Saint Francis and the Sow Study Guide

Saint Francis and the Sow by Galway Kinnell

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Francis and the Sow" appeared in *Mortal Acts, Mortal Words* in 1980. With its sensuous language of "touch" and blessing of earthly existence, this poem has become a signature piece for Kinnell's work in the last two decades. Nine years elapsed between *The Book of Nightmares* (1971) and this volume. In the "silent" interval between the two books, Kinnell took a new direction, sensing in 1972 that "a door has been closed on something." When it opened again, Kinnell's approach to mortality took fewer paths through the surreal and cosmic images that filled *The Book of Nightmares,* and more through ordinary rooms lit by day. This "Franciscan" poem and numerous others in *Mortal Acts, Mortal Words*□"After Making Love We Hear Footsteps," "Brother of My Heart," "Goodbye," "There are Things I Tell to No One"□ are composed out of Kinnell's keen awareness of death-in-life.

What makes a poem such as "Saint Francis and the Sow" different from those in earlier volumes is a stronger sense that mortality is not an occasion for despair but for affirmation of life. Poet Donald Hall observes the crucial difference between simplistic affirmation, and the life-affirmation at this poem's center. "Saint Francis and the Sow," Hall asserts, has nothing to do with the uncritical cheerfulness of the "Booster Club," nor does it belong to the "Nice Doggie School of Contemporary American Verse." Rather, here is a poet, Hall says, "who understands that we live by emptying ourselves," and that in Kinnell's poetic cosmos, *"up* always summons the implication of *down.*"

This "transcendence downward" is especially evident in Kinnell's numerous animal poems, with their grounding in earthy particulars. Those particulars become violent and gruesome in "The Porcupine" and "The Bear," two poems from *Body Rags* in which poet and animal are closely identified. "Saint Francis and the Sow" evokes all the senses□sight, sound, touch, and smell□in its attention to the sow's "creased forehead" and "earthen snout," the "fodder and slops" and the noisy sucking of shoats. But there is also a bit of mystery infused in this barnyard scene, in the "spiritual curl" of the sow's tail, and in the "blue milken dreaminess" that feeds her young. The realms of heaven and earth are co-mingled in Kinnell's poems, and the mundane is nearly always the seat of mystery. In a later poem, "The Angel," Kinnell inverts the usual chain of being so that a dog, not a supra-human spirit, becomes the angel "who mediates between us / and the world underneath us."

"Saint Francis and the Sow" invokes the legendary Francis who revered all animals, even the lowly housefly. Francis was thus a natural choice for the bearer of blessing in Kinnell's "pig" poem. By his own admission, Kinnell's art is a "poetics of the physical world," not of "theology and philosophy, with their large words, their formulations, their airtight systems." Rather, as he says, "the subject of the poem is the thing which dies," but not before the mortal acts of word and touch can call forth its essential loveliness.

Author Biography

Galway Kinnell was born on February 1, 1927, in Providence, Rhode Island, the fourth child of James and Elizabeth Mills Kinnell, immigrants from Scotland and Ireland. Galway turned five the year the Kinnell family moved to nearby Pawtucket so that his carpenter father could continue to earn a living during the Great Depression. "How I came to practice poetry is a little bit of a mystery to me," says Kinnell in a recent interview, but he does remember that "I came to love poetry when I discovered, in a little anthology in my parents' bookshelf, the poems of Edgar Allan Poe in particular." Poe's language provided a counterpoint to the "rather unpoetical" accent of Rhode Island. "It's a very charming and loveable accent, but not very musical," Kinnell admits, and "to discover that this language could sing like that□'It was many and many a year ago in a kingdom by the sea ...'□ thrilled me." Kinnell describes his childhood as "particularly lonely," and his personality, "shy to the point of mutinous." By age twelve he knew he wanted to write poems himself, because it was the only way he had of saying the things he "couldn't express in ordinary life." Poetry was the key to "that inner life," he says, whose "weight of meaning and feeling ... has to get out."

As Kinnell became more serious about writing poetry, encouraging influences came his way□an English teacher at Wilbraham Academy, and at Princeton, his roommate, the poet W. S. Merwin. But most important was a teacher, Charles G. Bell, who astutely recognized Kinnell's gift at "first sight." Bell remembers in a memoir that

"In the winter of 1946-47, when I was teaching at Princeton University, a dark-shocked student, looking more like a prize fighter than a literary man, showed me a poem, maybe his first. I remember it as a Wordsworthian sonnet, not what the avant-garde of Princeton, Blackmur or Berryman, would have taken to□old diction, no modern flair. But the last couplet had a romantic fierceness that amazed me. The man who had done that could go beyond any poetic limits to be assigned. I was reckless enough to tell him so."

Kinnell gives Charles Bell credit for mentoring his work through its youthful use of traditional forms into a distinctive voice that seemed to flower "from within" and come to full expression in free verse. And even as a mature poet, Kinnell continued to turn to Bell for trustworthy critiques of his work. Bell proclaims Kinnell "of all the poets born in the twenties and thirties ... the only one who has taken up the passionate symbolic search of the great American tradition," and describes the poet with words such as "passionate," "volcanic," "lyrical," "transparent," "intuitive," and "death-haunted."

Hardly a better set of adjectives is available for Kinnell since his entry into American poetry in 1960 with *What a Kingdom It Was.* This volume and its famous long poem "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World," reflects Kinnell's gypsy-like decade after graduating *summa cum laucle* from Princeton in 1948. Having earned an M.A. in English from the University of Rochester, he then spent time at the University of Chicago, the University of Grenoble (France), in New York City, at Juniata College (Huntington, Pennsylvania), Colorado State University, Reed College (Portland, Oregon), University of California at Irvine, the University of Iowa, and in Iran as a

Fulbright lecturer. In 1961, Kinnell bought an abandoned farm in rural Sheffield, Vermont, and before 1968 had published two more volumes of poetry and translations of the French poets Francois Villon and Yves Bonnefoy.

During the sixties, Kinnell became a social and political activist. He was jailed briefly for his work on behalf of the Congress of Racial Equality in Louisiana, and protested along with other American poets against the Vietnam War in numerous readings. Poems such as "The Last River" and "Vapor Trail Reflected in the Frog Pond" articulate Kinnell's passionate engagement in these national crises. In 1965, Kinnell married Ines Delgado de Torres, and two children, Maud and Fergus, soon followed. The children inspired several of Kinnell's well-known poems, such as "Under the Maud Moon," in which he remembers Maud's birth and the "agonized clenches making / the last molds of her life in the dark." With its eulogistic litany, "Fergus Falling" opens *Mortal Acts, Mortal Words* (1980) by paying homage to a pond "from which many have gone" and which his son Fergus "saw ... for the first time" just before a dangerous fall from a tree.

