leaves are falling to the ground.

In the first line of stanza 10, the speaker realizes his "closest friend is going to die." This realization is likely a result of the omen in stanza 3, the significance of which has dawned on the speaker, and it is followed by dark and foreboding imagery. First, the entire night sky tilts "on one wing." Second, the clouds that brought the omen seem to break, "Shuddering with rain" and descending on the speaker. It seems the speaker will again feel, as he did in his childhood, the rain pounding on his house, trapping him inside and banging against his head like a hammer. Like his friend in the hospital who is in constant pain, the speaker himself is associated with a fearful, powerless, and suffering child.

Themes

Grief

One of the main themes of Hirsch's poem is the grief the speaker feels in anticipation of his friend's death. "Omen" is unique in that it describes this grief at a point *before* the friend has actually died, but it deals with the typical themes of a traditional elegiac poem that remembers a person *after* his/her death. In an expression of sorrow and resignation, Hirsch explores the ways in which people deal with death and experience loss.

Vital to Hirsch's commentary on grief is the fact that his speaker deals with his friend's illness by feeling and remembering his friend's pains and fears. Because the friend feels repeated, agonizing pain, the speaker remembers the rain banging against his own head, and because the friend is confined to an "airless" hospital ward, the speaker remembers when he himself was "unable to breathe" during his sleep. This appears to be more than simple identification with his friend's feelings; Hirsch is implying that people deal with the death of those close to them by physically and mentally suffering along with them.

The Cycles of the Seasons and of Life

Hirsch's poem is not simply a tribute to his friend Dennis Turner, and it does not spend any time praising his friend. Instead, Hirsch concentrates on the feelings of someone facing death and the emotions of that person's friends, meditating on the place of fate and a higher power in the world. Since the poem is set before the friend's death occurs, it concentrates on the building emotions to this point and the feeling of powerlessness as death approaches, implying that humans are not in control of their own lives. The poem also comments on how people view fate and possibility at different stages of their lives; while the summer is characterized by great hope, the autumn is confined and worn down, waiting for the finality of winter. With flashbacks to the speaker's childhood, Hirsch suggests that death and loss are an implicit part of every year of life and that fate regularly bears down harshly on humanity. This stresses the sorrow of the experience of death and implies that the freedom and limitlessness of summer nights will eventually return.

Hirsch seems to envision death as an inevitable aspect of life, somewhat like the weather in that it moves in cycles, but it is not a random or unpredictable occurrence. Death seems to be connected to some higher instrument of fate in the poem, although Hirsch makes no mention of God. The main evidence that the poem considers religious themes is the fact that it portrays death and the weather as part of a preordained vision of a higher power. To underscore this idea, Hirsch gives the moon and clouds human qualities when they view the world, provide omens, whisper, and periodically rain down on it, all of which make them seem like instruments of some kind of deity.

Insomnia

Like many of Hirsch's poems from the 1980s, "Omen" deals with the phenomenon of insomnia. The present moment and all of the speaker's memories take place at night. At no point does he seem able to fall entirely asleep. Hirsch implies that night is a place of extremes for insomniacs; it can inspire "immense" possibilities and hopes, or it can become a dreadful, foreboding, painful, and confining space. In both cases, insomnia seems to inspire powerful emotion and insight, and sleeplessness allows the speaker to realize the true importance of his friend's illness and impending death.

Childhood Experience

Another theme Hirsch explores in "Omen" is the way in which childhood experience and memory impact later life. The speaker's childhood is very important to him, and it serves as a defining array of experiences that apply to the predicaments of his middle age. The fact that the cycles of the speaker's childhood repeat themselves in his adult life suggests that childhood is the source of his fundamental emotions and that it serves as an important filter through which the speaker understands the world, particularly during times of duress and sorrow. The friend's illness makes the speaker appear "boyish" and causes him to revert to childhood memories because, Hirsch implies, during stressful times people cling to the belief systems they develop as children.

