One of the Smallest Study Guide

One of the Smallest by Gerald Stern

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Introduction

Gerald Stern’s poem “One of the Smallest” was first published in the journal *Poetry* in January 1997. A four-page poem, it is the first section of six sections in Stern’s twelfth book of poetry, *Last Blue*, published in 2000. Stern did not start publishing poetry until 1971, when he was forty-six years old, but by 1973, he had received a National Endowment for the Arts grant to be a master poet for Pennsylvania, and he received numerous awards afterward, including the National Book Award in 1998 for his collection of poetry entitled *This Time: New and Selected Poems*. *Last Blue* was also well received as a continuation of Stern’s emotional, exuberant expression of himself in surreal images. Using the first person, the narrator becomes a sort of Everyman based on Stern’s own background and memories. “One of the Smallest” is typical of Stern’s work in that it includes abundant imagery taken from elements of the natural world such as animals, plants, and a river. A poem about death and rebirth, “One of the Smallest” follows a ray of sunshine through multiple locations and transformations as a life force that is compared to and connected with a person’s life span.

Author Biography

Born on February 22, 1925, Gerald Stern grew up in a rough neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His parents, both Eastern European immigrants, were Orthodox Jews who sent him to a religious school, but he stopped practicing his faith shortly after his bar mitzvah. In childhood, Stern suffered from anti-Semitism; moreover, at age eight, he experienced the traumatic death of his nine-year-old sister Sylvia to spinal meningitis. In 1947, he graduated from the University of Pittsburgh, served in the U.S. Army Air Corps, and then earned his master's degree from Columbia University in 1949. Although he began writing poetry in college, Stern taught college English for most of his professional career.

After graduation, Stern went to Paris for a year of travel and study at the Sorbonne, and it was there that he became seriously interested in poetry. Upon his return to New York, he entered a doctoral program at Columbia but left a year later to become the headmaster at a private school. He married Patricia Miller in 1952, and in 1953, they went back to Europe for three years. He eventually taught high school in Glasgow, Scotland. Upon his return to the United States, Stern began his college teaching career, holding positions at Temple University, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and Somerset County College. From 1982 to his retirement in 1995, he held a tenured position at the Writers' Workshop of the University of Iowa. Throughout these years, he was also a visiting professor at several other universities. He and his wife had two children, but the couple divorced in the late 1980s.

Stern did not publish his first book of poetry, *Rejoicings*, until 1971, when he was forty-six years old. Among more than a dozen subsequent collections of poetry are *Lucky Life* (1977, Lamont Poetry Selection Award); *This Time: New and Selected Poems* (1998, National Book Award); *Last Blue* (2000), which contains "One of the Smallest"; *American Sonnets* (2003, Griffin Poetry Prize); and *Everything Is Burning* (2006). He is also the author of a book of personal essays, *What I Can't Bear Losing: Notes from a Life* (2003).

Stern has received many other honors, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, five National Endowment of the Arts Fellowships, the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts for the State of Pennsylvania, the PEN Award, a chancellorship in the Academy of American Poets, and the Ruth Lilly Prize and the Wallace Stevens Award for a lifetime of achievement in poetry. A lyric poet who emphasizes lessons from memories and nature, Stern has made a significant contribution to American literature.

Plot Summary

Lines 1–8

“One of the Smallest” is a long poem without stanzas. Rather than simply say that there is one long thread that runs through the whole poem tying it together, it would be more accurate to say that there is one long thread running through the poem as if placed there by a sewing machine gone berserk, zigzagging unevenly as Stern’s thoughts ricochet down the poem. However, there are divisions that can be made according to subject and punctuation.

The poem starts with “one of the smallest” things in existence, a ray of light. The “first gray light” of morning finds its way through a tiny hole “in the cracked window blind” in the narrator’s room. Sunshine, “made of gas and water”—a reference to the gaseous composition of the sun and the way sunlight reflects off particles of water—although the “smallest, smallest” microscopically small, can still catch the eye in an otherwise darkened room.

Lines 9–23

The sunlight is needed by living creatures, and Stern lists among them an eagle, a mole, a rabbit, a quail, and a lilac. He emphasizes the mole by repeating, “even a mole, a mole” because even though the mole lives mostly underground, it, too, needs sunlight. As a human, the narrator needs sunlight so much that he says, “I tore down walls, I cut my trees,” to allow more sunlight to reach him. He enjoys the sunlight by sunbathing while lying on his back with “a rock to support” his head, swimming, and then drying in the sunlight, even if the bright sun can make his eyes water. Stern notes the passage of time in a reference to “the wind and the dirt” wearing away the surface of the earth as he segues into the segment of the poem that deals with death.

