Paradiso Study Guide

Paradiso by Kenneth Koch

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"Paradiso" appears in Kenneth Koch's final collection of new poems, *A Possible World* (New York, 2002), published a few months after his death. This poem examines an individual who initially revels in an illusion of happiness and then chastises himself for not grasping the opportunity for the real happiness that lies before him. While one may read this poem apart from the book that includes it, the best possible understanding comes from knowing something about the entire collection, as well as knowing something about Koch's personal life. Koch's time spent in various countries—including Italy, where he married his first wife—plays an important role in *A Possible World*. It may even be the impetus for the title of this poem, which shares its name with an older work of the same name, written in the fourteenth century by Italian classical poet Dante Alighieri. It is also likely that Koch's personal life—especially the love he felt for each of his wives—is what helps his speaker make the leap from disillusionment to possible happiness once he understands the true meaning of paradise.

Author Biography

Kenneth Koch (pronounced "coke") was born February 27, 1925, in Cincinnati, Ohio. His father Stuart Koch owned a furniture store, and his mother Lillian wrote amateur literary reviews. As an adult, Koch admitted that, though his upbringing was pleasant enough, he longed to get away from his cozy, provincial Midwestern town, and writing poetry and stories was one way to escape it as a youngster. He has noted that he remembers writing his first poem at age five and that as a child he was quite enamored of nursery rhymes and children's stories.

After high school, Koch was drafted into the Army and served in the Philippines during World War II. He did not write about his harrowing war experiences until near the end of his life, by which time he had found a poetic voice to describe them. Koch enrolled at Harvard University when the war ended and there studied writing with renowned poet Delmore Schwartz. He also developed what would become a lifelong friendship with poet and art critic John Ashbery.

In 1948, Koch graduated with honors from Harvard. He then studied briefly at the University of California, Berkeley—where he met Mary Janice Elwood (Janice), his first wife—before transferring to Columbia University to complete his master's and doctoral degrees. He published his first volume of poetry, titled simply *Poems*, in 1953. In 1959, Koch became a member of the Columbia writing faculty and remained a teacher there for virtually the rest of his life. During his lifetime, he was as renowned for his teaching as for his writing.

Koch is considered one of the founders of the New York School of Poetry, which emphasizes playfulness and absurdity as well as a nihilistic point of view on society and a snubbing of traditional "serious" poetry. His literary career spanned more than forty years and included some thirty volumes of poetry and plays, numerous articles of literary criticism, and three instructional books on how to write poetry. His writing garnered numerous awards, including the 1973 Frank O'Hara Prize for poetry; the 1986 Award of Merit for poetry from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters; the Bollingen Prize in 1995; and a 1996 Library of Congress award for *One Train: Poems* (1994). Koch's *New Addresses* was National Book Award finalist in 2000. Two of his works were published posthumously in autumn 2002: *Sun Out*, which included work written between 1952 and 1954, and *A Possible World*, including the poem "Paradiso."

Koch's first wife, with whom he had one child, died in 1981. In 1994, Koch married Karen Culler, the woman to whom he dedicated his final volume of poetry. His love for his wives, as well as his undying sense of humor, his thirst for world travel, and a never-ending personal exuberance, fill his work with a vitality not often seen in modern and contemporary poetry. Koch died of leukemia July 6, 2002 at his home in Manhattan.

Summary and Analysis

Line 1

Koch's "Paradiso" begins with a statement that may be called an absolute positive negative: "There is *no way not* to be excited" (italics inserted). From the outset, the speaker takes away all but one option on how to respond to what he is about to say. Whoever hears him, whoever reads his words must be as excited as he is about the coming scenario.

Line 2

What follows is seemingly a statement of direct address—a speaker talking pointedly to "you" the reader, but later in the poem the second person turns into the first, and the reader realizes the speaker is actually talking to himself. In line 2 the topic is disillusionment, but it is coupled with the enlightened notion of something "rais[ing] its head," implying a rebirth or reprieve from what has been keeping the head down. The idea of human disillusionment is central to the poem's meaning, as is the will to overcome it, and the first two lines of "Paradiso" establish this central theme.