Style

Elegy

"Omen" is an elegy, a type of poem that began in ancient Greece and Rome, where it signified a specific "meter," or a systematic rhythm in verse. At this time, an elegy could be about any subject, but it needed to have alternate lines of six and five three-syllable units. Some elegies were laments and some were love poems. In modern languages, such as German, an elegy continues to mean the meter of a poem as opposed to its specific content. Since the sixteenth century, elegies in English have come to signify a poem of lamentation, often expressing sorrow for one who is dead. They can be written in any meter. It is the modern English meaning of elegy that applies to "Omen," which is set in three-line stanzas that are not in the strict elegiac meter.

While modern elegies tend to be sorrowful and nostalgic, the emotions expressed in "Omen" are better described as fearful and resigned. This attitude is one of the unique aspects of Hirsch's use of the elegiac form, and it reveals how the poet interacts with the convention of an elegy, suiting it to his own thematic goals. Although the poem laments the sad circumstances of his friend's death and reaches back to old memories, it does not confine itself to an expression of sorrow over past events. By setting the poem in a time before his friend's death, Hirsch focuses on contemplating the mysteries of life as they are happening rather than grieving over what has been lost.

Flashback

One of the important stylistic devices in Hirsch's poem is his use of flashback to the speaker's childhood. The transitions to and from the three stanzas that flashback to the speaker's summer and autumn childhood nights are carefully and artfully placed so that they echo the words and ideas of the present setting. For example, stanza 5 uses the word "boy" to connect seamlessly to the word "boyish" in stanza 4. Also, Hirsch ties the emotions of the speaker's childhood to the friend's experience in the hospital; the airlessness of the hospital connects to the speaker being unable to breathe in his sleep, and the friend's repetitive pain and fear connects to the speaker's emotions during the autumn nights of his childhood. In the concluding stanzas of the poem, Hirsch integrates flashbacks completely within the present narrative by placing the speaker in the same situation as that of his childhood autumn nights. At both points in his life, the speaker sits indoors, sorrowful and enclosed, and waits for the rain to fall on him.

Historical Context

American Society in the 1980s

The 1980s was a decade of social and economic conservatism in the United States. Ronald Reagan, a former actor, was president from 1980 to 1988, and, George Herbert Walker Bush (Reagan's vice president) was president from 1989 until 1992. The Reagan and Bush administrations were fiscally and socially conservative, cutting taxes for the wealthy, eliminating certain restrictions on businesses, and reducing funding to a wide variety of social services such as low-income food programs and child day care centers. During this time there was economic growth and prosperity for the well-to-do, while the nation accumulated enormous national debt because the budget was not balanced.

One of the areas that suffered cutbacks during the Reagan years was government funding for hospitals and medical programs. Many mental health centers and centers for the elderly shut down during the decade, and hospitals were often overcrowded, particularly those in the inner city, such as the one mentioned in "Omen." Meanwhile, in social policy, the Reagan administration rolled back many of the affirmative-action policies enacted in the 1960s and 1970s to improve conditions for minorities. Reagan, who was known as the "great communicator" because of his ability to connect with the public, argued that minorities should not receive any special treatment.

The 1980s was a period of major technological advance; the first reusable spacecraft was launched, computers became available in homes and schools, and popular music began to be influenced by electronic innovations such as synthesizers. However, it was also a period of escalating social problems in some areas; illegal drug use increased, the divorce rate climbed, and AIDS emerged as a deadly disease. By the end of the decade, major changes in world politics were occurring, including the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the Eastern Bloc of formerly communist countries and the fall of the Berlin Wall, a symbol of world communism. Meanwhile, the United States was experiencing an economic recession because consumer and investor confidence was shaken by the loss of jobs and the devaluation of the dollar.