Lines 23–35

As the day and the years progress, the sun “slowly died.” When the sun sets, it appears to die out, but it is actually dying over millions of years, while the narrator is dying “much quicker, much quicker.” The narrator describes life as a race “until I was wrinkled” by old age, but he and the star are both “losing light.” The narrator says, “I was dying before I was born,” because from the moment life begins it is on a journey to death. At birth, the narrator describes himself as “blue” perhaps in reference to those babies who are born a little blue because before birth they did not get sufficient oxygen. A healthy baby will turn red when crying, and the narrator says, “I was red much later.” The redness is Stern’s color for life, “a copy” of the sun exploding down the path of life, but the narrator is inescapably born for death, even if he “fought against it.”

Lines 35–43

In the first line, Stern refers to “the first gray light,” and he returns to that image in line 36 as a comparison to the evening sky that is “rose” in one sky and “white” in another. The narrator actually says “a rose,” perhaps to create an image of an evening sky when the varied colors are layered like the petals of a rose. The white sky may be equivalent to the bright light to which one is supposed to go at death, the “one place the light comes back” in the darkness that is death. At this point, the narrator says, “I disappeared like a fragment of gas . . . or fire.” Choosing to use the words gas and fire again, Stern is making connections to the gases and fire of the sun in the disintegration of the narrator’s life.

Lines 44–52

Eventually, Stern wants to resurrect the narrator, but first the fiery, gaseous fragments are cooled and transformed into metal and then, after “one or two more centuries,” made into a bell. Some people who believe in reincarnation or multiple lives believe there may be large time gaps between lives and perhaps that is why Stern provides a length of time before the metal finally gets made into something. The narrator insists that he is made into a bell and “not a bridge, not a hammer”; more precisely, he envisions becoming “the tongue of a bell” because he wants to “sing as the bell does.”

Lines 52–62

The burst of light that exploded the narrator’s being into gaseous fragments is one viewpoint, but, the reader is told, there could be another way of looking at his death. Perhaps instead his was a “long slow burning” fire as one might have with a slow-burning wood such as that of the olive or carob trees, two trees still in existence after thousand of years. The narrator says that is what is wrong with human life: it is more like the comet’s flash of fire than like the plants that have lasted on earth longer than humans.

Lines 62–85

Even more short-lived is the flame on a match. Stern describes in detail the composition and function of a match and a matchbox. Anyone who has ever used a match is reminded by Stern’s description of exactly the process of striking a match, letting it burn, and how it looks afterwards. Readers can almost smell the “fosfur” (usually spelled phosphor), hear the striking of the match, count with the narrator through the six seconds that the flame lasts, and see the curled remains of matches in the ash tray. The matchbox is also vividly described with its stack of matches, the two rough striking areas on the sides of the box, and how one holds a match to light it. No matter how common the action, the narrator says that the “flash of fire” is “always a shock,” because one never knows when the match will catch fire and when it will not. Besides,

the making of fire simply by scratching a treated piece of wood against a rough surface still seems like magic, so the experience is always new and enlightening because each match starts a new fire.

Lines 86–93

Speaking of forever, time has apparently passed, and the narrator finds himself once again in his yard, once again starting out blue with his mouth agape, perhaps from the surprise of the transition. The narrator is immediately able to discern the season because he has a bridal wreath in his right hand, so it must be June, the month of weddings. Why is his left hand scratching? Is he clawing his way back into life? Stern is a poet of place, so the narrator is located in a yard that has a dogwood tree and an iris.

Lines 93–102

Is the narrator looking at the iris, or has the narrator become the iris in a new life? He says he is without a beard, and irises have what is called a beard in the center of the flower, but he also says that he is streaked with purple, a common color for irises, and that his “hands are folded and overlapping” just as the iris’s large petals appear to be like folded hands. As a plant, he loves the rain and “blossoms for fifteen hours a day” in the summertime sunlight.

