Portrait of a Couple at Century's End Study Guide

Portrait of a Couple at Century's End by Sherod Santos

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

□Portrait of a Couple at Century's End□ contrasts the private pain of contemporary life to the awareness of global strife. Its author, Sherod Santos, does not give a detailed view of the couple mentioned in the title but instead looks at their situation in only the most general terms. He presents them as the sort of anonymous people who live all over America in warm, respectable homes and commute to jobs that distract them from the fact that they are out of touch with what is important in their lives. These are people who have chosen a life of comfort over openly acknowledging the memories of bad times that haunt them. The couple live a life of quiet discontent, making small talk over dinner and pretending that past arguments have no lingering effect. Santos stands these controlled lives against the international news that streams into the couple's living room over the twenty-four-hour news network, bringing the horrors of modern urban warfare into their staid living room with the same emotional suppression that characterizes the couple's quiet lives.

A version of □Portrait of a Couple at Century's End□ was published in the January 7, 1992, issue of the *Nation*. A revision of the poem is in *The Pilot Star Elegies*, which was published in 1999 by W. W. Norton and for which Santos was a finalist for the National Book Award.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1948

Santos was born on September 9, 1948, in Greenville, South Carolina. His father was a pilot in the United States Air Force, and his mother was a painter. Like that of many children of servicemen, Santos's childhood was marked by constant relocation. He attended grammar school and high school in such varied locales as Germany, Switzerland, France, and Hawaii and various places in the United States.

In his late teens, Santos bought a one-way ticket to Paris, traveling with no particular plan. Without a work permit, he could not obtain legal employment, but a concierge at the Hotel Racine hired him to serve breakfast to the guests for fifty cents an hour and a room in the attic. Santos spent his mornings working at the hotel and his afternoons honing his poetry at the American Library. Having learned to love what he had once found most challenging about poetry□its difficulty□Santos returned to the United States with no doubt about what he wanted to do with his life.

Santos attended San Diego State University, from which he received a bachelor of arts degree in 1971. He went on to receive a master of arts degree from San Diego State University in 1974 and a master of fine arts degree from the University of California, Irvine, in 1978. Santos earned his doctorate from the University of Utah in 1982, having focused his dissertation on the works of William Shakespeare. After completing his education, Santos began his teaching career at California State University, San Bernadino, and in 1983 moved to the University of Missouri, where he was teaching in 2005. In 1990, Santos took the position of external examiner and poet in residence at the Poet's House in Islandmagee, Northern Ireland, holding that post until 1997. Santos was the poetry editor of the *Missouri Review* from 1983 to 1990.

Santos was the recipient of numerous awards, including fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. He won the Pushcart Prize for essays and for poetry, the Ingram Merrill Award, the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Award, and the B. F. Connors Prize for Poetry. For *The Pilot Star Elegies*, the book that includes □Portrait of a Couple at Century's End,□ Santos was a finalist for the National Book Award and the *New Yorker* Book Award and won the Theodore Roethke Memorial Poetry Prize. Santos's published works include five collections of poetry, essays, and memoirs.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-5

The first stanza of □Portrait of a Couple at Century's End□ establishes a commuter traffic scene. The poem starts out on a note of discomfort, beginning with the word □Impatient.□ The drivers of the cars are looking forward to their homes, where, presumably, they will be comfortable and feel safe from the hassles of their day. Santos compares the sound of cars on a wet street to the sound made by construction paper when it is torn. The tearing of construction paper foreshadows domestic strife.

This stanza ends with what seems like a redundancy. The sheets of paper in the audio image are said to be torn not only □their length□ but also □through.□ This image makes more sense when □through□ is joined to the following stanza, to make □through / the walls,□ which is where the sound can be heard.

Lines 6-10

With the second stanza, the poem shifts from outdoors to indoors, using the phrase □through / the walls□ to cross the boundary, as if readers are being brought inside along with the traffic sounds. Line 7 specifically mentions the furnace to evoke the warmth and dryness of the inside of the house in contrast to the wetness of the outside. The furnace sound is identified with the simile of the sound of □a hundred thousand / bottle-flies□ trapped in the walls. The sound evoked is no less unpleasant than the traffic sound. By detailing the insides of the walls, Santos implies a hidden, sinister problem in the house, referring to the domestic problems of the couple mentioned in the title.