For the next twenty years, Kinnell's growing renown as a poet, reader, and teacher took him to posts in Spain, France, Australia, Hawaii, and eventually to New York City in 1985, where he still holds the post of Samuel F. B. Morse Professor of Fine Arts at New York University. Honors and prizes have followed nearly every volume, even when his work moved in new directions after the publication in 1971 of the critically acclaimed *Book of Nightmares.* This long meditation on death in a ten-part sequence muses finally whether it should be called a poem, or a "concert of one / divided among himself, / this earthward gesture / of the sky-diver." Despite his transition after that volume to more affirmative poems and shorter lyrics, Galway Kinnell continues to be preoccupied with the "poetics of the physical world," (after an essay by that name), in books such as *Mortal Acts, Mortal Words* (1980), *The Past* (1985), *When One Has Lived a Long Time* (1990), and most recently, *Imperfect Thirst* (1994). For forty years, Galway Kinnell has written and read poems which, to use his own words, "cling to the imperfect music of a human voice."

Poem Text

The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;
as Saint Francis
put his hand on the creased forehead
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch
blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow
began remembering all down her thick length,
from the earthen snout all the way
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail,
down through the great broken heart
to the blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths
sucking and blowing beneath them
the long, perfect loveliness of sow.

Plot Summary

Lines: 1-2

"The bud / stands for all things," are the first two lines of this poem, and in a few, simple words, makes a profound claim. It declares that this single phenomenon of nature, the bud, has an elemental, omnipresent power, and that "All things" incorporate something of its essence. Yet, powerful as "the bud" is in the universe of this poem, it stands small and vulnerable on a line by itself. There is an infant tenderness to the two-syllable line that is itself quite bud-like. Flower images are common to poetry, so it is not the presence of a "bud" that is surprising. Rather it is the unfolding juxtaposition of bud with sow, and it is on this pairing that the metaphorical power of the poem rests.

Lines: 3-4

The next lines explore the meaning of "all things," and help explain the symbolic power of the bud. A bud contains within itself all that is needed for full flowering. It is pure potential, a flower fully present, but yet-to-be revealed. Some things, for whatever reason, do not ultimately flower, at least visibly. The bud "stands" for those things too, says the poem, because a certain kind of flowering still occurs□"from within." And the agent of such inner unfolding is "self-blessing." If "bud" is the kernel of all nouns in this poem, "blessing" is the essential verb. The capacity to flower, whether without, or from within (an ability "everything" has) is a matter of being blessed.

Lines: 5-11

The poem continues to unfold this connection between bud and blessing in a somewhat abstract way, using the unspecified noun "thing" as the object of blessing, and the one performing the blessing, also unnamed. The dialogue between inner and outer also continues. Everything, being bud-like, has the capacity to bless itself. But "sometimes it is necessary / to reteach a thing its loveliness," because it may have forgotten how to flower "from within, of self-blessing." Some other presence or power comes with "words and touch" to affect the healing. Even though both the one giving and receiving such a "reteaching" are kept vague in these lines, the manner of touching is quite specific and concrete; it is necessary "to put a hand on its brow / of the flower / and retell it in words and in touch / it is lovely."

Line: 12

Were it not for concrete words such as "bud," "hand," "brow," and "flower," the first half of the poem would be largely conceptual. The second half of "Saint Francis and the Sow," however, introduces us to a particular human and specific animal, the giver and receiver of blessing who together flesh out the teaching introduced in the first half of the

poem. In the context of Kinnell's broader poetics□"a poetics of the physical world"□it makes perfect sense that Francis of Assisi would appear as the conveyor of blessing and transformation.

Born into a wealthy Italian merchant family in 1182, the young Francis Bernadone turned his back on prosperity and adopted a life of poverty and radical simplicity. The barefooted beggar-monk showed compassion and respect not only to every person, peasant or pope, but to every creature, whether petted or reviled. Paintings and frescoes show the Saint preaching to the birds or miraculously taming the devouring wolf of Grubbio. He showed no hesitation in kissing and laying hands on the lepers outside the city wall in gestures of love and compassion, and showed no more fear in converting a murderer than a scholar. He is well-known for his practice of oneness with all creation. In his famous song of praise, "Canticle to the Sun," Francis addresses the sun, moon, wind, water, earth, and fire as "brother" or "sister." His many followers founded the Franciscan order, still active today, and Francis is now considered the patron saint of ecology.

Line: 13-15

The legends surrounding Saint Francis, especially those recorded in *The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi,* make this poem's "historical fiction" entirely plausible. Given Francis's radical gestures of blessing, it is easy to imagine his putting a "hand on the creased forehead / of the sow" and helping her flower again "from within."

The association of pig with earth is strong. Fewer animals seem more "earthy" in their habits and habitat. Despite their intelligence, pigs are the inspiration for so many insults. Yet in these lines, the sow's very earthen nature is the root of her blessing. "In words and in touch" the Saint helps her remember her elemental home and being as a blessing.

Lines: 16-18

The sow responds to the blessing quite physically and completely, from "the earthen snout" to the "spiritual curl of the tail," and through all the "fodder and slops" in between. The poem refuses to "prettify" the pig in the process of describing her response to the Saint's touch. She seems to become more "pig," more herself, not less. The poem's diction, or choice of words, keeps the "blessings of earth" grounded, quite literally, in the actual details of the sow's body and her pen.

Lines: 19-23

The continued repetition of "from ... through ... to ..." in the description of this sow and her "flowering" emphasizes both the wholeness of the blessing and the completeness of the creature. In the preceding lines the description followed the horizontal axis: from nose to tail. Here it follows the vertical axis: from the spine, "down" through the heart, to

the teats below. The axes cross in the "great broken heart," whose suffering remains a mystery.

This sense of completion is furthered by the perfect match between fourteen teats and fourteen mouths. Not one shoat is missing, and the mother's ample ability to nourish them all is conveyed by the vivid physicality of verbs, "spurting and shuddering," "sucking and blowing." The portrait is also enriched by the paradoxes of "hard spininess and "milken dreaminess." Through this close attention to the sow's actual creatureliness in all its completed dimensions, the poem becomes an antidote to the pigs of cartoons, caricatures, toys, and slang.

Line: 24

The first line of this poem began with a simple noun phrase; so does the last. In between is one single, complex sentence that journeys metaphorically from "bud" to "sow." "The bud" begins this poem as a symbol of the potential perfection and loveliness of all things. "Saint Francis" bends in compassion at its very center (line 12). The sow, at its end, embodies the blessing that has flowered to perfection. As a result of the poem's careful "reteaching," from concept, down through concrete particulars, to actual embodiment, the reader can reach an understanding of perfection and loveliness quite different from the teachings of modern media and mass culture.