American Poetry in the 1980s

In the 1980s, poetry in the United States was greatly influenced by postmodern theory, which refers to the new ways of thinking about language and philosophy that developed in the years following World War II. Postmodernism is probably best known for challenging traditional understandings of reality and contending that the world is composed of layers of meaning. It has inspired many critical theories, such as Jacques Derrida's linguistic theory of "deconstruction." Although postmodern theory had been important for decades, its influence expanded in the 1980s, and it began to be apparent in the work of a wider variety of American poets. Often skeptical of straightforward depictions of reality, poets experimented with these new philosophies and theories of language. Their poetry often pictures reality as endless; it uses new techniques like the jump-cuts and shifting angles that are used in film; and it tends not to take for granted traditional understandings of how people experience and remember events.

Critical Overview

Wild Gratitude, Hirsch's poetry collection that includes "Omen," was received favorably by critics, winning the National Book Critics Circle Award and an award for poetry from the Texas Institute of Letters. The prestigious writer Robert Penn Warren commended the book's best poems as unsurpassed in their time. Daniel L. Guillory, in his review of the book for *Library Journal*, praises Hirsch's poems as offering "poetic surprises on every page. Highly recommended." As Nancy Eimers writes in her *Dictionary of Literary Biography* entry on Hirsch: "Critics comparing it with *For the Sleepwalker* have generally praised *Wild Gratitude* for its greater control and maturity of technique and subject matter."

Eimers goes on to cite "Omen" as an example of Hirsch's increased attention to autobiographical material, writing that the poem "is more sparse and direct in its presentation of [personal] details than most of Hirsch's earlier poems." The poem is also mentioned in R. S. Gwynn's article in the *New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly*, in which Gwynn writes that it is an "elegiac" poem in which Hirsch inhabits "familiar settings" to confront the death of his friend. "Omen" has not received much other individual critical attention, but critics consider the shift toward more personal themes an important development in Hirsch's career.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Trudell is an independent scholar with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, Trudell examines the relationship of this poem to the other poems in Hirsch's collection, focusing on the themes of fate and God.

For a short poem, "Omen" brings up a great variety of themes, but its true implications seem somewhat underdeveloped until they are placed into context within *Wild Gratitude*. Images, symbols, and metaphors only briefly alluded to in "Omen" attain a broader significance and develop much more profoundly when considered along with the other poems of the collection. Fate and God are crucial themes in "Omen," but Hirsch's deeper implications about these ideas become clearer after the reader has examined the allusions to a higher power in its companion poems.

This is not to say that the poem fails to stand by itself; it is a powerful tribute to Hirsch's friend, and its meditation on grief and loss is coherent independently from the poet's other work. "Omen" also implies a great deal about the importance of childhood experience throughout a person's life, and it seems to suggest the existence of a vague higher power that bears some relation to the fate of humanity. The appearance of an omen presaging the speaker's friend's death suggests that a God exists, and the speaker looks to the night sky as the source of this fate or higher power.

The specific characteristics of this fatalistic force are quite unclear. From the scant evidence of the poem, it is possible that the omen is merely an effect of the speaker's state of mind. This essay will therefore examine how the images and symbols that seem to relate to a higher power in "Omen" are treated throughout *Wild Gratitude*. Since Hirsch seldomly refers to God explicitly, the best place to begin this examination is with his treatment of death, which is a central theme in the collection that naturally leads to many of the poet's meditations about religion.

"I Need Help" introduces the key idea in the book: sleep. Across Hirsch's body of work from this period, sleep is connected to death. In this poem, the insomniacs are unable to fly "out of the body at night," their skeletons are unable to leave their bodies, and they are unable to fall asleep in the empty coffins carried by the "six pallbearers of sleep." It is as though staying awake through the night is the only way to stay alive. This idea is reinforced in later poems. In "Leningrad (1941—1943)," Hirsch makes explicit that the only way to stay alive is to stay awake: "There are days when dying will seem as / Easy as sitting down in a warm, comfortable / Overstuffed chair and going back to sleep."