Like the first stanza, the second stanza ends with a transition that can be misleading. Line 10 mentions a rain, but one not as harsh as the one outside. Readers are forced to question why there is rain inside until they read on to the third stanza.

Lines 11-15

Santos uses the concept of a news broadcast playing on the television to move the action to a third locale, beyond the house and the commuter traffic outside it to Tuzla, Bosnia. Tuzla was a central point of contention during the Bosnian war of 1992 to 1995, which occurred after the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. During 1995, Tuzla was hammered by mortar fire, including the single most deadly attack of the war: On May 25, 1995, a Serb mortar killed seventy-two children. The poem shows this bombing program in the context of a television report from the Cable News Network (CNN), which brings tragedy and destruction from far away into the sheltered and secluded world of an American living room.

Lines 16-20

□Eye□ in line 18 refers to the television set. Line 16 mentions □darker crimes□ in the context of the war, but the ominous sound shuddering through the walls of the house also foreshadows the suggestion that there are things going on domestically that can be considered dark and shameful. The parenthetical phrase □*a world outside, a world within*□ serves as a membrane between the television report of terrors far away and the couple's awareness that there are terrors within their own marriage.

After the parenthetical phrase, the poem's focus shifts to the couple mentioned in the title. Readers can see that the poem is no longer talking about the news anchor, because it mentions personal matters such as the summer, the meal the couple are sharing, and the work they do. Presenting the topics of dinner conversation in a list such as this trivializes them, showing that, following the horrors presented on the television, the couple's discussion is actually very banal.

Lines 21-25

The conversation about uncontroversial topics leads to an unpleasant topic: an argument the couple has had in another place. Their memory of that argument awakens repressed feelings. Santos presents these feelings as positive ones, referring to them as longings that have been stirred up by the memory of the argument. The poem implies that even the negative emotions of an argument are preferable to living with no emotions at all.

In line 24, the focus of the poem changes again, from □they□ to □us.□ Just as the argument has opened up the couple in the poem to the emotions they have once known but have suppressed, the poem tells the reader that observing the couple's transformation can have the same effect on the reader, awakening suppressed feelings. The subject of recognizing buried emotions is referred to in a deadpan way, as a simple reminder.

Lines 26-30

Line 26 repeats the word □something□ from line 25, indicating that the meaning of the memory is slowly dawning on the poem's speaker. This technique of rephrasing an idea is repeated in line 27, in which □our lives□ is refined to the idea □shadow-life of ours.□ The difference between the two phrasings is that the first uses the plural word □lives,□ indicating the separate lives lived by separate people, whereas the use of the singular □life□ in the iteration indicates that a plurality is involved even in a common life.

In lines 28 to 30, the poem reverses direction. Readers are told to □forget□ about the hypothetical couple living in the house on the rainy day and to ignore any speculation about what their life is going to be like in the future. The couple's hearts are called □monogamous,□ which means that they are true to each other and that their problem is

not unfaithfulness to each other. However, the poem is no longer interested in exploring the couple's real problem after it has finished using them to raise the broader issue of people living with each other but harboring discontentment.

Lines 31-35

In erasing the importance of the couple that have been the focus of most of the poem, Santos indicates that they are never going to change. The poem uses the image of a boot stuck in mud to indicate that their lives (and, by inference, □our□ lives) are not going to be appreciably different in the future. The relationship they have established, which continues to create dissatisfaction, is referred to as □the industry of pain,□ as if producing pain is the work that these people have set for themselves.

Lines 36-40

The poem's final stanza addresses the emptiness of the couple's lives and the lack of hope that their lives will change. The couple are people of some refinement who eat dinner by candlelight, but their problems are so deeply ingrained that their refined exteriors are used only to deflect emotions. Santos uses the image of a burnt match□a spent article, destroyed, with no further hope that it will have any good use. He extends the visual image of the match head stuck in wax, referring to its being □preserved into amber.□ Amber is tree resin that has become fossilized, usually dating back thirty million to ninety million years. Scientists sometimes find stuck in amber the remains of an insect that is completely intact. These fossils are used in the study of anatomical forms that have not changed for thousands of centuries. The novel and film *Jurassic Park* (1990 and 1993, respectively) are based on the idea of being able to revive dinosaur DNA found in the blood of a mosquito that has been embedded in amber. The poem therefore indicates that the couple's relationship will not grow or improve when the new century comes in, that it will never change□these people are set in their unhappy relationship, like an insect in amber, unmoving for eons.