Line 3

Koch relies on personification (a figure of speech in which inanimate objects or abstract ideas are represented with human qualities or form) in the beginning of the poem to describe the "form of reality"—noted later in line 6—by which the speaker has been "disillusioned." In line 3 the image implied is a human being sitting perhaps at a table, with arms folded atop it and his or her head buried within the arms. One can picture the head slowly rising "From [the] arms" and a facial expression that indicates the person "seems to want to talk to you again." Visually personifying reality and disillusionment reflects the speaker's eagerness to connect with what has been eluding him.

Lines 4—5

These lines suggest how intense emotions can be when one is on the brink of making a connection to a longed-for reality. The mind becomes so tunneled to one goal that "You forget home and family" and head out on some wild goose chase "on foot or in your automobile" in a desperate, if not blind, search for something that may not even exist.

Lines 6—8

In these lines, the speaker reveals what he is seeking—the place where "this form of reality / May dwell." The reality he seeks is the one that "raises its head" and "seems to

want to talk" in lines 2 and 3, but the hope and excitement within those previous lines are quickly dashed in lines 7 and 8: "Not finding it there, you refuse / Any further contact." The irony is that there has been no contact in the first place, and yet the speaker must console himself by *believing* he is in control of the situation and can therefore be the one to "refuse" contact.

Lines 9—10

Line 9 is a continuation of the thought expressed in the previous two lines, but it also contrasts with that sentiment. The speaker vows to refuse contact, then tempers his declaration with "Until you are back again trying to forget." In essence, he finds himself right back where he started, longing to connect with a reality that keeps eluding him. It is that reality which the speaker thinks is the "only thing that moved you," but readers should notice the parenthetical qualifier "(it seems)." This qualifier is the first indication in the poem that the speaker may be wavering in his steadfast beliefs. Perhaps the "only thing" that can move him and bring him happiness is not the *only* thing after all. These lines mark the point in the poem where the second-person "you" begins to sound more like a first-person "me"—that is, the speaker now appears to address his own situation and his own desperate need to find a happy reality. Readers may assume that from here to the end of the poem, the speaker is talking to himself, and his tone seems to soften as he admits that the elusive reality "gave" him "what [he] forever will / have."

Line 11

In this line, the speaker resigns himself to the fact that what he has been chasing (arguably, the first love of his life who is now gone from him) will remain "in the form of a disillusion," taking him full circle back to the personified image of his ambiguous reality *before* it "raises its head," tempting him to go after it again.

Lines 12—13

Line 12 is the main turning point in "Paradiso," as it is the first time that a forward-looking attitude is described. Now the speaker is "looking toward the horizon," which he apparently does "often." In line 13 he declares that what he has been seeking is within sight, but he questions whether it is in fact "inimical" (harmful) to him. Why would this phrase—"inimical to you?"—be offset in an otherwise positive statement and what does it reveal about the speaker's ultimate concerns? Perhaps it is evidence he is still unsure of his feelings and is so afraid to admit the possibility of finding what he has "never found" that he wonders if it may hurt him in some way. Regardless of the reason, these lines are pivotal in that the speaker finally acknowledges that his obsession with what he has "been disillusioned by" (line 2) may be useless, considering the real thing may be right there on the horizon.

Line 14

Here the speaker further emphasizes his belief that the reality he seeks is unattainable because he "could never have / imagined" it is possible to find it. Yet "those who came before him"—perhaps those who were living proof that one can have more than one path to happiness—have left such an impression on him that he now too believes he can achieve it.

Lines 15—17

In these lines Koch unravels the mystery of his speaker's metaphorical allusions from the first three-quarters of the poem. The speaker *berates* himself for having "thought there was one person who could make [him] / Happy," and for thinking that "happiness was not the uneven / Phenomenon" he had always known it to be. Emphasis should be placed on the word "one" in line 15 because the happiness the speaker has been chasing is based on his belief that it can come from only one person, and when that one person is gone, the hope of real happiness is gone with him or her. The speaker has finally realized that happiness *is indeed* an "uneven / Phenomenon" and that someone else can come along and bring about the same feeling of euphoria.

Line 18

Line 18 is a continuation of the question the speaker asks himself in line 17—essentially, why believe in a "Reality" that exists only in the past and is now just a memory "dependent on the time allowed it" by his mind?