The connection between sleep and death is particularly important in "Poor Angels," in which, late at night, a tired body listens to the "clear summons of the dead," or sleep. Since sleep signifies death, the soul cannot escape to the heavens until the body falls asleep. Portrayed as "a yellow wing" and "a little ecstatic / cloud," the soul calls out to the "approaching night, 'Amaze me, amaze me,'" as if the night were some kind of heaven or afterlife full of miracles. The soul later "dreams of a small fire / of stars flaming on the other side of the sky," which suggests the existence of a higher power, full of light and flame, to be reached once the soul is separated from the body. "The Emaciated Horse" also depicts heaven as the source of light and suggests that there is a "celestial power / of that light," or a God.

Another way that Hirsch suggests the presence of a God is through the appearance of miracles, as in the title poem of the collection, "Wild Gratitude." Here the speaker comes to the realization that all creatures are miraculous and "can teach us how to praise," implying that God should be the object of this praise. Like "Poor Angels" and "The Emaciated Horse," the presence of God is signified by a "living fire," or a source of divine light.

Divine light usually appears in the night sky, such as in "Prelude of Black Drapes" and "In Spite of Everything, the Stars," both of which imply that one should praise God and have faith in him. "In Spite of Everything, the Stars" suggests that people look up to the sky with hope and faith "Because the night is alive with lamps!" and that the bright stars are the reason that sleepers' "plumes of breath rise into the sky." Hirsch is drawing from the association of sleep with death here, and the imagery of the rising plumes of breath reminds the reader of the soul rising toward heaven in "Poor Angels." "Prelude of Black Drapes," meanwhile, stresses that "it takes all our faith to believe" that the "curtain of ash," or the drapes that represent the smoky night as well as the ashes of dead bodies, "will ever rise again in the morning." This sounds a great deal like the passage of a soul to heaven, and the religious meaning of the lines is reinforced by the imagery of the moon, a "faint smudge / of light," obscured by the heavy fog but nonetheless a symbol of divine promise and light.

The other major symbol connected to God that comes up in "Omen" and is then developed more thoroughly in its companion poems is rain, which is the central image of "In the Middle of August" and "Recovery." In both of these poems, rain is a source of great hope and promise, a symbol of good fortune from the heavens that allows people to move on with their lives. In fact, rain is connected to the wishes of some greater power even when it has a more negative connotation; the grandfather figure of "Ancient Signs" says that "rain is an ancient sign / of the sky's sadness," implying that there is some great figure in the sky who is sad.

The images and symbols examined above suggest the presence of a particular kind of God in "Omen." For example, that the moon is a source of divine light in "Prelude of Black Drapes" supports the idea that the moon in "Omen" has divine significance. Both poems describe the moon as "smudge[d]," and in both poems its appearance is followed by an inexplicable and somewhat eerie sign from the heavens. This helps to explain why the "glassy, one-eyed" moon of "Omen" that "comes out to stare" at the speaker and then "turns away from the ground" looks down on the speaker as if it were conscious. Turning away and replacing itself with an omen in the clouds, the moon is an instrument of a higher power foretelling the speaker's friend's death.

Nowhere in *Wild Gratitude* does Hirsch identify his idea of God with any particular religion, but the higher power of "Omen" is not necessarily a strictly Judeo-Christian God. Hirsch's depiction of God is perhaps better described as a naturalistic force working in the orderly cycles of the seasons to bring about the necessary and inevitable aspects of life. The omen of the gathering clouds that forms when the sky turns "purple, speckled red" is very similar to the "indigos and pinks, mauves and reddish-browns" in the sky of "Recovery" that set the stage for the speaker's departure, healed and happy, from the hospital. In both poems, though their omens signify very different events, the coloring of the sky represents the will of a higher power that works through the inflexible laws of nature.