Themes

Empathy

In the fifth stanza, in line 24, □Portrait of a Couple at Century's End□ changes direction. Lines 1 through 23 focus on one continuous scene: a suburban home with cars going by in the rain and the news on the television while a couple eat their dinner and placidly discuss their day. In line 24, however, the speaker intrudes on the story. □They remind us / of something□ draws attention to the fact that the poet is describing a scene and that the reader is observing it. In lines 24 through 32, the poem uses the words □us,□ □we've,□ □our,□ and □ours□ to make readers see how the poem is talking not only about the lives of theoretical people but also about readers' lives.

The poem counts on the fact that readers will empathize with the couple described. Unlike sympathy, which entails understanding another's suffering, empathy requires one to put oneself in the other person's place and to feel his or her situation from the inside rather than from the outside. When he switches the focus to □our lives,□ Santos forces readers to accept the couple's situation as their own.

Bourgeois Life

□Bourgeois□ is a word that comes from the French and means □a middle-class person.□ It is often used derogatorily and usually while discussing opposition between social classes. □Bourgeois□ is used to indicate a comfort with materialism and a conformity with middle-class values that makes a person wish for nothing more than continued financial stability. In this □Portrait of a Couple at Century's End,□ Santos depicts a couple locked up in their bourgeois values. The signs of their prosperity include the house, the television they watch during their meal, their dinnerware, and the beeswax candles on their dinner table. The couple is financially comfortable but not independently wealthy, because not one but both of them work. Santos contrasts the couple's placid middle-class life to life in war-torn Bosnia.

The couple is evidently so comfortable with their life that they want to avoid thinking about things that might upset them, such as an argument that they once had. Given such little information, readers cannot help but assume that the couple would rather keep their lifestyle consistent than explore the things that really matter in life, such as having an honest relationship. It is characteristic of the bourgeois lifestyle that the couple would put material comfort over spiritual growth.

Permanence

The imagery used in the final stanza, lines 36 to 40, of □Portrait of a Couple at Century's End□ is fatalistic in that it tells readers that the situations described in the poem will never change. The situations are indeed grim. The television describes war

overseas; thousands of commuters sit stuck impatiently in traffic; and in the living room of one house, a couple talks about the summer in order to avoid acknowledging their unhappy situation. When it comes up, the quarrel in Iowa is seen as an opportunity to let emotions flow again, but by the final stanza, the couple, as well as everyone else mentioned or referred to in the poem, including the speaker and the reader, are said to be stuck in the maddening patterns they have lived in, presumably doomed to stay dissatisfied forever. The images that Santos uses to imply this state of suspended animation are the boot stuck in the mud, the amber that has been known to imprison life forms for millions of years, and the candle wax that solidifies around the burnt matchstick.

Optimism

The end of the century is used in □Portrait of a Couple at Century's End□ to imply a turning point, a time when the wrongs of the past can be set right. It is mentioned in the title, but after that this cause for hope is left to linger in the back of the reader's mind while the poem goes on to concentrate on other matters, such as traffic, the international news, and the tension in the couple's living room.

The idea of the passage of time and its ability to clear up old, lingering wounds is raised in the fifth stanza, lines 21 through 25, in which Santos alludes to a past quarrel. The quarrel is presented as a good thing, bringing up longings, leading readers to hope that the resurrection of buried emotions can mean that the wounds can be healed once and for all. The wounds are not healed, though. The poem reminds readers of how such moments reflect their own □shadow-life□ and tells them that the future of the couple's □monogamous hearts□ is to be forgotten. Lines 31 through 35 return to the century's end of the title, using a metaphor to indicate the unpleasant fact that the turn of the century will not, in fact, free the couple from the unpleasantness they have buried. The century is mentioned in terms of one hundred years of accumulation of mud, in which the soles of the couple's boots are stuck forever, making them unable to move forward. This idea of crushed optimism is reinforced in lines 36 through 40, in which the couple's relationship is compared to an insect preserved in amber and a burnt matchstick stuck into coalesced beeswax. Rather than moving forward when the century changes to a new one, this couple are doomed to continue with their unhappy, emotionally drained life.