Lines 102–121

In this last section of the poem, the narrator shifts back to being a human who walks “through streams of some sort.” As the sunlight bombards his eyes, he likes to think that the sun is what gave him “life in the first place.” The next several lines ponder how natural it might be, as primitive peoples did, to worship the sun for its life-giving properties. Instead, modern people sometimes see the sunlight as “disturbing, call it interfering” when in its pervasiveness it lights up the area around the dumpster “at five in the morning” or shines on the river at six. The narrator describes being “a little tired from the two hundred steps.” Are these steps a reference to the one or two centuries in line 46 that it took for the metal to be made into a bell? Or does Stern have a backyard that has two hundred steps down to the river? Regardless, his iris is blooming and his maple tree is blowing in the wind. All is well. He has been a mole, a rabbit, a stone, maybe a bell and an iris, or at least shared life and the need for fire and sunshine with them. Life is “garish,” a bright flash of many colors, and then a burning of human energy.

Themes

Light versus Darkness

A career-long theme for Stern was that of light versus darkness, that this natural contrast or conflict is inherently important to humans in both a biological and an emotional way. “One of the Smallest” incorporates light and darkness with life, death, and rebirth. The narrator of the poem says that light “was what gave me life in the first place,” and Stern makes this connection between light and life throughout the poem. In lines 9–11, he asserts that the plants and animals need sunlight. In the same way, the narrator needs sunlight so much that he tears down walls and cuts down trees to get more of it. Stern describes a scene in which the narrator is soaking up the sun outdoors by sunbathing and swimming. The implication is that his energy and his joy come from the sunlight. However, the sun is dying and so is the narrator. By “losing light,” he disappears into fragments, but he reappears into his sunlit yard after an explosion of light brings him back to life. A popular image of death is going into the light, but for the narrator of the poem death is darkness, an absence from the world until his essence is remade and brought back to life by the fire of light. Although the word “light” is used many times in “One of the Smallest,” the words “dark” and “darkness” are not because death is equated to darkness or the loss of light. So, although there are allusions to death in this poem, the emphasis is on the power of light to generate life and rebirth, a power so strong that even “one of the smallest” particles of light can awaken a person to a world of joy.

Memory and Nostalgia

Memory for Stern is as much a device as a theme; he uses memories to generate poetry. The idea, however, is to encourage readers to take a trip down memory lane with the narrator of the poem for the purpose of sharing memories and comparing them to the readers’ own. Perhaps whatever the “I” of the poem learns from his memories serves as a lesson for readers, too. Stern is not being didactic or nostalgic in a heavy-handed way; rather, the memories are an opportunity for thoughtful examination that might lead to a resurrection of goals and the search for paradise that Stern feels is a central quest for all humans. Nostalgia prompts one to look back and gain perspective about events in one’s past. At the same time, it prompts one to bring the pieces of one’s life together in order to blend past, present, and future into a cohesive whole, of applying logic to the emotions lingering from the past. In “One of the Smallest,” the speaker in the poem remembers a past life spent in sunshine and nature. Death takes that life away for a while, but light, the energy of fire and the sun, gives it back. The interim period is a remembrance of the fragments of his essence being made into the tongue of a bell, remembering how slowly the olive and carob trees burn and how long they have been a part of the earth’s resources, remembering in detail the construction and use of a matchbox and matches. Stern’s narrator imagines being transformed into a bell’s tongue. The close-up look at the matches provides a way to come back to the fire

and light that will rekindle his life and place him once again in his yard, where he does not remember the dogwood and the iris, but time has gone by and there is a new world to experience in the warmth of the life-giving sunlight that he appreciates so much.

Rebirth

A frequent subject in storytelling, mythology, and religion, rebirth can be portrayed as spiritual, as a metaphoric rectification of one's life, or as a some kind of reincarnation. The symbols of rebirth include baptism, the rites of spring, the rise of the mythic phoenix from the ashes, and so on. Whether used in the *Odyssey*, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, or *Groundhog Day*, the theme is a familiar one that usually involves uprooting the subject who then journeys to the new life. Rebirth is used frequently by Stern as a device for becoming free of inner conflict and the past's burdens, a type of cleansing. In "One of the Smallest," rebirth takes place after a transformation through time and matter. It is described as the reincarnation of the narrator into an iris, but also possibly into a mole, rabbit, stone, and then perhaps back into a human who can once again relish the joy of light and nature. Perhaps the narrator has been all of the these things at different times as the molecules of nature evolve and transform, just as the molecules of the sun bring life to everything.