The higher power of "Omen," therefore, is neither cruel nor kind, and it is tied very closely to the laws of nature. It is a stolid force that creates happiness and sadness depending on the season; the rules of childhood that summer is boundless and glorious while fall is confined with "too many rules" always apply, and this natural cycle shows no sign of ending. Because fall is the season of dying, it is in the fall that the higher power releases rain to beat down on the speaker like a hammer, keeping him indoors and unable to see the hopeful divine light. Having given the speaker warning of the inevitable, the higher power lets the "dark sky," which is "tilting on one wing" like the soul of "Poor Angels," descend on the world, putting the speaker to sleep and ending his friend's life. The reader must wait until later in the collection for the return of spring and summer, which come in poems such as "In the Middle of August," for Hirsch's idea of a naturalistic higher power to rain down the "immense" possibilities of survival and regeneration.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on "Omen," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Donnelly is a poet, editor, and teacher. His first book of poems is The Charge*. In this essay, Donnelly discusses the conventions and challenges of the elegy.*

Many readers of poetry do not understand how hard it is to write a successful lyric poem, never mind how treacherous it is—artistically speaking—to attempt an elegy mourning the death of a friend or loved one. This poetic task is risky because there are so many ways to fail. In particular, an elegy may fail to rise to eloquence while lamenting and praising the dead person, or it may cross the line between sentiment and sentimentality. The several-thousand-year history of the elegy is illuminated by the brilliant achievements of poets who rose to this challenge—Milton, Tennyson, Whitman, Yeats, Auden, and Allen Ginsberg, to name a few—and also littered by the efforts of those who tried and fell short.

There is no shame in any unsuccessful poetic attempt: good art of any kind is hard to make. Fortunately for the skillful reader of poetry, there is almost as much to be learned about how poetry works from studying a not completely successful poem, as from studying one that is superbly successful.

It is helpful, before turning to Edward Hirsch's "Omen" in particular, to review the "rules" or conventions of elegies or elegiac poems in general. Elegies belong to the larger category of lyric poetry, a form that has as its primary purpose the expression of strong feeling. In a broad sense, an elegiac poem mourns the general impermanence or sorrow of life. But, the usual focus of the elegy is grief for the death of a *particular* person. A secondary purpose is to praise qualities of that person's life, usually in the context of lamenting their loss. Some elegies also praise the departed as part of a larger project of finding consolation in spiritual or philosophical truths that are felt to be of greater consequence than the life of any one person.

The "pastoral elegy," of which Milton's "Lycidas" and Shelley's "Adonais" are examples, usually represented the dead person as a shepherd mourned by mythological figures and the natural world. Hirsch's "Omen" makes use of the poetic device, common in the pastoral elegy, of projecting human emotion onto natural phenomena like stormy weather and darkness.

Some poets have written "anti-elegies," which refuse to proceed in an expected or orderly manner, like Dylan Thomas's "Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" and contemporary American poet Diane Fisher's "The Mother Has Her Say." These poems are in fact still elegies but make rejection of sentimentality or conventional sources of consolation an explicit part of their poetic projects.

The person doing the elegizing needs to have been close enough to the person being elegized that the poem seems justified. If the poet did not actually know the dead person well, there needs to be some other reason the poet felt a strong connection. Theodore Roethke acknowledges the expectation of connection in his poem "Elegy for

Jane," both in the epigraph "My Student, Thrown by a Horse," and in his last lines "Over this damp grave I speak the words of my love: / I, with no rights in this matter, / Neither father nor lover."

The elegy has the difficult poetic task□perhaps in a sense impossible□of balancing the competing losses of the person doing the elegizing and the person being elegized. The dead person's loss of life itself (claims of an afterlife notwithstanding) is permanent and immeasurable. Some might argue that the loss of the elegizer is actually greater because that person is still sensible to the pain whereas the pain of the person who died is over. Conversely it can be argued that the living have the chance to become happy again, or at least to go on living, which the dead have lost. Ultimately, the dead person's claim for the greater loss would seem to be persuasive□though certainly good poems can and have been made asserting the opposite view. The point is that in order to be successful the elegy has to *struggle* with this question of balance, not proceed as though it did not exist. Ideally, the poet causes the two griefs implicit in the elegy to contend in a way that is productive of eloquence.