Style

Syllabic Verse

□Portrait of a Couple at Century's End□ has little noticeable consistency for readers who try to examine it line by line. The poem does not follow a set rhyme scheme, and the lines within each stanza do not resemble each other in rhythm or length. Santos does, however, use rhythmic consistency in this poem by repeating the pattern of line lengths in each stanza. The first line of each stanza has five syllables; the second lines all have eleven syllables; all but one□line 13□of the third lines have seven syllables; the fourth lines have ten syllables; and the fifth lines have four syllables. Poetry in which lines are measured by the number of syllables in a line, rather than by the rhythm of stressed and unstressed syllables in the line, is called syllabic verse.

Syllabic verse is more common in languages other than English. Japanese, French, and Spanish are examples of languages that are syllable timed. Their syllables are approximately the same length. English, by contrast, is a stress-timed language, which means that it flows rhythmically. Syllable-timed languages are more likely to organize verse around counting syllables, and stress-timed languages are inclined to focus on the pattern created by stressed and unstressed syllables.

Extended Metaphor

Throughout the poem's early stanzas, Santos uses rain to imply an ominous sense of discontent pervading modern culture. In the first stanza, the rush-hour traffic is slowed by the rain. In the second and third stanzas, lines 6 through 15, it is raining in the country being covered on the television news. The couple inside their house are aware of the rain, which drives them to take themselves back to the summer in their conversation. The rain defines the mood of the entire poem.

In the seventh stanza, lines 31 through 35, Santos refers to the rain obliquely when he mentions boots that are □pressed forever in our century's mud.□ The rain that is everywhere, representing grim oppression, will not go away. The mud that results from the rain will trap the people in this poem in that same oppression. By altering the reference only a little, Santos carries the metaphorical rain to its logical conclusion, mud.

Historical Context

□Portrait of a Couple at Century's End□ was published in the late 1990s, when the world was looking forward to the approach of the twenty-first century. Many cultures around the world celebrate New Year's Day each year as a time of promise, when old troubles can be left behind and a better life can begin. The interest in the change of the calendar is intensified at the turn of each century, with the beginning of another hundred-year cycle. In 1999, that effect was made more significant by the fact that it represented the start of a new millennium, an event that had not occurred since the year 999, well before the Georgian calendar, which is common throughout the Western world, was introduced in 1582.

Because of the end of the millennium, expectations were raised as the year 2000 approached. Some evangelical Christians, for example, their expectations piqued by strict readings of the book of Revelation in the Bible, claimed that the end of the millennium would signify the long-awaited Second Coming, the return of Jesus Christ on the last day of the world. Some people believed that the turn of the century would bring with it earthquakes, plagues, and catastrophe. Their predictions were based on ancient texts they believed foretold the start of the new millennium as a time of apocalypse.

The U.S. government had reason for more practical concerns. Evidence had been uncovered that the al Qaeda terrorist organization was planning public attacks during New Year's celebrations around the world that would injure or kill dozens if not hundreds of people. On December 14, 1999, an Algerian citizen named Ahmed Ressam, traveling with a false Canadian passport, was caught driving into the United States at Port Angeles, Washington, with one hundred pounds of explosives in the trunk of his car. After his arrest, it was determined that Ressam had been trained by al Qaeda and that he was planning to blow up a terminal at Los Angeles International Airport. In early January 2000, U.S. government officials went public with information that they had disrupted terrorist plans in eight countries where attacks had been planned. The approach of the new millennium raised concerns about the sort of terror attacks that would later strike Washington, D.C., and New York City in 2001, Madrid in 2004, and London in 2005.

Neither celestial prophecy nor terrorist attack was the biggest concern as the new century approached. The years and months before the event brought increasing international concern about a credible problem with computer systems worldwide. Called the Y2K bug, or millennium bug, this problem threatened to do widespread and lasting damage. The bug stemmed from the fact that since the 1960s, computer programmers had used two digits rather than four for the year in date codes. As the turn of the century approached, companies realized that their computers might not be able to correctly read dates after December 31, 1999, that 2000 might be read as 1900. The resulting problem in continuity was predicted to create widespread havoc□that automatic teller machines would refuse to dispense cash; that air and ground traffic control programs would shut down at midnight on December 31, 1999; that electrical, water, and gas utilities would fail. During the last half of the 1990s, the Y2K

phenomenon became well known, and public anxiety about the pending calamity grew. Corporations and governments devoted millions of dollars to hiring teams of programmers to go over their computer systems and ensure that they were Y2K compliant. In the end, relatively little damage occurred. The few problems that did happen, such as a brief railway shutdown in Denmark and the temporary blinding of a U.S. spy satellite, were isolated and did not have the cascading effect that was expected to cause life-threatening social collapse on an unprecedented scale.