Themes

Innocence and Guilt

The "bud" may stand "for all things" in this poem, but one of its most common associations is with "innocence." A bud is a flower in its infancy, both vulnerable to the elements and powerful in its potential beauty. Like any infant being, it is unblemished, whole, and pure in its emergent form. Seventeenth-century poet Thomas Traherne exalted the delights of infancy and childhood throughout his work, and expressed innocence in images of light:

No darkness then did overshade, But all within was pure and bright; No guilt did crush nor fear invade. But all my soul was full of light.

Some poets explore the condition of innocence through its contrasts. In the late eighteenth century. William Blake composed pairs of "songs" such as "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" whose seeming simple dualisms are challenged by a poetic voice who asks the tiger, "Did he who made the lamb make thee?" Innocence is unselfconscious by definition. It is in one's conscious "remembering" that a regeneration of loveliness and purity occurs. In his book on Galway Kinnell, *Intricate and Simple Things,* Lee Zimmerman compares Kinnell to Wordsworth, who "recognizes memory's power to evoke an early or original state of completion or grace and thereby replenish the present.

The infant state is "innocent" in the original (Latin) sense of the word, *in* + *nocens,* not-hurt. To lose one's innocence is to be "hurt," at some level, by knowledge and experience. To be innocent also means, in many contexts, to be found blameless of hurting another. John Milton's unforgettable portrait of Adam before the Fall in *Paradise Lost* (1667) provides a poignant example of mythic human innocence. In the epic's traditional Judeo-Christian theology, disobedience and an improper desire for power cause humankind's fall from innocence, and creation along with it, into a condition of guilt and division called "original sin." In the context of this theology, no one can remain innocent, because no one can retain the divine wholeness of being, blamelessness, and harmony with creation that characterized life in the "first garden."

Innocence, thus, is an original, but transient condition, the very character of infancy. A certain kind of innocence is attributed to so-called "primitive" cultures who have yet to acquire the technology and economics of "civilized" cultures. Primitive peoples are closer, we might say, to their own, and the earth's, origins. Our own culture generally understands children to be innocent until they have reached a certain age of accountability for their own moral behavior, and are able to act upon society's standards for right and wrong.

Kinnell's poem explores an innocence which both includes and transcends morality. It approaches what is called a "deep morality" (as opposed to moralism) that is more

spiritual than sociological. Saint Francis's gesture restores the creature to harmony with the particulars of its own createdness, the "blessings of earth." The sow's "remembering" is a return, figuratively speaking, to her own "first garden," that state of innocence where she is "not hurt" by human arrogance and perfectionism gone awry. Theologian Matthew Fox might see Francis' compassion toward the sow as an embodiment of "original blessing," a cosmology which counters the doctrine of "original sin" by assuming that creation is radically ("at root") good, not corrupt.

In a sense, it is not just the sow who is retaught "loveliness" in Kinnell's poem, but also potentially the reader. As Saint Francis blesses the sow, one's perception is also returned to a "blessed" state, "unhurt" by the negative associations the animal has acquired and freer to accept the "perfect loveliness" not only of sow, but of serf and others.

Flesh vs. Spirit

Many of Galway Kinnell's poems have a spiritual dimension that occasionally surfaces in religious or liturgical language, as one can see in such titles as "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World," "Prayer," and "Last Holy Fragrance." Yet these poems never "preach" any particular religion, doctrine, or theology. They are not religious poems, per se. The spirituality of "Saint Francis and the Sow" and many other Kinnell poems, avoids religious clichés and pious sentimentality in favor of a close attention to the actual, the seemingly unlovely realities of mundane, mortal existence. Francis is a saint in the context of this poem not only because the Church has canonized him, but because he has met the pig completely, and blessed her in all her earthy dimensions.

Kinnell has said on more than one occasion that his aesthetic depends on the "physical world." "The subject of the poem is the thing which dies," Kinnell explains, and "poetry is the wasted breath," not the ethereal music of the gods: "This is why it clings to the imperfect music of a human voice, this is why its verbs are imitative of bodily motions, why its prepositions pile up like crazy longings, why its nouns reverberate from the past as if they spoke for archetypes of earthly life, this is why the poem depends on adjectives, as if they were its senses, which want only to smell, touch, see, hear, taste, to press themselves to the physical world." ("The Poetics of the Physical World") The words of such poems will make some connection to the body and its senses, and by extension, to the body of the world. In "Saint Francis and the Sow," there is no artificial distinction between flesh and spirit. For blessing to effect its transformations, "all down her thick length," spirit and flesh must touch. The spirit cannot simply transcend "the fodder and slops" but passes through the rich stench on the way to the humblest place of all: the pig's tail. Even there, heaven and earth meet in its "spiritual curl." There is no regeneration in Kinnell's poems without this conversation between flesh and spirit, the visible and invisible, the immanent and the transcendent. The syllables of religious language acquire an earthiness heavy as the sow in Kinnell's sacramental relationship with the world. "It is typical of Kinnell," comments poet Donald Hall, this "having it both

ways at once." Hall is referring to the horrible glory of "The Porcupine," but he could be speaking as well of the play of flesh and spirit in "Saint Francis and the Sow."

Animals

Anthropomorphism is a word which originally meant "human form" in Greek. When an animal or object is given human characteristics, we say its appearance is "anthropomorphic." There is an element of anthropomorphism in "Saint Francis and the Sow": the sow has a "great broken heart" and an ability to "remember" her own loveliness, traits and abilities normally attributed to human beings. Even Saint Francis' act of compassion is a kind of anthropomorphism, since blessings, in a religious context, are typically bestowed on human beings. Not only does he put his hand on the pig's forehead, but the saint also speaks "blessings of earth" upon her, to which she responds in a very physical sort of "remembering." In the liturgical calendar, St. Francis' feast day is celebrated in early October in ritual blessings of animals.

Many writers and poets are leery of giving animals human attributes for fear of engaging in a preciousness characteristic of stuffed animal toys, or of denying animals the "rights" of their distinct differences from the human. Galway Kinnell struggled over this issue in the process of revising and re-revising "Saint Francis and the Sow" for re-publication in two later volumes. At the time he was choosing poems for *Selected Poems* (1982), Kinnell remembers thinking "'Can a pig really have a broken heart?' and I changed 'broken' to 'unbreakable.'" But for *Three Books: Body Rags; Mortal Acts, Mortal Words; The Past* (1993), he restored the poem's original wording, because Now I think I was right in the first place, and that my earlier scruple came from the harmful and surely false idea, carefully nurtured by our kind, that there is no resonance between our emotional life and that of the other animals.