Is Hirsch's "Omen" an elegy? The person the speaker grieves is still alive during the time the poem describes. Because the impending death of the friend is placed in a position so close to the center of the poem's project, it virtually forces the reader to consider the poem an elegy and to compare the gestures the poem makes with those of other elegies. "Omen" is not so much an "anti-elegy"□the speaker does grieve in fairly conventional ways and, arguably, gives over to sentimentality in several passages□as it is a "pre-elegy." Even in that category it is not completely successful, because the poem does not acknowledge the competing griefs of the elegy in a meaningful way. Neglecting to do so undermines the all-important relationship between the speaker of a poem and the reader.

A reader may begin to withdraw sympathy, trust, and, most importantly, interest from the speaker of an elegy if that speaker reduces the large loss of the dead person primarily to an occasion to direct attention to the speaker himself. There have been many fine poems with speakers who have moral flaws yet still retain the speaker's interest. There is all the difference, in poetry as in life, between self-absorption (or an extreme subjectivity such as that caused by grief) and an acknowledgment of self-absorption or extreme subjectivity. Objectivity is no virtue in poetry, but an admission of subjectivity can be a very great virtue. As Carl Dennis has written in *Poetry as Persuasion*:

Poets whose speakers confess moral failures are usually on safer ground than those celebrating their moral triumphs. But even a confession, if it is aesthetically effective, will imply certain virtues: the honesty and humility, say, that confronts inadequacies directly, and the ambition implied by judging oneself by the highest standards.

When the somewhat unpleasant speaker of Robert Lowell's poem "Skunk Hour" says, late in that poem, "My mind's not right," he does a great deal to retain (or regain) the reader's interest and sympathy. This kind of acknowledgment of subjectivity is missing from "Omen." When "Omen" diminishes the importance of the death of the friend by juxtaposing it, and seeming to compare it, with seemingly minor forms of suffering from the speaker's past, it cannot help but injure the speaker in the reader's eyes.

It is probably the speaker's description of the dying friend as looking "boyish and haunted" that causes the speaker to remember, associatively, the unhappiness of his own boyhood. The unhappinesses he describes in the sixth and seventh stanzas of the poem□"stormy clouds, too many rules." and "Sometimes I'd wake up / In the middle of a cruel dream, coughing / And lost, unable to breathe in my sleep"□do not amount to much when compared to the friend's impending death. The juxtaposition of the friend's death with the speaker's memory of childhood discomfort has the effect of including the friend's death on a list of other bad things that have happened to the speaker without any acknowledgment of the subjectivity of this perspective that might redeem it in the reader's estimation.

The problem with "Omen" is that the relationship between the speaker and the friend is not clear or compelling. We have no evidence for friendship but the label, no shared memories, no history, no details about the dying man to make him memorable or individual. This is part of what turns him into a prop on the speaker's stage.

"Omen" might have been more successful if the language had risen to genuine eloquence. Eloquence is difficult to define, but in poetry it has everything to do with freshness (lack of cliché), precision, compression, and rhythmic authority. Hirsch has achieved eloquence in other poems like "Lay Back the Darkness," or translation/adaptations like "The Desire Manuscripts." Passages like "the nights are getting cold," "I can't stop thinking about my closest friend" and "I know that my closest friend is going to die" in "Omen" are closer to the rhythms of everyday prose than poetry and are emotionally flat. Other passages in "Omen" resort to generic "poetry-speak" or stock gestures to express fear and grief: "Clear as a country lake" and "The rain was a hammer banging against the house, / Beating against my head" are examples of metaphors that lack surprise or freshness. If the most important metaphor in "Omen," which compares the dying friend's pain to "a mule / kicking him in the chest, again and again," had used more surprising, emotionally charged language, it might have done much to redress the feeling that the poem focuses too much on the speaker's pain. This important metaphor subsides into flat abstraction, with the deflating explanation "Until nothing else but the pain seems real."