Critical Overview

Santos has long been admired by critics as a poet of impressive style and vision. Reviewing Santos's second collection, *The Southern Reaches* (1989), Christopher Buckley writes in the *New Leader*, □it has been a very long time since I have read a work of poetry as consciously and deftly orchestrated. . . . Santos' mastery of his craft, of form, sound and music, is astounding.□ Santos's next book, *The City of Women* (1993), impresses critics for its ability to string together poetry and fiction in an extended meditation on a single theme. □His book is a sustained series of shimmering, shape-shifting meditations on the ways the self is one's story and one's story is always one's self,□ writes Deborah Pope in the *Southern Review*. *Publishers Weekly* declares that the same collection □makes sense of the vast canvas of remembered love□ and that □Santos's greatest accomplishment here is not that he provides answers for the unanswerable, but that he convinces readers that love creates 'words whose syllables we are laved in, / Whose meanings keep endlessly coming to pass.'□

The Pilot Star Elegies, in which □Portrait of a Couple at Century's End□ appears, was met in 1999 with critical enthusiasm. Ann K. van Buren writes in *Library Journal* that □Santos brings thoughtfulness and wisdom to subjects like suicide, war, and extinction. His poems avoid stating the obvious and strip tragedies bare of their most hideous details.□ The book centers on the extended poem □Elegy for My Sister,□ written after Santos's sister committed suicide. In the *Washington Post*, Rafael Campo writes that the book is not one of laments, noting that □this poet seems most concerned with salving our common flaws and recognizing how beautifully human it is simply to need.□

Floyd Collins directly addresses □Portrait of a Couple at Century's End□ in his review of the collection in the *Gettysburg Review*. Regarding the book, Collins notes that □Santos encompasses the myriad contingencies of loss in lyrics.□ Collins realizes the sadness of the poem and the gentleness with which Santos has written about it. □Although youthful emotions appear transient within the larger context of the century's upheaval,□ Collins writes, □the charred match-end that once blossomed into flame, however briefly, betokens an innocence and passion long spent.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

David Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature. In this essay, he examines the ways that Santos balances misery with banality.

Poetry in general can be looked at as a balance between ideas, which are insubstantial, and the imagery used to tether them. There is no way to tell in advance what the proper balance will be. For some poems, being heavy on ideas is the way to go, but other poems reach maximum effectiveness with a series of images that require readers to use their interpretive skills to piece together meanings. It would be a mistake to say that a poem has the right style before knowing what ideas are being conveyed. As the rule for writers states, form should serve the piece's function, not dictate it.

A poem like Santos's □Portrait of a Couple at Century's End□ is effective because it establishes its own balance, even among the chaos of the subjects and images it presents. As indicated in the title, which situates the couple under discussion as poised between one historical epoch and the next, the poem is frozen, pulled neither toward its worldly elements nor toward its conceptual ones. It is a poem in which humanity's deepest and darkest emotions, the horror and existential weight that come from nothing more than from being, are balanced against a familiar domestic situation that, described in another setting, may seem so common as to be forgettable. The huge is balanced against the small and the profound balanced against the mundane with such deft accuracy that the poem seems to gravitate motionlessly. In some poems, it would seem as if the writer is too little involved in his subject, but in Santos's poem the balance is appropriate.

The important ideas in □Portrait of a Couple at Century's End□ are pain, sorrow, regret, and loss. These concepts are hinted at in the early, rain-soaked stanzas, but Santos does more than simply imply these ideas. Near the end of the poem, he states them outright. In lines 26 through 35, Santos refers to the sinister □shadow-life,□ the □industry of pain,□ and the □Ho- / ly Spirit of / everything that's been / taken away.□ □Portrait of a Couple at Century's End□ is a grim poem about the aspects of life that most people would rather avoid thinking about, as the couple described here does. Santos even evokes an unidentified □us,□ which brings reader and writer into the conspiracy of avoidance, marking the ideas as being so dark that most people, like the couple, would rather suppress knowledge of them.