Lines 19—20

Turn these two final lines of the poem around from a negative perspective to a positive one, and they read something like this: "Your false reality has more to do with an inability to accept all the things 'life promised that you could do' than with an older man trying to believe he is still young by 'exil[ing]' himself from his real age." In other words, the speaker is trying to convince himself that his disillusionment is not just a result of nostalgic longing to be young again, but more a product of his unwillingness to move beyond what he has lost and toward all other possibilities that life holds. In spite of seeming otherwise, Koch's poem actually ends on a good note, for the implication is that the speaker may finally realize he has found his paradise—or "paradiso"—after years of believing it was gone forever.

Themes

Human Longing and Self-Delusion

The two central themes of "Paradiso," human longing and self-delusion, are closely interwoven, and both examine human understanding of what is real and what is not. Perhaps the dividing line is simply between their general parameters: one theme has more to do with the individual and illusion, and the other more to do with humankind as a whole and illusion. The speaker in the poem is portrayed as a pathetic person, especially in the beginning when he is seen at a very vulnerable moment of elation that turns out to be in vain. He is like a scolded puppy that suddenly becomes excited and overjoyed when it appears his master is no longer angry with him. But the speaker is mastered by something more intangible and enigmatic, a concept difficult for him to grasp: his own self-deluded mind. From the outset, there is no doubt that something is *missing* from his life and that he is desperate to get it back. He admits his excitement at the prospect of regaining what has been lost, but it is only a prospect that he dreams up out of desire and need. In reality, the thing that "raises its head / From its arms and seems to want to talk to [him] again" is only a figment of his very vivid imagination.

Not until line 17 of this twenty-two-line poem does the speaker refer to a human being as the source of his longing. Until then, he mentions an "it," a "thing," and a "something." These impersonal, detached references suggest he is aware of the lack of a real connection—that his elusive catch is as distant from him as it is from anybody else. He acknowledges that "this form of reality" he seeks will always be with him, but "in the form of a disillusion." When an individual is so desperate to find the "only thing" that may bring happiness that he or she is willing to live a life of delusion in order to gain it, then the pathos of the situation is even greater. The speaker in "Paradiso" has been forcing himself to believe that only "one person" can make him happy and that he is condemned to endless searching for the same happiness from the same person, even though intellectually he knows that is impossible. By the end of the poem, he calls this self-delusion into question by asking himself why he "keep[s] believing" in the memory of happiness instead of accepting that his life holds other promises to pursue. In this examination of human longing and self-delusion, the individual appears to bring the desired illusion into check before it is too late.

Humankind and the Power of Illusion

A related second theme in the poem is the power of illusion over human beings in general. In the grand scheme of human desire and emotion, probably happiness is the most basic, prevalent desire, regardless of a person's age, nationality, ethnicity, religion, or any other category. But happiness comes in different forms for different people. For some, it may mean good health and a solid marriage; for others it may mean great wealth and expensive possessions; and for still others it may mean a hot meal each day and shelter from cold and rain. While these examples are obviously disparate, there is

one common thread that runs through them: susceptibility to illusion. When a goal appears unreachable, many people find solace and pseudo-happiness in a good imagination. The problem with creating an illusory world in which to live is that sooner or later the real world is bound to intrude and turn the comfort of make-believe into the frustration of disillusionment.

Early in the poem, Koch suggests the power illusion holds, when just the hint of possible happiness causes the speaker to "forget home and family" and blindly "set off on foot or in [his] automobile" to track down his elusive goal. Anything that can cause a human being to "forget" his loved ones and the place where he lives must be an incredibly strong force indeed. The human tendency to fixate on *one* solution to a problem, denying the potential for other answers, is implied at least twice in "Paradiso"—once when the speaker claims there is an "only thing" that has "moved" him, and again when he asks himself, "How could you have thought there was one person who could make you / Happy?" Despite tunnel vision, the speaker (and humankind in general) leaves a tiny window open for new possibility. If people are bound to share a quest for happiness, as well as an exposure to disillusionment, perhaps that quest can eventually diverge into new paths. The "Reality so dependent on the time allowed it" is not necessarily restricted to the past; instead it may "dwell" in the present or the future.