In the best poetry, sensual specifics and images serve to anchor emotion in the reader's imagination. Abstractions and nonspecific language do not do this job as well. Compare this passage from "Omen"

Tonight the wind whispers a secret to the trees,

Something stark and unsettling, something terrible

Since the yard begins to tremble, shedding leaves.

with the following excerpt from Stanley Kunitz's poem "Quinnapoxet," which also projects human emotions onto nature:

I was fishing in the abandoned reservoir back in Quinnapoxet, where the snapping turtles cruised and the bullheads swayed in their bower of tree-stumps, sleek as eels and pigeon-fat. . . . The sun hung its terrible coals over Buteau's farm: I saw the treetops seething.

In Kunitz's poem, language charged with strong emotional associations—like "abandoned," "snapping," "terrible coals," and "seething"—creates true ominousness. The passage from "Omen" falls short of the same goal. Both passages use the word "terrible," but Kunitz's language embodies terribleness more viscerally and memorably.

The artistic challenge of writing successful elegies for the next thousand years is that every poet who attempts the form has to find a way to grieve an intensely personal loss in a way that acknowledges that the loss is also completely universal. This complex balancing act is precisely the kind of challenge for which lyric poetry was invented, but it requires a poet to call upon every ounce of philosophical, spiritual, and linguistic resources at her disposal.

Every human has the same primal desires and fears—wanting and needing love, and fearing death. Out of these old, old elements new poems will always be made, because love and death are not going to cease being of intense interest to readers. Poets will continue to exert themselves to express new truths about love and death, or to express old truths in language that makes them seem new. Whether they succeed or not in any given poem, one should be grateful for every poet willing to take on this difficult work of casting light on the human predicament.

Source: Patrick Donnelly, Critical Essay on "Omen," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

"Omen" is an elegy for Hirsch's close friend Dennis Turner, and the poem draws on a variety of autobiographical themes. Research Hirsch's biographical details on the Web and in articles such as Peter Szatmary's "Poetic Genius," published in the April 1999 edition of *Biblio*. Speculate on the variety of details from Hirsch's personal life that come out in "Omen." How do these details find their way, directly or indirectly, into the poem?

Hirsch is a prominent critic of poetry, and he has written a variety of influential scholarly works. Read one of these works, such as *How to Read a Book: And Fall in Love with Poetry* (1999) or *Responsive Reading* (1999), and discuss its relationship to "Omen." How can you apply the themes of the book you have chosen to Hirsch's elegy? Discuss how you think Hirsch might analyze his own poem.

Research the history of the elegiac form, from ancient Greek times to the present. How have elegies changed, and how do they differ in various languages and traditions? Read and discuss several of the most influential elegies in the English language, such as Thomas Gray's "An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751). Describe the important characteristics of a contemporary elegy. In what ways is "Omen" an elegy, and in what ways does it differ from the convention?

Research the history of cancer. How have medical attitudes toward cancer changed across history? How have treatments been developed, and what are the major sources for cancer research funding? What was it like to be a cancer patient in the 1980s, and how is that different from what it is like to be a cancer patient today?

Insomnia is an important theme in *Wild Gratitude*. Research some of the medical theories about insomnia, including its possible causes and its frequency in the United States. Then read some of Hirsch's poems about insomnia, such as those from his first collection, *For the Sleepwalkers*. How does Hirsch envision insomnia, and how does he use the condition to elaborate on other themes? How does his description of insomnia relate to medical theories about the condition?

Compare and Contrast

1980s: Cancer is a common and devastating disease for which there are treatments but no cure.