Although the mood is somber, one would not characterize this poem as fatalistic. Santos pulls it away from the depths of absolute misery not only with the images that he uses (which are in themselves bleak) but also with the way that he conveys both ideas and images. Santos does not say much that is good. The most uplifting idea in the poem is a mention of □buried longings,□ which in any context but this one would not be stretched into a ray of hope. The cumulative effect of the dark imagery and the even darker proclamations is more buoyant than any of the parts.

Santos chooses words in his descriptions that, although not positive, are at least not gloomy. The net effect is that the words tend to elevate the mood of the poem. The details of Santos's images are important. Traffic in the rain does not sound simply like paper tearing but specifically like construction paper tearing, a sound most people associate with childhood and school projects. Using the image of construction paper conjures up thoughts of white paste and safety scissors being used to make collages and dioramas. Inside the couple's house, the walls sound as if they hold not simply a hundred thousand flies but specifically □bottle-flies.□ These flies are the ones associated not with clustering on the dead but with the harmless domesticity of screen doors and cooling pies. The walls themselves are made of □clapboards,□ a word seldom used in the early twenty-first century but familiar to earlier generations. The use of this word reminds readers of more than the boundary-setting function of walls, taking them back to older building materials with a mild case of nostalgia. When discussing the destruction caused by mortar fire in the middle of an urban war zone, Santos softens the harshness of reality by mentioning a □terrace.□ These reminders of the genteel world in the middle of a poem about misery can be seen as an exercise in irony, but the more important accomplishment is that they keep the poem from falling entirely into despair.

The details go beyond the poet's usual responsibility of evoking images with specificity. The details in □Portrait of a Couple at Century's End□ poem are more domestic than they need to be. As a result, the objects□walls, flies, traffic sounds, even a bombed-out café□enforce the poem's domestic, everyday side. They ground the poem in the familiar, the nonthreatening, and buy the reader's patience for later, when the poem digs in with flat-out anger.

Although the familiarity of the imagery helps to take the edge off the unpleasantness of the ideas expressed, Santos achieves much the same effect by hyphenating words. Two of the hyphenated compound words in the poem are □bottle-flies□ and □shadow-life.□ The complexity that Santos gives to these ordinary, simple words serves to numb the senses, overloading readers with the opposite of the effect they would get from punchy, snappy terms. Similarly, although the poem uses □boot- / soles□ where □boots□ would suffice, the extended form surrounds a simple concept with a dreamy fog. □Boot-soles□ is a more specific description than □boots,□ which makes it stronger writing, but the word itself, like □clapboard,□ sounds antiquated, like a throwback to an earlier, more manageable time. For this reason, it lacks immediacy. If Santos's purpose had been to keep things compelling or lively, then slowing down the poem this way would be a flaw. As it is, though, this poem works best when excess wording slows it down. As a word, □boot-soles□ is mired in the poem's language as much as the boots in the poem are mired in mud. Breaking the word in two, stretching it out with a hyphen, makes it slow and lazy. Carrying the word over to the next line makes the concept of boots plodding and domestic.

The effect of carrying a word into the next line is used in an even more eye-catching way when Santos spans the short, four-letter word □holy□ across the break between lines 34 and 35. This stylistic maneuver is the most unusual one in the poem and is telling about the poet's method. The oversimplified explanation for why Santos does not

keep the two syllables of □holy□ together is that keeping the word intact would violate the syllabic pattern of the poem. The fourth line of each stanza has ten syllables, and line 34 reaches that total with □Ho-.□ This argument is too easy. The poet has control of the words he uses, and Santos could have easily avoided the interruption by using a shorter word for □industry□ earlier in the line.

To divide the word □holy,□ dragging it out the way the poem does, is to diminish the idea that it represents. In presenting the word in its parts, the poem requires readers to pay more attention to the word itself than to its meaning. If the reference was really to the Holy Spirit of Christian dogma, this technique might be irreverent or blasphemous. Santos, however, is using this phrase in a personal way when he writes □the Ho- / ly Spirit of / everything that's been / taken away.□ The central idea of the poem is ultimate loss, and the words □Holy Spirit□ add a religious dimension. The overall expression would not work if the poem did not negate the power of its effect by reminding readers that they are involved in reading a poem.