Style

Style

Contemporary Free Verse

A broad classification such as "contemporary free verse" is apt for "Paradiso," but it does little to define the full range of Koch's style. There is hardly a catchall category for a poet who "offers a smorgasbord of styles," as critic Ben Howard points out in *Poetry*. Howard notes that Koch's "varied fare" may include "prose" poems, a "fugue," a "parody," a "sequence of songs," "minimalist vignettes," "lyric and reflective poems," and even something Howard calls a "four-line squib." These and other forms of poetic construction make up the body of Koch's work, including the poems that accompany "Paradiso" in *A Possible World*. But "Paradiso" is one of Koch's more straightforward, conversational works—so much so that it reads more like a paragraph from a novel (or self-help manual) than poetic verse. Stretch the lines into complete sentences and the *sound* remains the same. No rhythm or rhyme is lost because it is not there in the first place. The tone is somewhat dry and ineffectual, most likely so that it does not get in the way of the overall message. What is being said is more important than how it is said.

Enjambment

Koch relies heavily on enjambment throughout the poem. This poetic device is the continuation of a syntactic unit from one line to the next, without pausing for an end-line full stop. Nearly every thought at the end of each line continues into the beginning of the following line, serving to give the poem its prosy tone and to minimize the distractions of obvious meters, rhythms, and rhyme schemes. The result is a piece that reads as though the speaker is simply talking to himself.

Historical Context

"Paradiso," Koch's poem about human longing and disillusionment, was published the year following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. While the poem may primarily disclose a personal agenda to overcome the frustration of individual loss and the struggle to find contentment afterwards, it also reflects a general societal disillusionment found in the United States following these attacks.

Although it seems artificial to concentrate blame for an entire nation's despair and pessimism on one individual or one event, it is clear that the devastating and unprecedented occurrences of September 11 sent a chilling message to Americans regardless of where they lived on the planet: your world is not as secure as you think it is. In 2002, one of the prevalent American concerns was the location and desired capture of Osama bin Laden, thought to be the mastermind of the September 11 attacks, and the United States waged war against the Taliban, the ruling party in Afghanistan, which was thought to be harboring bin Laden and many other terrorists. Though there was some initial speculation following U.S. attacks in Afghanistan that bin Laden had been killed, he continued to evade capture, evidenced by audiotapes broadcast in the Middle East which were confirmed by U.S. officials and others to contain the voice of this al Qaeda leader.

In other news in 2002, inspectors from the United Nations searched for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and world leaders chose sides on whether the results of these searches should lead to U.S. military action there. Elsewhere in the Middle East, tensions between Israelis and Palestinians worsened as Ariel Sharon and Yasser Arafat failed to reach an agreement on the peace process and violence continued to mount between the two groups. World tensions were further stressed when North Korea admitted in late 2002 that it had a secret nuclear weapons program, in defiance of an agreement the country signed in 1994, agreeing to freeze all nuclear-related activities.

In the United States in 2002, scandal rocked the Catholic Church as hundreds of Catholics came forward to point fingers at former priests, accusing them of sexual abuse, and many bishops and cardinals were blamed for covering up the actions of church officials through the decades. Big business saw its share of scandal as well when giant corporations Enron and WorldCom were each accused of illegal accounting practices that cheated investors and employees alike out of their life savings. The negative fallout on the stock market from the terrorist attacks and corporate scandals was felt worldwide. Perhaps one bright spot in a year of much dark disillusionment for Americans was the recognition of the world-peace-seeking efforts of former president Jimmy Carter, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in October 2002.

Critical Overview

There is not an abundance of criticism available for *A Possible World*; however, the small amount accumulated so far has been positive. In an article for *Booklist*, critic Donna Seaman describes Koch's final effort as "a beautiful new collection" from "a key figure in American poetry." Seaman singles out one of the lengthier poems, "A Memoir," for particular praise that could be applied to Koch's work as a whole: "Wryly and affectionately reflective, teasingly subversive, and still vitally curious and joyfully creative." In a review of *A Possible World* for *Publishers Weekly*, one critic observes that the various writings in the book "display Koch's verve and light touch, but are unmistakably colored by requiem."

Throughout Koch's career, critics have applauded the poet's sense of humor and his willingness to write "unpoetic" poetry. Critic Ben Howard writes in a review of Koch's *Straits* for *Poetry*, "in his poems Koch rarely plays the ponderous theorist or the sober observer. His stance is that of the passionate participant, the guest at life's feast." Howard nods to the poet's lighter side in saying, "Koch ignites sparklers and fireworks rather than an edifying light. But humor is rare in contemporary American poetry, and one is grateful for the show." Even Koch's books on how to teach poetry writing to children and adults are widely acclaimed for their intriguing insights and Koch's whimsy and wit.