It is important to notice that Kinnell says the "other" animals, thereby including the human in the animal realm. Animals are central subjects of several Kinnell poems. Their strong presence reflects that dimension of his aesthetic which is earthy and physical. In an interview *fox American Poetry Observed,* Kinnell's comment about animals has Franciscan overtones: "When you sense the brotherhood between creatures, you are in touch with some kind of primal, natural event□your creatureliness, or whatever it might be." In a conversation with Gregory Fitzgerald, Kinnell suggests that the presence of animals in his poems comes from an "act of the imagination" and a desire "to see them in themselves and also to see their closeness to us." Kinnell's empathy with animals exemplifies the attitude in an earlier time and place described by Richard White as now at once recognizable and utterly strange. "Remembering it, we may feel like Dorothy remembering Oz. Because once, when animals were persons, the West was a biological republic. The sow in this poem is neither more human nor less animal for having been given a "broken heart." It is the human reader who is given the opportunity to become enlarged through this intimate identification with another creature."

Style

This poem is an example of the free verse style that characterizes much American poetry from the mid-fifties to the present. In free verse, there is no dependence on formal patterns of meter or rhyme for the poem's structure. Instead, the poem's content and emotional textures often determine line length and line breaks, the interior patterns of sounds, and the texture of images. Like many poets of his generation, Galway Kinnell wrote at first in "strict" forms. But long before he composed "Saint Francis and the Sow," his work had taken on the "old" free verse style that has its roots in the poetics of Walt Whitman, the "grandfather" of American free verse. In discussing his own style with Wayne Dodd and Stanley Plumly, Kinnell observes that Whitman "seeks in the music of his verse what he calls the 'perfect rectitude and insouciance of the movements of animals,' and his lines have that they are exactly right yet there's no way to systemize them."

A Whitmanesque "rectitude and insouciance" is palpable in "Saint Francis and the Sow." There is a certain "insouciance" or nonchalance to the lack of stanza breaks, uneven line lengths, and discursive voice. But there is also a definite "rectitude" or discipline that guides the 24 lines into one coherent, logically-structured sentence. The poem's deductive reasoning, from general to specific, takes place almost invisibly through a strategic placement of images and punctuation. The more abstract first half of the poem is actually two independent clauses. The first four lines introduce the concept of serf-blessing. A semicolon then introduces a qualification of that idea and an elaboration on the central image of the bud, all of which prepare the reader for the illustration of that concept in the poem's second half.

Like an icon, Saint Francis stands at the very center of the poem on a line by himself, just as the bud and sow similarly, and significantly, occupy the very first and last lines of the poem. The act of blessing then ripples along the second half of the poem through prepositional phrases minimally punctuated by commas, as though not to disturb the flow of healing energy. At the end of the penultimate, or next-to-last line, a colon announces at last what the sow "began remembering": her own "long, perfect loveliness."

The description of the mother pig is quite sensuous, not only because Kinnell uses words that employ sight, sound, smell, and touch, but because the very patterns of sounds within and among words become physical things-in-themselves when read aloud. The explosive "sp" sounds of line 19 thrust their way into the portrait much like the spine itself. The "ur" sound which begins in "earth," the pig's elemental home, occurs over and over, in "earthen," "fodder," "curl," "spurting," and "shuddering." The dark vowels in "fodder and slops" are at one with the character of compost, and the ordinarily unlovely "uh" sound becomes "perfectly lovely" when repeated in the context of the sow's motherly abundance, her milk "shuddering" into the mouths of "sucking" piglets. As Kinnell's poem reveals, "free verse" is not liberation from form and discipline. It requires an ear trained to the rhythm and resonance of language, and an imagination awake to the power of both reason and emotion.

Historical Context

"Saint Francis and the Sow" appeared in *Mortal Acts, Mortal Words* in 1980, just as Ronald Reagan was elected President of the United States, and the nation entered what has been called the "decade of greed." Prosperity increased exponentially for a few, while poverty claimed unprecedented numbers of Americans, especially children.

Yet not everyone who could afford to blur the distinction between "want" and "need" did so. A growing number of Americans have reacted to consumerism and the excesses of "me-ism" by practicing voluntary simplicity, refusing or reusing products that deplete the earth's resources, and avoiding practices that contribute to the vast discrepancies between rich and poor in the world economy. By 1995, the Trends Research Institute had cited "simplifying" as one of the nation's leading cultural movements, and Elaine St. James uses that research to encourage her readers not to feel they are alone in their desire to change their lives.

In the vocabulary of "voluntary simplicity," Saint Francis has become a kind of icon. Biographies of the Saint, such as Green and Heinegg's *God's Fool,* show that Francis Bernadone was quite human and fallible, both as the privileged young son of a wealthy cloth merchant who loved raucous parties and bloody battles; and later as the barefooted beggar who offered a radical love for all, human and animal, heedless of their status. He is famous, moreover, among those with an ecological consciousness for dispensing "blessings of the earth" and living in harmony with Brother Sun and Sister Moon. Francis was not born in poverty; he chose it. But he was not converted to such a life overnight. As accounts of his life attest, his spiritual visions and yearnings took years to penetrate the habits of excess and wealth acquired by birth and social position.

Likewise, many in the latter half of the 20th century who grew up near the mall-lined boulevards of most American cities, wealthy by the world's standards, are turning voluntarily to ways of living that recall "blessings of the earth," both in word and practice, and many are also engaged in political, social, and religious movements that foster peace and justice. The much-revered Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who died in 1997, was a contemporary "saint" whose life of voluntary poverty and far-reaching mission to the poorest of the poor has set an example of extraordinary compassion. Familiar are the photo images of her holding a starving infant or leprous cast-off. While few people exhibit the radical compassion and serf-denial of a Mother Teresa, many are nevertheless converting to practices suggested by such books as Duane Elgin's 1981 *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich.* Elgin's book draws upon the contrasts between a consumerist society and a sustainable society in order to suggest patterns for transformation.

Those skeptical of the "voluntary simplicity" movement argue that it is simply another inflection of a middle and upper-class economics of choice, just another lifestyle among lifestyles. They quickly point out the irony that merchandising has found a lucrative market along the borders of the movement, belying its original intent through a complex proliferation of natural, organic, and recycled goods and serf-focused "natural" health

products. This version of the "simple" life seems to bear little similarity to, or sympathy for the truly poor, those who know poverty by birth or accident, not by choice.

In *The New American Poverty* (1984), activist Michael Harrington asserts that the war on poverty proclaimed in the sixties has not only been lost, but that "new structures of misery" are strengthening poverty's tenacious, systemic hold. "The national vision has been impaired" for a number of complex reasons, Harrington says in the wake of the 1982-83 recession. The resulting "new" poverty cannot be understood, much less fought, apart from serious awareness and analysis of the economic and social structures that support it: It is not enough to demand sympathy for women from the Caribbean working a fourteen-hour day for a pittance in the New York City borough of Queens. To open our eyes today, it is also necessary for us to know why those women are there, to see not merely the exploitation they endure, but the structures that cause it as well. For it is precisely those structures that impair our vision in the first place. Numerous programs nationwide are taking these structures into account in their practical advocacy for the poor. Among the most effective are Habitat for Humanity, YouthBuild, City Year, Job Corps, Farmworker Justice Fund, Families First, and PraireFire. But it is clear that, despite its technological advances, twentieth-century America has proved Herbert Hoover's prophecy of 1928 wrong, and has been unable to "banish poverty from the nation," whether in its old or new forms. Nothing short of a world-wide revolution in consciousness and compassion is required to topple those "structures of misery." That is why Kinnell's poetic invocation of Saint Francis is both timely and timeless. What seems to be called for□not only on the part of poets, priests, and political activists, but urban planners and corporate executives, educators and health care workers□is a vision that transforms society by seeing into the essential, and potential, loveliness of every life.