Although much poetry is about balance□between form and idea, thought and substance, implication and assertion□it is even more crucial for a piece like □Portrait of a Couple at Century's End□ to stay between the extremes, to not give too much attention to any of the aspects of the poem at the expense of others. Santos's poetry has a melancholy edge, a willingness to look at the harshness just under the surface of everyday life. In this poem, much is stated about the harshness, and much is implied about quiet suffering. If this mood dominated by □darker crimes□ were not contrasted by word choice and style, it would seem to present a vision of unendurable gloom, and that in itself would not be reality. The situation described in the poem is complex. The one thing that Santos cannot say about the situation is that it may change. That is the point of the poem. With no chance of even hoping for hope, the poem has to find other ways to oppose its own misery.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on □Portrait of a Couple at Century's End,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

Sherod Santos is one of the poets recorded reading at the *Robinson Jeffers Festival* in Carmel, California, on October 8, 1994. A cassette of this recording is available from the Oral Traditions Archives of Pacific Grove, California.

Topics for Further Study

Conduct a survey of people who watch television while they eat dinner. Determine which programs are watched most while people eat. Write an analysis of how you think watching television while eating dinner affects people's moods.

Write the story of an argument that you once had with someone who is still your friend but that neither of you mentions anymore. Include as many details as you can remember.

Although it was widely covered by the news media, the Bosnian war did not gain the attention of Americans that other international conflicts have drawn. Research news reports of the biggest stories of 1995 for mentions of the bombing of Tuzla. Write an essay comparing the war in Bosnia with any current event that you think Americans are not noticing.

What are the chances that you will be alive at the end of the twenty-first century? Research the latest advances in the science of aging and produce a chart that shows the factors that will affect your long-term survival.

In line 34, □Portrait of a Couple at Century's End□ mentions the □industry of pain.□ Research the condition of the world at the end of the nineteenth century and write an essay comparing it with major events at the end of the twentieth century. Was there more or less suffering at the close of the twentieth century? Why?

What Do I Read Next?

Santos has written one book of prose, a collection of essays titled *A Poetry of Two Minds* (2000). The essays are pertinent to poetry in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, but readers curious about Santos's style will be particularly interested in "Writing the Poet, Unwriting the Poem: Notes Toward an *Ars Poetica*."

Santos's collection *The Perishing: Poems* (2003) is both mournful and political, reflecting the changed world after September 11, 2001.

C. K. Williams's poem "Elegy for Paul Zweig" has been compared with Santos's writing at about the time he wrote "Portrait of a Couple at Century's End," both in subject matter and in treatment. It is found in Williams's *Selected Poems* (1994).

One of Santos's elegies in *The Pilot Star Elegies* is dedicated to the critic M. L. Rosenthal. Rosenthal's book *Poetry and the Common Life* (1974) is an influence on Santos's style.

The year that Santos was a finalist for the National Book Award for Poetry, that prize was awarded to Ai for her collection *Vice: New and Selected Poems* (1999). The poets' styles could hardly be farther apart. Santos is dry and academic, and Ai is a populist, weaving figures from modern culture—Marilyn Monroe, O. J. Simpson, murderers, and rapists—to write a new kind of poetry for the twenty-first century.

Further Study

Baker, David, "The Push on Reading," in *Heresy and the Ideal: On Contemporary Poetry*, University of Arkansas Press, 2000.

In his examination of academic poetry, Baker links Santos to his fellow poets Jorie Graham, Carol Muske-Dukes, and A. R. Ammons.

Berg, Steven L., and Paul S. Shoup, *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention*, M. E. Sharpe, 2000.

When Santos mentions the shelling of Tuzla, he is alluding to the frightening moral complexity of the world in the era before September 11, 2001. This book explores the war in detail, explaining the realities of a conflict that most Americans became aware of only periodically through scattered news reports.

Paley, Morton D., *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry*, Oxford University Press, 2000.

Santos's style has been described as neo-Romantic. Paley writes about poets who preceded Santos by hundreds of years, but his points are relevant about the expectations people hold and the ways in which poets address them.

Yenser, Stephen, "Sensuous and Particular: Sherod Santos, Rosanna Warren, Richard Kenny," in *A Boundless Field: American Poetry at Large*, University of Michigan Press, 2002, pp. 160-75.

A prominent critic looks at the works of Santos and of other writers and points out their place in recent American literature.

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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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