In his book *The Art of Poetry: Poems, Parodies, Interviews, Essays, and Other Work*, Koch himself provides insight into his approach to poetry: "when I started teaching at the New School . . . there were still a number of students whose idea of poetry was something like 'O wingéd being soaring through the azure,' and [William Carlos] Williams can show you quickly the pleasure of saying 'Bird there in the blue,' or something like that." Koch, as Williams, showed his readers the pleasure of simple words—classically poetic or not—in over four decades of writing, and his final work reveals no signs of his having let up.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill examines the link between Koch's poem and Dante's much older work of the same title, suggesting their connection is much stronger than a shared name.

Little is gained by calling a poem the same name as an easily recognizable, virtual icon of literary history if there is no connection whatsoever between the two. Dante Alighieri's fourteenth-century masterpiece *The Divine Comedy*, the third part of which is titled "Paradiso," has undoubtedly inspired countless poets, writers, playwrights, painters—artists of all kinds, for hundreds of years. Koch is likely no exception. But the twentieth-century poet's "Paradiso" does not overtly mention an inferno or a purgatory to go along with paradise, nor does it describe someone making a treacherous journey from hell to heaven, encountering both gruesome and beautiful sights along the way. Or does it? In spite of its obvious contemporary feel and contemporary language, perhaps Koch's poem actually contains several allusions to Dante's epic. Perhaps its title is only a rather large hint that this work, too, is about a man's journey through hell—his own kind, that is. The progression in the poem certainly implies the speaker's movement from one place to another, and the trip is just as real even though the "places" he visits are actually states of his own mind.

In the first two parts of *The Divine Comedy*, "Inferno" and "Purgatorio" respectively, Dante has a guide—the spirit of the great classical poet Vergil—who leads him through both hell and purgatory. Dante must journey through the depths of the inferno in order to be freed of the temptation to sin and then travel up the mountain of purgatory where his soul is cleansed of even the capacity for doing wrong. But that is as far as Vergil can take him, for man alone, with only a human intellect, cannot enter the higher realm of paradise. Instead, Dante is met by Beatrice, who represents divine grace and revelation, and it is she who leads him along the final ascent to "paradiso." In real life, Dante only met Beatrice twice but he idealized her as the perfect woman, if not the perfect human being altogether. While it is unclear on what Dante based his intense feelings—considering the two were virtually strangers—it is certain that his unrequited devotion to her is unparalleled in the history of courtly love. And this is why "Beatrice" is the star of Dante's "Paradiso"—only *she* is divine enough to enter into heaven with him.

The speaker in Koch's "Paradiso" does not have an outside party who guides him on his journey; instead, he has himself. That is, his own mind acts as an escort through a series of emotions, from initial disillusionment to excitement, hope, determination, bliss, disappointment, despair, and, finally, disillusionment again. Note the circularity of his emotional sojourn, all of which takes place in the first half of the poem. In Dante's "Inferno," the nine levels of hell form a conical shape, ensuring that the inhabitants of each circle continue in an endless ring of torment. Koch's speaker is tormented by his constant "trying to forget" what his mind will not let him forget. He finds himself "back again" where he started after heading out on his feverish attempt to "go to where . . . this form of reality / May dwell." Not finding it, he is forced to resign himself to a dream

world—a hellish world, in fact, in which his desired reality exists only "in the form of a disillusion."

The first half of the poem may be seen as the speaker's experience in the inferno and purgatory all rolled into one. There is no obvious distinction between the horrible sights and events of hell and the more amiable, hopeful displays of the region in between the inferno and paradise. Instead, the contemporary speaker is caught up in the excitement of happiness and the devastation of letdown at the same time. His movement from down to up to down again is quick and does not allow for a significant stay on either side, although the division is not completely concealed either. He admits that there is "no way not to be excited" when his elusive reality seems to be within *talking* distance again, and he is so enthralled with that prospect that he can even "forget home and family" in order to chase after it. Just as rapidly, his hopes are dashed by one fast, undeniable declaration: he does not find it, and the chase is over. Koch's speaker both enjoys and suffers a medley of responses in his quest to achieve happiness, but the search comes to an end at line 12. Line 13 denotes a turnaround—for Dante, a literal turn from hell and purgatory toward heaven; for Koch's speaker, an emotional shift toward the possibility of real happiness.