Critical Overview

"Saint Francis and the Sow" is one of Galway Kinnell's most anthologized and often-read poems. For critic Howard Nelson, this poem stands "for the physical brilliance and weight in Kinnell's poetry," and the sow becomes, magically, "almost the earth herself." Hank Lazer also finds "Saint Francis and the Sow" a "remarkable poem," not only because it is "fit to join company with Kinnell's finest animal poems," but because it contains what Lazer considers to be at the heart of Kinnell's work, the "understanding that 'sometimes it is necessary / to reteach a thing its loveliness.'" We are to take the poem's method of blessing "in words and in touch" seriously, as the key to Kinnell's work, suggests Nancy Lewis Tuten, and look not to an inward-seeking spirituality for the pulse of his aesthetic, but to "the physical touch of another being." Liz Rosenberg's enthusiastic review of *Selected Poems* calls Kinnell "a poet with the flame of greatness," and unreservedly suggests that "Everyone□happy or unhappy, confirmed lover of poetry or despiser□ should read Galway Kinnell," simply because "he may be the only great poet still writing great poems in America today."

Not every reader shares such glowing assessments of Kinnell's work. Donald Davie sums up his poetics as a "slogging for the absolute," and argues that Kinnell has created "a blowsy nineteenth-century titanism in which he has snared himself." Robert Peters's scathing review of *The Book of Nightmares* concludes that in 1970 Kinnell "seems to have reached the bottom of his bag of tricks .... Consider his diction, for example: certain words [darkness, light, bone, grave] appear with the inevitability of Cher Bono's navel." Kinnell's most pervasive flaw, suggests critic Harold Bloom, in his review of *Mortal Acts, Mortal Words,* is "a certain over ambition that makes of each separate poem too crucial an event," related, no doubt, to the intense diction of "dying" that Peters noticed. Bloom's review concludes that Kinnell has generally not continued to live up to the "grand beginnings" augured by a much earlier, long poem, "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World."

Poet Donald Hall negotiates a balanced route between these poles of appreciation and detraction. In his essay "Text as Test," Hall neither over-praises nor over-blames Kinnell's artistic habits. A respected poet in his own right, Hall approaches Kinnell's work from the vantage of practicing the art himself, and therefore can say with a credible honesty□"I was unimpressed ... when I read the early poems." But he is also aware of the ways Kinnell's work has been since received, and therefore counters Harold Bloom's critical "condescension" to *Mortal Acts* which implies, Hall says, "that Kinnell's poetry ended with the Avenue C poem, where I claim it began." He also defends Kinnell against Davie's charge of restless spiritual "titanism":

I find him less of a tourist among spiritual things than many of his contemporaries-subscribers to the God-of-the-Month-Club, worshippers at brief shrines like Castaneda's Don Juan __ And I find Kinnell less restless and more settled ... than most contemporary American poets; more settled in a landscape, a loved place that holds him to the earth.

As much a comment on the current state of literary criticism as it is an article on Kinnell's poetry, Hall's essay concludes that these readers "miss" Kinnell because "our leading critics of the contemporary read without leg-muscles or tongues, read without bodies." Hall finds "Saint Francis and the Sow," in all its embodied earthiness, a good example of what he finds best about Kinnell's work, an "affirmation in death's face because of death's face."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Jonathan N. Barron is associate professor of English at the University of Southern Mississippi. He has co-edited Jewish American Poetry (forthcoming from University Press of New England), Robert Frost at the Millennium (forthcoming from University of Missouri Press) as well as a forthcoming collection of essays on the poetic movement, New Formalism. Beginning in 2001, he will be the editor-in-chief of The Robert Frost Review.

In a powerful defense of poetry's nobility, the contemporary American poet, Mary Oliver, wrote: "No poet ever wrote a poem to dishonor life, to compromise high ideals, to scorn religious views, to demean hope or gratitude, to argue against tenderness, to place rancor before love, or to praise littleness of soul. Not one. Not ever." To demonstrate the truth of Oliver's views, one need look no further than Galway Kinnell's marvelous and poignant poem, "Saint Francis and the Sow," from his 1980 collection *Mortal Acts, Mortal Words.* This poem□just as Oliver claimed all genuine poetry would□honors life, high ideals, and a religious view. It does all this by describing the poet's caress of a simple plant, a bud that may or may not flower. Although unnamed the plant is certainly common, perhaps even a weed.

In the first eleven lines, Kinnell depicts his caress. Then, in the lines that follow, he compares this gesture to the moment when St. Francis caressed a sow. The comparison, however, takes on a life of its own. Like a bud, it, too, blossoms into a set of vivid images. In turn, these images teach a spiritual lesson about the sanctity of all life. But more than that, in the comparison of Kinnell's touch to Saint Francis' s, the poem reveals just how important a sense of self-respect, and self-pride must be. Ultimately, Kinnell's poem, through its extended metaphor, affirms the particularly American faith in absolute self-reliance, and self-worth. This theme, self-reliance, owes its greatest debt to the poetic tradition first heralded by the great nineteenth-century New England poet, essayist, and thinker, Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his famous essay (actually a small book) *Nature* (1836), Emerson summed up his natural theology in a now famous syllogism: "1. Words are signs of natural facts. 2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts. 3. Nature is the symbol of the spirit." In these brief sentences, Emerson tells us that divinity, the soul, exists not just in people but in all nature as well. This thing called soul, or spirit, says Emerson, links people to nature. As a result, according to Emerson, the world is not a constant struggle and contest between matter and spirit. To his mind, there is no conflict because spirit, he tells us, is part of the very fabric of nature. This view□that one's soul is but a facet of a universal spirit that exists as well in nature□is in theology called "immanence." Simply defined, "immanence" means that spirituality emerges from within any given object. According to Emerson, then, both the natural world and human beings are vessels out of which the spirit blossomed. While this view about the location of divinity is not necessarily original to Emerson, it did lead him to draw a conclusion expressed in Nature and in subsequent essays that is very much unique to him. Simply stated, the view insists on a radical equality, a genuine democracy where people are equal to each other and where all nature itself is equal to people.