Style

Lyric Poetry

Lyric poetry, the dominant form of the twentieth century, does not tell a story; it has a single narrator, not the poet, who speaks in first person. This “I” is a distinguishing feature of lyric poetry and is used to express a state of mind, present an argument or a justification, make an observation, or contemplate a problem. Readers of lyric poetry need to identify the type of person speaking and the listener to whom the narrator is speaking. Stern’s poems are based on his memories, but he does not reveal the source of those memories, nor does he regard the speaker as his personal mouthpiece. Rather, the speaker is a contemporary representative person, more singular than the Everyman of Whitman and other poets. In “One of the Smallest,” the “I” gives individuality to an experience that yet could be the life and fate of anyone.

Free Verse

The most commonly used style of poetry in modern times is free verse. While it does not have strict metrical patterns, fixed line lengths, or ending rhymes, it qualifies as poetry because of its rhythms and sound patterns. Students of free verse should look for divisions within a poem (not just stanza divisions but divisions from one line to the next), line length, repeated syntactical units, imagery patterns, sound devices, and word choices. Assonance, alliteration, and internal rhyme are used to create the desired sound qualities, while repetition of words and phrases with the same syntactical structure is used to create a rhythm. Another way to create rhythm is by constructing phrases of about equal length. In “One of the Smallest,” Stern uses word and phrase repetition liberally. Line length can also help to convey emphasis or create tension. For example, a series of long lines followed by one short line might signal a commentary on the preceding lines or the solution to a problem. “One of the Smallest” has lines of almost equal length throughout, which may signal that Stern wants the reader to keep going, to keep reading with the speed that the passage of time takes with one’s life. Stern is known for his use of imagery from nature, and “One of the Smallest” is replete with free verse patterns of flora and fauna, sunshine, and water.

Colors

An important part of the imagery that Stern uses is color. *Last Blue* is the title of the collection in which “One of the Smallest” is the first entry, and blue is a dominant color throughout the poems in the book. In “One of the Smallest,” the word “blue” appears only twice, once describing the narrator’s color at birth, “blue at the start,” and “sitting with my mouth open in some unbearable blue,” but six other colors help to paint the landscape: gray (twice), as in the “first gray light that came into my room” and “The light of morning was gray”; red, the color he becomes after the blue of birth; green, “the light

of morning was gray with a green"; white, the evening light was like a rose, "though it was white"; pinkish, "the pinkish head" of the match; and purple, "I'm streaked with a kind of purple," like the iris. Imagery is intended to appeal to the senses, and use of colors helps to convey a vivid picture to the reader.

Sensuality of Nature and Physical Things

Stern is noted for his extensive use of images from nature. The things he names, such as plants and animals, give concreteness to his abstract expression and give readers something familiar to cling to as they try to follow the narrator's associative thoughts. In "One of the Smallest," the reader finds an eagle, a mole, a rabbit, a quail, a lilac, an iris, and dogwood, maple, olive and carob trees. There is a river, a stream, a yard, sunrises, and sunsets; in all, Stern sees nature as an integral part of the human experience. Also, his belief in the human need to find the lost paradise causes him to fill his landscapes with the abundant garden people may associate with paradise. Stern glorifies nature and its importance to the human environment. The renewal of life, part of nature's cycle, finds its way into Stern's poetry, as it does in the story of life, death, and rebirth that is "One of the Smallest."

Historical Context

Poetry in the 1990s

Post–World War II poetry in the United States could be categorized into definite schools, and discussions centered on traditional forms versus free verse, or academic study versus experimentation. In the 1980s, there were still definite boundaries between competing styles, but change occurred in the 1990s when reality in poetry became totally relative to the imagination of the poet. This change is referred to as the postmodern movement, and it held to no rules as it mixed varying viewpoints with psychology and experimentation with language. American poetry showed the influence of overseas and in film techniques (such as the split screen and shifting angles) and fostered diversity among women and various ethnic groups, thus joining in the burgeoning global literature movement. The result was a public interest in poetry that in the early 2000s continued to be at an all-time high. Colleges increased the number of creative writing programs, poetry slams and readings were well attended, and the Internet opened a vast exchange among poets, aspiring poets, and readers. The introduction of the World Wide Web in 1992 led to paperless, experimental poetry that is technology-driven and includes graphics, animation, and hypertext links.