If the latter half of "Paradiso" does not take place wholly within paradise, it at least has the speaker knocking on the gold city's door. He has decided that "looking toward the horizon" may afford him a chance at a better way of life than he is living by continuing to long for the past. He suddenly understands that out there in the future is that "something" he has "never found" in his dream world and that something he "could never have / imagined" as long as he refuses to see reality for what it is. More importantly, the speaker finally denies his Beatrice. Like Dante, he has been under the impression that "there was one person who could make [him] / Happy" and, since this one person is someone with whom he has no actual contact, the relationship must exist only in the imagination. But unlike Dante, the speaker here has a change of heart. He questions how he could have ever let himself believe that only one woman held the key to his being happy and why he thought happiness was a consistent, homogenous, always balanced phenomenon that one either possesses or does not. In fact, real happiness is "uneven" and may come and go dozens of times throughout one's life, stemming from relationships with countless numbers of people, including romantic partners when the love of one's life is suddenly gone. Insisting on only one source of personal contentment and peace of mind inevitably leads to disillusionment, as Koch's speaker so poignantly demonstrates in the first part of the poem. But he saves himself with a new determination to separate what is illusion from what is real—and to hold fast to the latter.

The greatest connection between Koch's "Paradiso" and Dante's work of the same name is actually marked by the two poems' greatest distinction: the role of each speaker's Beatrice. For Dante, she is the undeniable, one and only perfect being who leads him to the highest realm of personal enlightenment a human can attain. She is no less than an angel to him—and, decidedly, his single source of happiness. Her function as Dante's guide through paradise is further evidence of the poet's exaltation of a mortal woman to heavenly heights, and it is clear that he will never question his blind, tunneled

devotion to her. Koch's speaker, on the other hand, is full of questions. His mind has been his guide through hell and purgatory, and it still leads him as he approaches paradise. His "Beatrice" has indeed existed and is the source of his happiness in the past. More recently, she has been a source of pain and disillusionment. The speaker realizes that the "reality" she used to represent is now completely "dependent on the time allowed it," and he has made up his mind not to permit it so much time. In essence, he determines to stop fantasizing and start living in the present reality. Only by freeing himself of illusion can he attain his own kind of ultimate personal enlightenment.

What Koch may have gained by giving this poem the same title as Dante's famous one may not be clear, nor even necessary to understand. If he had called it simply "Paradise," its meaning would be the same, but any allusions to Dante may never be recognized. Using the Italian word, however, points readers in the direction of the classic predecessor and, if nothing else, adds philosophical depth to Koch's work. It implies that the poem is about a journey—one that is as important to its speaker as the epic sojourn from hell to heaven is for Dante. Just as vital, Koch's speaker's eventual rejection of his old belief in a single source of happiness is made all the more poignant by comparing it to Dante's unshakable devotion to one woman as the human ideal. Giving up on a lost love may not be that remarkable an event; but giving up a Beatrice drives home just how extraordinary the decision is.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Paradiso," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Critical Essay #2

Potter is a university writing instructor and fiction writer living in San Francisco. In this essay, Potter illustrates how Koch crafts line breaks in his poem to affect both its mood and message.

Koch's work is distinguished by its humor and experimental quality, as Koch was a member of the 1950s avant-garde poetic movement known as the New York School, contemporary to the Abstract Expressionist movement in art. Critic Vernon Shetley, reviewing Koch's poetics for the beginning student, *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry*, writes that "formally and stylistically, Koch is the most Protean of our poets . . . from surrealist whimsy . . . to deadpan humor. . . . Aristotle, perhaps, might have called him a consistently inconsistent character." However, regarding the themes Koch treats in his work, Shetley feels he is consistent: "the themes of Koch's verse have remained constant since his earliest work, as has his characteristic tone; Koch has only ever had two real subjects, love and poetry, and has consistently treated them with the same combination of exuberant celebration and wry irony." To such a tongue-in-cheek poet as Koch, can there be such a place as paradise, as Paradiso suggests? Or is Koch wryly tempering his vision of a heaven on earth in this poem by categorizing it merely as another "possible world?"