As fine a poet as he was an essayist, Emerson also expressed this sentiment in a wonderful poem from the 1830s, "The Rhodora." In that poem, Emerson comes across the fallen petals of the rhodora plant floating in a brook in the woods. Seeing them, he cannot resist celebrating their beauty, their obvious soulfulness. In the last line of the poem, he links himself to the petals□"The selfsame Power that brought me there brought you." The audacity of this in the early 19th century cannot be underestimated. For why would one ever think to equate the human with so simple and mundane an object as a flower? Yet this is precisely what Emerson does. In this line, Emerson meant literally to say that the flower and he were both divine, both equal, both possessed of the same "Power."

By the early 1840s, Emerson began to insist more overtly on the importance of such equality. It proved, he argued, that each individual was worthy and that, what he termed, "self-reliance" was the central principle for a well-lived life. In his great essay, "Self Reliance," Emerson tells his readers that serf-respect is the only way to be fully human, the only way to acknowledge the divine in one's serf: "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist." According to Emerson, one had, as it were, to bless oneself: "What I must do, is all that concerns me, not what people think." This does not degenerate into a celebration of mere selfishness because, said Emerson, there is a "deep force" in which "all things find their common origin." As he said in Nature, "the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God." Eventually, in another landmark essay, "The Poet," Emerson went so far as to claim that poets are the people most qualified to tell us these truths about our own inner-divinity, our own need for self-respect. Poets, said Emerson, could rekindle our knowledge of the divine flame that always flickers within us. "The poets," said Emerson, "are thus liberating gods."

Within twenty years of these essays, in 1855, America would see the publication of the first such fiery poet, Walt Whitman. Amazingly, however, both Emerson and Whitman eventually fell out of favor, out of the general literary tradition. By the 1940s and early 1950s, Whitman was all but erased from American literature by a new trend in literary study that dismissed such talk of self-reliance, soul-fulness, and spirituality as so much hokkum and silliness. To poets who went to college in these years, as the scholar Alan Golding explains in a book on the subject, Whitman was a marginal figure, rarely taught, and rarely even mentioned as important or significant. In fact, both his free verse poetry, and Emerson's ideas of radical equality, and spiritual immanence were often scorned in the 1940s and early 1950s. As a result, it took a great deal of straggle against their teachers for poets of Kinnell's generation to return to Whitman and Emerson: it took a lot of courage for such poets to want to further their goals, and to insist that those goals were necessary, essential, and important.

James Wright was among the first poets of Kinnell' s generation to turn to Whitman and Emerson. In 1963, he wrote perhaps the single most important and moving poem on these matters in American poetry, "A Blessing." There, Wright recounts the moment when, driving along the road in southern Minnesota, he stopped his car, walked over to a set of ponies, and caressed one's ear. His powerful conclusion states: "suddenly I realize / That if I stepped out of my body I would break / Into blossom." In these lines, Wright awakens to his own inner spirit thanks to the benevolent touch of another

creature. By contrast, in Galway Kinnell's poem, one man blesses a plant, while another man blesses an animal. In both poems, however, the touch across the species barrier is meant to rekindle the major Emersonian belief that all life is sacred, that all life is interconnected, that all life is individual and worthy of self-respect. Indeed, the major message of Walt Whitman's poetry, that serf-respect is the highest of ideals, returns with renewed vigor in the work of poets born in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the poets of James Wright's and Galway Kinnell's generation. For example, in Wright's poem, the pony allows Wright to blossom and know himself better. Similarly, in Kinnell's poem, the poet, through his touch, allows a plant to blossom with a sense of inner spiritual importance. Kinnell even equates that touch with Saint Francis's caress of a sow as if to insist on the importance of communicated to each and every individual life its own innate self-worth. Interestingly, in both Wright's and Kinnell's poems the species barrier is crossed as one creature reminds the other of its inherent dignity. In these poems, as in Emerson's philosophy, no life form, on a spiritual, ethical plane is better than any other. And, as with Whitman, the poetic form for such a message is free verse: a set of line breaks that are meant to conform to the actual spoken breath of the poet.

Looking more closely at Kinnell's poem, then, one finds that in its first half (the first 13 lines) Kinnell, like Emerson, Whitman, and Wright before him, argues against the seemingly insurmountable hierarchies of less, better, best that separate life forms from one another. But unlike his three predecessors, Kinnell also turns to a specifically Christian source to make this same point. It is as if Kinnell wants to reconcile a more obviously Christian sensibility to the natural theology embraced by Emerson, Whitman, and Wright. In other words, when Kinnell compares his touch to that of Saint Francis, he implicitly compares an Emersonian naturalism to the specific theology of Christianity. When Kinnell, in the second half of his poem, turns to this Christian saint it is as if he were speaking across the gulf of time to Emerson himself. It is as if Kinnell were saying, you know, not only is all life radically equal but so too are all spiritual creeds. On the one hand there is the natural divinity celebrated by Emerson on the other there is the specifically Christian theology of Saint Francis. Rather than claim one is better, more pure than the other, Kinnell, in his poem shows them to be the same in their goals, in their implicit faith in self-reliance and self-respect. In the beginning of his poem, Kinnell makes a straightforward Emersonian message plain: The bud stands for all things, even for those things that don't flower, for everything flowers, from within, of serf-blessing.

In these opening lines, Kinnell fully enters the tradition of immanence where "everything flowers, from within." He also reminds us of that tradition's ethical dimension, of the idea that, if all things are holy, than all things deserve equal respect. Through the metaphor of the bud, Kinnell is able to tell us that even the most banal of plants□even those plants which don't actually blossom□have an inner spirit. He also tells us that this spirit can go dormant. Even the simplest of life forms needs to be reminded that it, too, deserves respect for itself. In this small way, through a set of four free verse lines, Kinnell recasts Emerson for the contemporary period. Through the use of plain language, readily accessible imagery, and the free verse line Kinnell makes Emerson new. In the next seven lines, Kinnell focuses on the individualistic dimension of Emerson's theology, on Emerson's principle of serf-reliance: sometimes it is necessary

to reteach a thing its loveliness, to put a hand on its brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch it is lovely until it flowers again from within, of serf-blessing.

Note that Kinnell echoes, and nearly repeats one of his opening lines: "flowers again from within, of self-blessing." This notion of "self-blessing" is at once an allusion to James Wright's marvelous poem and a restatement of Emerson's major ideas. But more than that these lines focus on the word "reteach." Notice that, according to Kinnell, when he teaches the bud to find "the blossom within" he is actually only "reteaching" a lesson the bud itself had known but had evidently forgotten. This was Emerson's major point about the poet. The poet, in effect, was a catalyst reminding us of what we always knew but had somehow forgotten. In these lines, Kinnell, acting on the faith that, as William Blake said, "everything that lives is holy," teaches even the plants to know themselves. In so doing, he eradicates the spiritual hierarchy that would make a man's soul worth more than a plant's. In his poem, Kinnell combats the temptation to find a spiritual inequality in creation. Rather than claim to be better than anything, or anyone, Kinnell, in a moment of genuine spiritual self-effacement, gestures to a lowly bud and tells it that it contains its own blessing. In many ways this echo of James Wright's great poem is also a modern version of Emerson's "The Rhodora."