Poetry in the 1990s dashed off in all directions as if the doors were opened to a big new world, and poets raced to see where they could take the genre. Consequently, in the early 2000s, it became almost impossible to typify the poetry of this decade. Anthologists had to narrow their titles to categories in this time period; for example, women's writing in the 1990s; ethnic writers; jazz poetry; cowboy poetry; hip-hop; poetry of nature, of wit, of family, etc. It could be said, though, that there were two major starting points for this new adventure from which the genre grew: first, poetry of the self, as influenced by Robert Lowell and the confessional poets of the 1950s and 1960s whose impact continued to be felt for decades, and, second, poetry of the world as typified by Elizabeth Bishop. The latter type was like a narrative, setting scenes centered on detail. The two roots of postmodernism were polar opposites and in between fell all the new poetry with various themes. Both Lowell and Bishop influenced Stern, who won the National Book Award in 1998. However, Stern definitely falls into the category of poetry of the self, which explores the psyche and expresses very personal emotions.

In addition, a study of the Pulitzer Prize winners of the decade shows a tendency toward the negative. Doom and gloom were common themes of the 1990s, perhaps because of the increased concern for the earth's environment that can be found in the poetry of the time. Whatever the cause, the negativity did not prevent the world of poetry from becoming larger and more diverse. It is hard to make a short list of notables in the field, but a few American names of import in the 1990s are Jorie Graham, Louise Gluck, Philip Levine, Charles Wright, Robert Pinsky, and Yusef Komunyakaa.

Reincarnation

An essential belief of some religions is reincarnation, the idea that the essence of a person can come back from death to live again, perhaps many times. Some religions assert that reincarnation can be cross-species, that a person may come back as an animal, for example. The idea is that the soul gains new experiences and learns in each life until spiritual perfection is achieved, at which time the sequence of birth, death, and birth ends. If the person errs with one life, then the next life could be as a lower species or in a lower station. Reincarnation is a central teaching of Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism, as well as to many Native American and Inuit traditions. It was also believed by some ancient Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians. Some modern New Age philosophies subscribe to the idea of reincarnation. Scientologists believe in immortality and that one is not born into another life but into another body. Buddhists believe in a continual momentum of ever-changing life, but they do not believe the individual entity or soul returns. Rebirth as used in literature usually means a spiritual renewal that is symbolized by death and rebirth, although mythology and folklore are full of stories about people who come back from the grave, often as ghosts or spirits. The theme of rebirth is generally used by writers to explain going through some kind of catharsis or dramatic life-changing turning point. Stern’s “One of the Smallest” leaves the interpretation of rebirth or reincarnation up to the reader.

Critical Overview

Many critics warmly received Stern's *Last Blue*. For example, Carlos Reyes, writing on the collection for the book review section of *Willamette Week Online*, points out that, "like wine, [Stern's] work only gets better with age. This is a rare book where each new reading brings us further insight into our existence." A reviewer for a volume on *American Writers*, Jonathan N. Barron agrees, commenting that "One of the Smallest," is a "visionary, even apocalyptic, tale of death, rebirth, and regeneration." As to singing, noted *Booklist* critic Donna Seaman says that Stern "levitate[s] out of the ordinary to take in the big picture and to feel the lift, the free-floating, singing bliss of life."

The focus on common events drew the notice of John Taylor, in his review of *Last Blue* for *Antioch Review*. Taylor writes that Stern's twelfth book of poetry is "composed in a vigorous first person and focused on the vagaries" of daily life. Taylor notes the extraordinary way that Stern presents ordinary things: "Stern's serpentine, kaleidoscopic verses combine, as in a Cubist collage, unexpected juxtapositions or contradictory viewpoints." Taylor further comments: "Capricious, amusing and sometimes suddenly poignant in their imagery, these poems exhibit mobility and uprootedness as paradoxically constant themes." He concludes that the collection has a "plucky, if melancholy, spirit." A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* agrees: "The language is far from ordinary. . . . The poems still rely on Stern's inimitable blend of coiled anger, love of life and raffish, on-the-outside-looking-in wit."