The poem consists of four complex sentences followed by two questions. Its vocabulary is formal and abstract, with "automobile" being the most concrete image in the poem. In this poem, Koch is waxing philosophic, discussing "reality," "disillusionment," "happiness" as an "uneven phenomenon," without mentioning love by name, yet this is a love poem. "How could you have thought there was one person who could make you / Happy. . . ?" is the question he ironically asks to answer the predicament he has posed in the first four sentences, that of disillusionment. Unlike Dante's *Paradiso*, written to Beatrice, the object of the Italian poet's affections and the source of his inspiration, Koch's "Paradiso" is written to the reader who has been disappointed in love. By the poem's end, the scope of his topic has widened to include any reader who has ever been disappointed and to offer an alternate way to view reality. Koch's poem reveals the many "possible worlds" beyond the realm of love, the illusion of happiness, and the limits of human understanding of reality.

The lines of this poem are in the plain style of speech and the verses are non-metrical. One of Koch's early influences was Walt Whitman, who brought the "heightened prose" of the King James Bible, long, rolling lines of preachers and politicians, into nineteenth-century poetry, which Koch examines in *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry*. The most salient poetic technique Koch employs in the poem is the interruption caused where he breaks each line. "Line breaks cause stops the way periods and commas do, but, instead of being necessary for sense, draw attention to tone and sound," he explains in *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry*, and they do so for various effects. For example, pausing where the poet breaks his line after "head" in the first poetic statement effects disillusionment itself. By separating the word "head" from its natural place on "its arms,"

the disjoined image breaks not only the poet's train of thought, but also serves as the figure of disillusionment itself. The second sentence creates the momentum of a journey, stopping abruptly with the end of the sentence, "May dwell." In the third sentence, where three short lines break after "refuse," "contact," and "forget," the disappointment felt in disillusionment is created by the use of these verbs. The next line rolls forward the promise of "what forever you will have," only to turn out to be, in the next short line, "in the form of a disillusion." What "you . . . have," by its placement at the end of the line, is countered by "disillusion," as all one is left with when one believes in an illusion is disillusion. The mood of these first sentences is dreamy and nostalgic if appropriate pauses are taken where Koch breaks his lines; it is as if the aged poet is delivering his private musings on love's losses to the reader. The fourth sentence runs in three long lines, each longer than the previous. Pausing eight times in this sentence adds breathlessness to the reading of the line, heightening the mood of the poem with a mixture of confusion and hope.

Not only does Koch craft his line breaks to cast a mood, but he also chooses the words at the end of these lines for their tone and therefore for what their sound will contribute to the overall effect of the poem. Two words, "again" and "disillusion," for example, are the final words in the first two sentences, as Koch is writing about not the first such disappointment in love or life. These words, while they do not rhyme, sound similar and softly resonate with each other. "Family" and "reality" are rhythmically and tonally similar, creating momentum in his lines toward the final words in that statement, "May dwell." Koch meticulously uses the reading of his lines for thematic and musical aims. For, as he writes in "The Language of Poetry," poetic language is "a language in which the sound of the words is raised to an importance equal to that of their meaning, and also to the importance of grammar and syntax."

The poem concludes with two questions phrased in six lines. Koch breaks the first question about love, "one person who could make you / Happy" and "happiness was not the uneven / Phenomenon" to mirror the unevenness of the state of happiness. Then, without breaking the line, he persists with yet another question, breaking before "Reality" to emphasize this idea. His final two lines, completing his question, propose a solution not only for the conundrum of love but for the existential dilemma as well, and Koch ultimately interprets reality for the reader in these lines. As Shetley writes, "Koch is really the most classical of contemporary American poets, the poet who most responds to the ancient themes of the pleasure of having a body and existing in the world of mutable nature, and who most energetically seeks out the variations that will allow the renewal of those themes in our time." His final questions express the mutability of existence, as both being a person and reality are a construct of culture and age, which can either limit humankind from reaching its potential or inspire it onward. That his final lines come in the form of questions shifts the tone of the poem from nostalgia toward directly addressing his reader. His final lines admonish his reader to not be restricted by his or her own society, era, concept of love and happiness, but to pursue instead the "promise" of one's own life.