Where the poem becomes entirely original, however, is in the second half when Kinnell compares his touch to that of Saint Francis. In this second half, Kinnell develops a simile where his hand touching the bud becomes, in his imagination, the hand of Saint Francis touching a sow. In twelve lines developing this image, Kinnell focuses the reader's gaze on the specific details of the sow and of its little suckling at its teats. Few animals could be more lowly than this, few scenes more animalistic. We are put, through these details, as far from the human world as we can be. Kinnell, in effect.

rubs our noses in the dirt and smell of swine. And, as the piglets suckle, Saint Francis, in his caress, declares this scene holy and necessary not for the sake of humanity but for the sake of the sow herself. It is her serf-respect, her worth as a creature with young giving life and feeding that life that Saint Francis, and now Kinnell, celebrates: "the long, perfect loveliness of sow." We, as readers, are not meant to find some use, some farming function, some domestic rationale in this loveliness. Rather, we are meant to see the sow as Saint Francis would have her see herself. If, as another poet of Kinnell's generation, Mary Oliver, declares, poetry is the art of "honoring life," "high ideals," and "religious views," if, as she insists, real poetry is an art of "hope," "gratitude," "tenderness" and "love" than both this poem, and this poet are the real thing.

Source: Jonathon N. Barron, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Adaptations

HardPrayer (1991) compiles recordings of Kinnell reading his work over the past 30 years in a retrospective, 63-minute audio tape. With only one exception, the tape does not duplicate any other Kinnell recordings, according to its producers, Watershed Tapes. It is available through The Writer's Center on-line at www.writer.org/ poettapes.

Kinnell reads from *The Book of Nightmares* in a 1975 Caedmon studio recording, *The Poetry and Voice ofGalway Kinnell,* also available from The Writer's Center at www.writer.org/poettapes.

By entering the "Listening Booth" in The American Academy of Poets online site, www.po-ets.org, you can hear Kinnell reading "After Making Love We Hear Footsteps" in RealAudio. Kinnell also reads this poem (and others) at the Dodge Poetry Festival in Bill Moyers' most recent PBS series on poetry, *Fooling with Words.* Audio-visual clips of the programs can be accessed at www.wnet.org/foolingwithwords.

Galway Kinnell is also featured in Bill Moyers' *The Power of the Word,* a documentary series that looks at how poets are "the keepers of language" and "the stewards of honest emotions." In the first program of the six-part series, "The Simple Acts of Life," Kinnell and Sharon Olds conclude the hour with a "conversation in poems" about sexual love. The series is available from PBS Video, circulates in many public and university libraries, and can be ordered from Films for the Humanities, 1-800-257-5126.

A1973 Franco Zeffirelli film, "Brother Sun, Sister Moon," dramatizes the life and times of Saint Francis of Assisi, played by Graham Fault The music is a re-arrangement of ancient melodies composed and performed by Donovan. In 1994, Mickey Rourke and Helena Bonham Carter star in what has been described as a more "hip" film version of the Saint's life, "Francesco." Both videos are available at www.amazon.com.

Topics for Further Study

Numerous fairy tales, such as "Beauty and the Beast" and "The Frog Prince," involve the magical transformation of ugliness into beauty, and occasionally vice-versa. Under what circumstances are fairy-tale characters transformed? What is the difference between transformation by "magic" and by "blessing"? What definition of "beauty" emerges from fairy tales? How does it compare and contrast with modern cultural notions of beauty?

Collect advertisements which feature pigs as part of the product's name, appeal, or persuasion from different decades in the twentieth century. What images of pigs emerge? How does that image change over time?

Research a saint's life, and (a) write a one-act play, or (b) produce a short film which dramatizes both the extraordinary and the ordinary features of that person's character and life.

Write a poem, story, or memoir about something you either witnessed or experienced which involved remembrance and blessing.

Compare and Contrast

1726: The poorer residents of Philadelphia. Pennsylvania, took part in a riot that culminated in destruction and fire. The governor put the uprising down, but over the next twelve years several more such riots occurred in response to economic discrepancies and laws that hindered labor.

1850: In New York City, the homeless represented a new and growing class. Over 18.5 thousand people were forced to seek shelter in little over 8 thousand city cellars. Tenements were built by 1856 to house some of these poor, but the majority remained homeless.

1928: America's prosperity following World War I meant a decline in the number of poor from 14 million at the turn of the century to 4 million. Shortly before Herbert Hoover was elected President of the U. S. that year, he announced that "we shall soon ... be in sight of the day when poverty will be banished from the nation."

1929: On October 29, called "Black Tuesday," the stock market crashed and plunged the nation into its worst-ever economic depression, known as the Great Depression. The number of jobless, homeless, and poor incr eased exponentially over the next several years, and by 1932, national wages were 60% less than in 1929.

1964: President Lyndon Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act in August to address the nation's poverty and joblessness. The bill authorized $947.5 million for youth programs, rural poverty relief, small business loans, and the establishment of training programs such as the Job Corps for youth.

1968: Not quite a month after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the "Poor People's March on Washington," planned by Dr. King before his death, got underway. Three thousand marchers camped near the Washington Monument on a muddy site dubbed "Resurrection City."

1987: In March several well-known actors and politicians took part in the "Grate American Sleep-Out," a protest in Washington D. C. designed to publicize the distress of the growing numbers of homeless people in the nation's capital.

1992-1993: Within one year, the number of people considered statistically poor increased by 1.2 million.

Today: Poor children in the United States are worse off than the poor children in 16 other industrialized nations.

1206: While at prayer in the decaying church of San Damiano, Francis of Assisi heard a voice speaking "Francis, repair My house." In response, Francis became voluntarily poor, stripping himself (literally) of his clothes and his father's money. Despite the great embarrassment to his wealthy family, a barefooted Francis began begging throughout

the region of Umbria, collecting money to restore St. Mary Major and many other churches which had crumbled through neglect or earthquake.

1228: Work began in Assisi on the Basilica of San Francesco (Saint Francis) on July 17th, the day after Pope Gregory IX canonized Francis a saint.

1997: Two separate devastating earthquakes in the Umbria region of Italy seriously damaged the Basilicas of Saint Francis and Saint Clare, Saint Mary Major Church, and numerous religious houses. Ironically enough, the first quake occurred on the date thought to be Francis' birth, September 26th, and the other on the date of his death, October 3rd. The Upper Basilica of Saint Francis was especially hard-hit, and many medieval frescoes (paintings on plaster) shattered to the ground into thousands of pieces. People came from around the world to help sift through the rubble to recover the missing fragments. The quakes also left thousands of people homeless.