Concerning *Last Blue*, a *Ploughshares* reviewer finds: "This is a sparer Stern than we're used to . . . he's writing now with a tighter focus, as though he had to make every word count. The best news is he does." But the reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* assures readers that Stern has remained true to his established style and that "While there are few surprises here, the quality of the poems is consistently quite high, and the voice behind them remains winning and companionable." In all, Stern won praise from many reviewers.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Kerschen is an educator and freelance writer. In this essay, she uses Stern's own words from his interviews to show how Stern's poetic practices were applied in "One of the Smallest."

It is common practice in the study of literature to examine the life of the author in hopes of finding clues to the inspiration behind the work. Often researchers can learn about the literary philosophies and creative practices of poets prior to the twentieth century only through any writings they or their learned admirers left behind on the subject. Since newspapers, radio, television, scholarly journals, and the Internet have proliferated, information about every variety of artist usually takes just a quick investigation. A further advantage of studying a modern writer is the likely availability of interviews with the author. Although some are reclusive and rarely give interviews, Gerald Stern has granted a number of them, as well as writing literary articles of his own. Besides, Stern has been a teacher most of his life and as such is inclined by the nature of the profession to share his knowledge with others. Therefore, reading his interviews can provide insight into his work. Specifically, it is interesting to see if what he preaches is what he practiced in "One of the Smallest."

Trying to keep up with where Stern is going requires a mental gymnastics that feels like being shot into a pinball machine, and yet there are no vague allusions sending the reader to the dictionary.

Jeffrey Dodd, Elise Gregory, and Adam O'Connor Rodriguez conducted a 2005 interview with Stern for *Willow Springs*, a literary magazine produced at Eastern Washington University. In this interview, Stern talks about the process by which he arrives at a poem: "I begin with language. I don't begin with ideas, I don't begin with images. I begin with words." In regards to "One of the Smallest," the reader may then wonder if the poem began with the word "sunlight" and then Stern thought about when sunlight has made an impression on him, such as the first light of morning. "Language is everything," Stern continues to explain in the *Willow Springs* interview. He says, "I let the words transform me, carry me, literally, to places and experience. Occasionally, I'll actually think of an experience, relive an experience. You'll read a poem that might describe an experience, but it starts with language." So, in "One of the Smallest," Stern went from the thought of that first morning light and let the thought carry him to what the ray of light touches, who sees it, how it feels when multiple rays warm him outdoors, and then arrives at a comparison of light to life which, when it fades, becomes death.

Similarly, in a 2002 interview with Gary Pacernick for the *American Poetry Review*, Stern says that he allows himself to "just move along as the spirit, if you will, takes me. God knows what that spirit is. Call it the muses, call it unconsciousness, guilt, shame, love, hope, memory." Stern describes this process to Pacernick as an associative way

of writing in which “one thing leads to another.” The reader can then see how, once the ray of light leads Stern to a comparison with life and death in “One of the Smallest,” he moves on to the death of the narrator, an interim time as a bell tongue, and then rebirth.

In Greek mythology, the muses were the nine goddess sisters who served as patrons and sources of inspiration for the arts and sciences. For Stern, perhaps the muse of poetry is still around to guide him and in “One of the Smallest,” this associative method of Stern’s is obvious. Thoughts run down the page with only a few commas and a rare period to give pause. The poem’s opening sentence, if it can be called a sentence, runs for twelve lines. The next two sentences run eleven and twelve lines, but the fourth sentence runs from line 35 to line 92! Trying to keep up with where Stern is going requires a mental gymnastics that feels like being shot into a pinball machine, and yet there are no vague allusions sending the reader to the dictionary. All the terms are everyday language, and for an abstract work, there are sufficient logical connections to enable the reader to hang on for the whole ride. Everyone has seen sunlight peeking through a window shade. Everyone has seen pictures of, if not actual, eagles, moles, rabbits, quails, lilacs, dogwood, and irises. Readers have seen bells, bridges, hammers, and matchboxes, and understand the point about olive and carob trees. The abstract nature of the poem comes in its ideas, but Stern describes everyday, concrete objects with words that are piled and scattered about, words that, as he says, carry him to places and experiences, words that fly wherever the spirit guides them, to express those thoughts and his feelings. Stern told Sue William Silverman in an interview for *Fourth Genre*: “What I believe . . . is that there is a subordinate or superior body or mind that is writing, organizing for you, and you must submit to that body or mind. It’s inchoate or invisible, without making it too mystical or being too Freudian about this.” Put in its simplest terms, Stern summed up the process for Silverman by saying: “I just write and hope it’s good.”