Reviewers such as Barbara Hoffert in *Library Journal* hint at strains of elegy or "requiem" in Koch's posthumously published final collection and certainly the tone of

"Paradiso" is subdued, reflective, coming from a sagacious voice in American letters. "If 'happy,' positive, excited poetry were the 'scene,' I might have been looking for the nuances of the losses and sorrows in my life for the subjects of poems," Koch remarked in an interview with Jordan Davis in 1996.

Although Koch had read the classics and some of his poetry is influenced by them, this poem is not a journey through paradise, nor is it, like *Paradise Lost*. While Koch alludes to his poetic predecessors in the title, the realm of his verse is human experience, for if one remains aware of the illusion of "happiness," there is more in life that becomes "possible."

Source: Mary Potter, Critical Essay on "Paradiso," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Topics for Further Study

What does research in the field of psychology say about the power of illusion in the human mind? Are its effects generally considered negative or positive? What are some examples of each?

What is the overall mindset of the speaker in "Paradiso"? Is he happy, sad, angry, indifferent, excited, or something else? Defend your answer with examples from the poem.

Choose a current event and explain why it is a source of great disillusionment in contemporary American society. Bolster your argument with historical facts from your research.

Choose a historical event that occurred before 1960 and explain how its impact brought about disillusionment in any society anywhere in the world.

What Do I Read Next?

Sun Out: Selected Poems, 1952—1954, one of Koch's two final works published posthumously in 2002, collects for the first time his earliest poems and provides a good look at the foundation for all his subsequent material. The poems are wonderfully detailed and give insight into his young relationships with other members of the New York School of Poets.

Koch's lifelong friend and fellow New York School poet, John Ashbery, has published dozens of poetry collections. Ashbery's *Chinese Whispers* (2002) includes work in typical Ashbery style—highly imaginative, rambling, often fragmented. "Chinese Whispers" refers to the British game in which whispered stories are passed along to the players until the original meaning has entirely disappeared.

Philip Auslander's *The New York School Poets as Playwrights: O'Hara, Ashbery, Koch, Schuyler, and the Visual Arts* (1989) provides a good look at how the methods and styles of the New York School of Poets is translated into works for the theater. Auslander reveals how these poets-turned-playwrights create strong visual effects on stage just as they create impressive "visual effects" on paper.

A revealing, compassionate tribute to Koch, written by fellow poet David Lehman and titled "Kenneth Koch's Seasons on Earth" appears in Columbia University's online newspaper *Columbia College Today*. The article is available at http://www.college.columbia.edu. It was originally posted in November 2002, a few months after the poet's death.

For Further Reading

Koch, Kenneth, *I Never Told Anybody: Teaching Poetry Writing in a Nursing Home*, Random House, 1977.

Although this book appeared a quarter century before *A Possible World*, the insight this book provides into Koch's methods, theories, and beliefs about how poetry gets written—by anyone at any age—makes it as relevant to understanding his poetry today as it was when originally published. This is an illustrative and entertaining "how-to" book.

———, *New Addresses*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.

Like many of Koch's poetry collections, *New Addresses* provides a very touching, somewhat comical look at the poet's own life, without becoming overly emotional or autobiographical. These poems examine such topics as a small-town man moving to New York City, an encounter with psychoanalysis, and facing combat in World War II. This collection was a National Book Award finalist.

Lehman, David, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*, Doubleday, 1998.

Covering the years 1948 to 1966, Lehman paints a rich portrait of the New York School of Poets, detailing the men most associated with the movement: John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, and Kenneth Koch.

Ward, Geoff, *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets*, St. Martin's Press, 1993.

Although this is not specifically a book about Koch, Ward's thorough examination of the New York School of Poets provides critical information on this important literary group. Ward offers a complete account of the school from its precarious beginnings to its cult following to its more recent acceptance into mainstream poetry and its influences on poets across the board.

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Koch, Kenneth, *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasure of Reading and Writing Poetry*, Scribner, 1998.

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Seaman, Donna, "A Poet's Fond Farewell," in *Booklist*, Vol. 99, No. 3, October 1, 2002, p. 296.

Shetley, Vernon, Review of *The Last Avant-Garde*, *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasure of Reading and Writing Poetry*, *Straits*, and *Wakefulness* in *Raritan*, Spring 1999, Vol. 18, No. 4, pp. 130—44.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Poetry for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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