Today: Cancer is the second leading cause of death in the United States, and there is still no cure for it, although scientists have learned a great deal more about how it functions, and treatments have become much more sophisticated.

1980s: Ronald Reagan, a Republican, is president for most of the decade. He is known for his communication skills, his tax cuts, and his reduction of funding to social services.

Today: George W. Bush, known for the war on Iraq as part of the war on terrorism and for fiscal and social conservatism, is president of the United States.

1980s: MTV, a new television station that plays music videos and defines popular music trends is popular with young adults.

Today: MTV is still influential, but it is no longer unique, and several other cable stations play music videos as well.

1980s: Russia is part of the communist U.S.S.R., one of the world's superpowers, although it is in the midst of a decline in power that will lead to its dissolution.

Today: Since the breakup of the U.S.S.R., Russia has struggled to develop a stable market economy and a new political order. The country is currently in the midst of a violent separatist conflict with the Islamic province of Chechnya.

What Do I Read Next?

Hirsch's collection of poems *The Night Parade* (1989) is more autobiographical in its themes than *Wild Gratitude*, and it explores the elements of Hirsch's childhood alluded to in "Omen."

"The Cave of Making" (1965), by W. H. Auden, is a poem about writing and an elegy for Auden's friend Louis MacNeice. Another classic elegy by Auden, who influenced Hirsch's writings and who is quoted in the epigraph to *Wild Gratitude*, is "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" (1939).

Hirsch's scholarly but readable prose work *How to Read a Poem: And Fall in Love with Poetry* (1999) contains a variety of compelling poems and suggestions on how to approach them.

Steven Millhauser's *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943—1954, by Jeffrey Cartwright: A Novel* (1972) is a vivid and delightful tale of a boy describing his relationship with a childhood friend who died very young.

Sailing Alone around the Room: New and Selected Poems (2001), by Billy Collins, contains some of the best examples of the poet's funny, sad, and tender explorations of everyday life.

Further Study

Boyle, Kevin, "An Interview with Edward Hirsch," in *Chicago Review*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 1995, pp. 19—28.

Boyle provides a useful interview with Hirsch in which the poet discusses topics such as the impact of his father's absence and the poets he admires.

Szatmary, Peter, "Poetic Genius," in *Biblio*, Vol. 4, No. 4, April 1999, p. 38.

This article provides a biographical analysis of Hirsch's career.

Whelan, David, "Poet's Winding Path Leads to a Job as a Foundation President," in *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, Vol. 15, No. 1, October 17, 2002.

Whelan's article discusses Hirsch's recently acquired role as the president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. It includes an overview of Hirsch's career and a brief interview with the poet.

Bibliography

Chatterton, Thomas. "Mr. Smith Is Dead," in *The Stuffed Owl: An Anthology of Bad Verse*, edited by D. B. Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee, New York Review Books, 2003, pp. 109—10.

Dennis, Carl, *Poetry as Persuasion*, University of Georgia Press, 2001, pp. 171—72.

Eimers, Nancy, "Edward Hirsch," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 120, *American Poets since World War II, Third Series*, edited by R. S. Gwynn, Gale Research, 1992, pp. 128—32.

Guillory, Daniel L., Review of *Wild Gratitude*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 111, No. 1, January 1, 1986, pp. 88—89.

Gwynn, R. S., "Second Gear," in *New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Autumn 1986, pp. 113—21.

Hirsch, Edward, *Wild Gratitude*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1996, pp. 3—7, 10—11, 15—18, 24, 40—1, 45, 57, 63, 71.

Kunitz, Stanley, "Quinnapoxet," in *The Collected Poems of Stanley Kunitz*, W. W. Norton, 2000, pp. 190—91.

Lowell, Robert, "Skunk Hour," in *Selected Poems*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998, pp. 95—96.

Roethke, Theodore, "Elegy for Jane," in *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*, Anchor Books, 1975, p. 98.