Stern wrote in a 1999 essay for *American Poetry Review*: “Poetry helps people live their lives through its music,” through poetry’s “exquisite interpenetration of these two things, moral force and tenderness, or brute power and tenderness.” Stern’s words may run pell-mell down the page in “One of the Smallest,” but there are the commas, periods, and dashes to create pauses as well as repetition of words and phrases, and parallel structures to create the meter, the beat of the music. In five places, he repeats words side by side. Then in lines 46 through 51 he scatters the word “bell.” In lines 21 through 22, there is a short structural repetition, “what was abraded and what was exhausted,” followed by an extended structural repetition in line 26 through 33 with “I was” repeated eight times to set up a progression of changes. Using this repetition definitely sets up a rhythm and serves as a sort of refrain in the music of the poem. Other repeated words and phrases follow in the rest of the poem but become slightly less frequent as Stern gets into detail with his comparisons and then brings his poem to its conclusion.

Stern also referred to the music of poetry in his Silverman interview, telling her that “In poetry, the music comes first, and I would never write a bad line, or what I consider a bad line, in order to get some content into the poem.” Content in the poem is the story that Stern tells. He admitted to Elizabeth Farnsworth in an interview for the *Jim Lehrer News Hour* that he is like “the ancient mariner who grabs people and says: ‘Listen, I

have to tell you something. I have to explain myself.' I suppose as I'm explaining myself to others, I'm quintessentially explaining myself to myself." Nonetheless, his poems are not confessional, nor do they express what he thinks about issues. Rather, they are his way of enabling the reader to participate in the spiritual journey that the muses allow him to pursue. There are no issues in "One of the Smallest," just the journey as he imagines it, and he invites his readers to tag along so they can experience the same feelings. As Stern emphasized to Farnsworth, his poems "don't relay the adventure of my life. I become, in effect, at the best, representational, so that my life is the reader's life, that the reader can zero in on those aspects of my life as I reveal them, that he can say, yes, that's what happens to me." The simple, concrete language that Stern uses helps readers relate to Stern's life and recognize similarities to their own lives.

For Stern to call upon aspects of his own life in his poetry, he has to draw on past experiences, but not in a sentimental or nostalgic way. Although Jane Somerville reports in the *American Poetry Review* that Stern proposes, "'Maybe the subject of the poem is always nostalgia,'" he clarifies this statement by saying that "'conventional nostalgia fits'" are only "echoes of the real thing . . . authentic nostalgia is 'the essential memory.'" This type of memory, Stern says, has "great psychic roots with true and terrifying aspects of rupture and separation." The pain of separation, Stern further asserts, stems from the loss of paradise. Living in the modern world automatically means not living in paradise, and humans instinctively are trying to re-create paradise and envision a future world. Somerville records Stern as saying, "I see it as an intense desire to be reunited with something in the universe from which we feel cut off. I see it as a search for the permanent." All of these elements are present in "One of the Smallest." Nostalgia as memory is seen in the first part of the poem in the picture of the narrator cutting down trees, basking in the sun, and swimming, then later being in the yard and seeing flowers, trees, and a river. Whether Stern ever actually cut down trees is not the point. These are all real things that he has seen or witnessed. They are brought to mind by his original subject of sunshine and are connected as he automatically goes on his search for paradise, for his Garden of Eden. The permanency he seeks lies in the fact that the garden is there in his first life, and even after his rebirth, the garden is there again. He is reassured that paradise will always be there.

"One of the Smallest" wonderfully exemplifies the use of memories to describe the small joys of life that a person embraces until they disappear "like a fragment of gas" or fire. Stern picks up on the idea of fire in line 42 and carries it through three manifestations until line 85: fire changing the fragments into metal that can be used in the making of a bell, the slow burning wood of the olive and carob trees, and the fire that is produced by a match. These three examples are all taken from memories about seeing how metal and a bell are made, memories about how slowly olive and carob trees burn, and detailed recall of the parts of a match and how a match works. The joyful memories are what make the eventual separation at death so painful. As Stern says, this is a loss that humans can hardly bear to face, so Stern turns the story of "One of the Smallest" into one that describes death as a transformation into a new life, giving hope that there may yet be a future and a paradise in a garden with dogwoods and irises.