1999: In early December, Pope John Paul II reconsecrates the main altar at the Basilica of Saint Francis.

Today: Many of the *terramotati* or "earthquake victims" remain homeless. Income generated from the many visitors and pilgrims expected in the year 2000 will be used to help restore homes and businesses. Meanwhile, the area's financial resources have been given largely to rebuilding the basilicas and shrines. Specially designed computer software is being used to map the millions of details in the thousands of color-coded bins of fresco fragments so that the invaluable art of Assisi can be restored.

What Do I Read Next?

The writing of saints' lives is known as "hagiography" in Christian theology. In light of the current interest in ancient religions and pre-modern spiritual practices, numerous writings by saints and mystics have been edited and reissued, and new kinds of "hagiographies" published with a more diverse, contemporary reader in mind. Saint Francis of Assisi has especially received renewed attention because of his popularity among those engaged in the issues of poverty, simplicity, and ecology. He appears, for example in Carole Armstrong's beautifully illustrated *Lives and Legends of the Saints,* whose one-page biographies of Cecilia, Francis, Jerome, Martin, Peter, and many others, are accompanied by reproductions of some of the world's most famous paintings, such as a fresco by Giotto of St. Francis preaching to the birds, and Raphael's painting of St. George slaying the dragon. One of the most readable, very human accounts of St. Francis is by Mien Green and Peter Heinegg, *God's Fool* (1987).

Susan Michaels looks at the Saint's life through the lens of Jungian psychology in *Journey Out of the Garden: St. Francis of Assisi and the Process of Lndividuation* (1997).

Coincidence or not, it is interesting that Galway Kinnell introduces St. Francis and the sow by way of a "little flower," because the legends attributed to Francis's life and works are called *The Little Flowers of St. Francis.* A thirteenth-century Franciscan friar, Ugolino di Monte Santa Maria, compiled these 53 narratives of "miracles and devout examples," the first half of which concern St. Francis and his companions; the second, of stories related to the Franciscan brethren. It is the first half that contains the legends of St. Francis preaching to the birds (#16), converting the fierce wolf of Grubbio (#21), and taming the wild turtle doves (# 22). A recent Vintage edition of *The Little Flowers* (1998) is prefaced by Madeleine L'Engle, author of the award-winning novel, *A Wrinkle in Time.*

Animals are the ostensible subjects of countless poems in contemporary American poetry; to name a few, James Dickey's "The Heaven of Animals," Elizabeth Bishop's "The Moose," Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour," Richard Wilbur's "The Death of a Toad," "A Blessing" by James Wright, and "The Fox" by Philip Levine. Denise Levertov composed a sequence of seventeen poems called *Pig Dreams: Scenes from the Life of Sylvia* (1981) which reveal the great intelligence and emotional sophistication of a real Hampshire pig from North Eastern Vermont. Sylvia's "outlook on life" is illustrated in pastels by her owner, the artist Liebe Coolidge, "a Human," Levertov says, "with an unusual capacity for understanding the Piggish utterance." Levertov herself had an abiding interest in pigs, animals whom she felt are wrongly portrayed and "maligned." Poems such as "Her Destiny," "Winterpig," "Her Secret," "Her Nightmare," and "Her Lament" show this particular "pig-person" (to put it in Levertov's words) to be a creature capable of great rapport and identification with her human companions as well as with those of other species, namely John the Cat and Kaya the Cow. While the book's format and its folk-art illustrations would seem to appeal to young readers, the emotionally sophisticated, violent, or sensual content of several poems suggests otherwise. Levertov adamantly denied, and rightly so, that this is a "cute animal" book for children.

In his portrait of a fearful "whisky priest" who runs for his life and forsakes his religious duties in war-torn Mexico, novelist Graham Greene offers a stark contrast to the stereotypes of saintly purity and holiness. *The Power and the Glory* (1940) dramatizes the struggle of a tortured soul, and in the process, blurs the ordinary distinctions between saint and sinner.

The Book of Nightmares (1971) is possibly Galway Kinnell's most critically acclaimed volume of poems, and the most aesthetically controversial. Of the ten poems that compose the book, several are often separately anthologized, such as "Under the Maud Moon," and "Little Sleep's-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight." As the title suggests, these poems reveal the darkness and terrors of the poet's soul, often under the guise of the ordinary images of daylight.

Further Study

Kinnell, Galway, "Poetry, Personality, and Death," in *A Field Guide to Contemporary Poetry and Poetics,* Rev. ed., edited by Stuart Friebert, David Walker, and David Young, Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College Press, 1997, pp. 203-223. As the title of this essay suggests, Kinnell examines the relationships between the poem and the mortal human behind and within the poem. In an age of self-absorption, he says, "poetry has taken on itself the task of breaking out of the closed ego," but that requires a "death of the self." He defines this concept further, as "a death out of which one might hope to be reborn more giving, more alive, more open, more related to the natural life." Along with "The Poetics of the Physical World," it is considered to be one of Kinnell's most important, and controversial, aesthetic statements.

--------, *Walking Down the Stairs: Selections from Interviews,* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995. The eleven interviews composing this book reveal much about Kinnell's personality, writing life, and artistic convictions. Conversations range from particular poems, changes in style, influences, and his role as teacher and translator, to personal habits, affections, and dislikes. The interviews cover the period between 1969 and 1976, representing a mere slice of the poet's forty-year career; an important one, nevertheless, since Kinnell was in the midst of significant aesthetic changes in the decade between 1970 and 1980.

Nelson, Howard, ed., *On the Poetry of Galway Kinnell: The Wages of Dying,* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1987.

This is an essential collection of Kinnell criticism, balanced and thorough, covering the first 25 years of the poet's career, from *What a Kingdom it Was* (1960) to *The Past* (1985). It is organized into five sections: overviews, book reviews, appraisals of his career, attention to individual poems, and a colorful reminiscence at the end by Anne Wright, wife of the late poet Charles Wright, one of Kinnell's closest friends.

Tuten, Nancy Lewis, ed., *Critical Essays on Galway Kinnell,* Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1997.

With its additional decade of coverage, Nancy Tuten's selection of reviews and essays complements Howard Nelson's earlier volume of criticism. Much like other volumes in the series Critical Essays on American Literature, this book features numerous reviews (here 28), only a few of which overlap with selections in Nelson's book. The essays of part two, written by both critics and poets, focus both on single books and on large themes such as transcendence, transformation, dualism, music, love, and death.

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Davie, Donald, "Slogging for the Absolute," in *On the Poetry of Galway Kinnell: The Wages of Dying,* edited by Howard Nelson, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1987, pp. 143-156.

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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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