Source: Lois Kerschen, Critical Essay on “One of the Smallest,” in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007

Adaptations

• Gerald Stern gave a reading of “Roses” from his book *American Sonnets* for the Griffin Trust for Excellence in Poetry. As of 2007, video of this reading was available on the Griffin Poetry Prize website.

• On November 23, 1998, Elizabeth Farnsworth interviewed Gerald Stern for the *PBS Online NewsHour*. As of 2007, both a print and an audio version were available at PBS website.

Topics for Further Study

- Stern is Jewish and has written poems about the Holocaust as well as many other subjects. He is often called a Jewish poet. In a small group, discuss whether heritage or subject matter makes someone a *Jewish* poet. For reference, look up his poem “Soap” or his poem “Adler.”

- Gerald Stern did not publish his first book of poetry until 1971 when he was forty-six years old. After that he published more than a dozen books and earned numerous prestigious awards. Research the time in Stern’s life before 1971 and write a brief biography of the man before his career as a poet.

- Why is Stern called the modern Whitman? Make a list of the characteristics of the poetry of each man and compare them. Is it valid to say that Stern writes in the style of Whitman? Defend your answer in a written answer or a presentation to your class, with specifics from your list.

- In 1982, Stern began teaching at the Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa and remained there until his retirement at the age of seventy in 1995. The Iowa Writers’ Workshop is one of the most famous schools for aspiring writers of all genres in the United States. Make an online search for other colleges that offer degrees in professional or creative writing. If you wanted to be a writer, where would you go and why? Explain your answer to your class.

- Stern won the National Book Award in 1998. What is this award and why is it so prestigious? How many genres does it cover? Make a comparison of the National Book Award to the Pulitzer Prize. Compare lists of recent winners. Report your findings in a brief, bulleted format.

What Do I Read Next?

• Stern won the National Book Award in 1999 for *This Time: New and Selected Poems*. This collection contains selections of Stern's best poetry from his seven previous volumes as well as new poems, and the collection shows remarkable consistency in theme and style through the years.

• *Everything Is Burning* is Stern's 2006 collection of poetry, published when the poet was eighty-one years old. As he did before, Stern based the poems on his own life and his Jewish-American heritage, but there seems to be a wider range of emotions and subjects in this volume.

• In 2003, Stern published a memoir, *What I Can't Bear Losing: Notes from a Life*, a reminiscence that includes explanations about the development of his writing style.

• Since Stern is often compared to Walt Whitman, a good companion to the study of Stern's poetry is Whitman's 1855 masterpiece, *Leaves of Grass*, which is available in various editions.

• Stern admits to preferring elements of Emily Dickinson to Walt Whitman. Multiple editions of her poetry are available, including a 2006 edition, entitled *Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

• Stern recommends to readers the work of poet Rainier Maria Rilke (1875–1926), whose popularity increased after Galway Kinnell and Hannah Liebmann published *The Essential Rilke* in 2000.

• As a young man, Stern sought out W. H. Auden, whose *Collected Poems* are available in a 2007 edition from Modern Library.

Further Study

Genovese, Peter, “A Singer of Everyday Life: At 74, Gerald Stern Is Finally Getting Recognition,” in *The Star-Ledger*, April 13, 1999, p. 57.

This article for a Newark, New Jersey newspaper, close to where Stern lives, is a short but information-packed overview of Stern’s life and works and the literary criticism of his poetry.

Hamilton, David, “An Interview with Gerald Stern,” in *Iowa Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2001, pp. 148–56.

This interview, conducted in 1999, covers mostly biographical material, including a more personal look at Stern’s parents and his time in Paris than found in generic biographies.

Somerville, Jane, “Gerald Stern Among the Poets: The Speaker as Meaning,” in *American Poetry Review*, Vol. 17, No. 6, November–December 1988, pp. 11–19.

Somerville is an authority on Stern, and this article is her analysis of Stern’s use of the narrator in his poetry.

———, *Making the Light Come: The Poetry of Gerald Stern*, Wayne State University Press, 1990.

After writing a number of articles about Stern, Somerville wrote this in-depth examination of the work Stern produced from 1977 to 1990.

Stitt, Peter, *Uncertainty and Plentitude: Five Contemporary Poets*, University of Iowa Press, 1997.

This book is a study of five American poets of note who were contemporaries in the 1990s. The chapter on Stern is called “Weeping and Wailing and Singing for Joy.” Stitt is an eminent critic and the publisher of the highly regarded literary journal *Gettysburg Review*.

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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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