Smart and Final Iris Study Guide

Smart and Final Iris by James Tate

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Introduction

"Smart and Final Iris" appears in James Tate's collection *Reckoner*, published in 1986, and is reprinted in his *Selected Poems* (1991). Though known primarily for his playful, often hallucinatory lyrics in which his speakers stumble about in a world of bizarre characters and events, Tate addresses socio-political subjects in his poems as well, highlighting the ways in which reality is often more absurd and dreamlike than dreams. "Land of Little Sticks, 1945," for example, the opening poem from *Constant Defender* (1983), mythically depicts the moment when the first atomic bombs were dropped, and suggests that the world will never be the same. Like "Land of Little Sticks, 1945," "Smart and Final Iris" addresses the possibility of nuclear annihilation and the ways in which that possibility affects the human imagination. In twenty short lines, Tate poetically describes the absurdity of the Pentagon's attempt to account for various scenarios resulting from nuclear war. He does this by turning the military's own practice of using silly code names for violent operations and outcomes against itself, in the process showing the insufficiency of language to adequately represent a catastrophe like nuclear war. Tate draws on readers' knowledge of popular culture to write this serious but funny poem.

Author Biography

James Vincent Tate was born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1943, in the middle of World War II. Tate's father, Samuel Vincent Appleby, was a pilot who was reported missing in action while on a bombing run over Germany in his B-17. Tate, who never met his father, was raised by his mother, Betty Jean Whitsitt. The title piece of his prizewinning Yale Younger Poets collection of poems, *The Lost Pilot* (1967), captures the poet's sense of the loss of his dead father. Themes of loss, absence, and imminent catastrophe pervade much of Tate's work. Tate is also fascinated with war, which he explores in "Smart and Final Iris," "Land of Little Sticks, 1945," and other poems.

Tate began writing poetry at 17, often composing in a trance-like state. Though he read and admired modernist poets William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens, Tate maintains that neither influenced him, and that it is difficult to name any direct influences on his writing□although he will admit to being a jazz aficionado, and a life-long student of popular culture and human nature. In 1965, he graduated from Kansas State College, and in 1967 he took a master of fine arts degree from the University of Iowa's prestigious Writer's Workshop, where he studied with poet Donald Justice, among others. In 1971, after teaching at Columbia University and the University of California, Berkeley, Tate joined the English department at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where he remains today.

From the moment Tate appeared on the scene, critics have characterized his poetry as improvisational, surreal, bizarre, absurd, and singular. Though some have faulted his poetry for being little more than verbal antics, most have recognized Tate's original voice and see his poetry as part of a process of spiritual questing and self-invention.

Tate seems to agree with them, to a point. In his introduction to *Best American Poetry of 1997*, Tate writes, "What we want from poetry is to be moved, to be moved from where we now stand. We don't just want to have our ideas or emotions confirmed."

The larger poetry world seems to agree with him. Tate's peers have awarded him many of the literary world's top honors, including a National Institute of Arts and Letters award for poetry in 1974; Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships in 1976 and 1980, respectively; the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1992, for *Selected Poems*; and the National Book Award for poetry in 1994, for *Worshipful Company of Fletchers*. Tate was also awarded the $100,000 Tanning Prize from the Academy of American Poets in 1995. He has authored some thirty books and chapbooks of poetry, from presses small and large

Poem Text

Pentagon code
For end of world
Is *rural paradise*,
If plan fails
It's *rural paradise*

For losses under
100 million, *a trip*
on the wayward bus

For a future of mutants,
bridal parties collide

World famine is
a plague of beatniks

First strike and
I sniff your nieces
I fall to pieces
Get hell out . . .

A madman comes,
one of those babies
the further you kick it
the bigger it gets.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-5

Tate's title, "Smart and Final Iris," refers to the name of a warehouse grocery chain that operates over 214 stores in California, Arizona, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Florida, and Mexico. The name is derived from the company's founders, Jim Smart and Hildane Final. Iris is the name of the company's private brand label introduced in 1895. In 1953, after acquiring its leading competitor, Haas, Baruch, and Co., Smart and Final became Smart & Final Iris Co. The obscurity of the title makes it a code of sorts because readers have to figure out what it has to do with the poem. This tactic makes sense because the poem concerns itself with the idea of code names and what they represent. The Pentagon is the building in Arlington County, Virginia, near Washington, D.C., that houses the United States Department of Defense and all four branches of the military□Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines. It is also one of the world's largest office buildings. But "Pentagon" is often used to refer to the U.S. military in general. The first line refers to the Pentagon's practice of giving code names to military operations and scenarios. For example, during the 1950s and 1960s, the United States Airborne Alert Program, which kept up to a dozen nuclear-armed bombers airborne 24 hours a day to deter a possible Soviet surprise attack, was variously called "Head Start," "Round Robin," and "Chrome Dome." Tate satirizes this practice by imagining what the Pentagon's code words would be for the end of the world, if Pentagon military plans for nuclear war fail. The phrase is ironic because there would be no paradise in the aftermath of a war. The word "rural" alludes to the fact that cities would be the primary targets and bombed first. By repeating the phrase "rural paradise," clarifying it the second time, Tate delays the ironic effect, showing his adroitness with comic timing.

Lines 6-8

In this stanza, Tate again satirizes the Pentagon's naming of horrific scenarios of mass destruction. Military bureaucracies are often criticized for using cost-benefit analysis to develop war strategies and to calculate acceptable numbers for the loss of human life. The phrase, "a trip on the wayward bus," conjures up associations of carefree, serendipitous travel, and the image of Volkswagen buses of the 1960s.

Lines 9-12

In these stanzas, Tate first presents the image of a "future of mutants" resulting from a nuclear war. His code for such a scenario, "bridal parties collide," is even more bizarre than his previous codes, and suggests the drama, comedy, and confusion at weddings, and the promise of children often resulting from them. Many of the children born to survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings were deformed because of the radiation their mothers experienced from the atomic blasts. The phrase also calls up

images of monsters and the walking dead, popularized in films such as *Dawn of the Dead* and *Night of the Living Dead*. The link between the code and what it signifies is comical in the next stanza because Tate plays with the idea of beatniks as impoverished artists who are frequently hungry. The word beatnik is often used as a derisive term for members of the Beat generation of the 1950s, a social and literary movement whose members abhorred conventional society and sought spiritual enlightenment through jazz, drugs, sex, and the practice of Eastern religion including Zen Buddhism. Beats were also the precursors to the hippies of the 1960s and 1970s, who shared many of the same beliefs. To have a "plague" of them is doubly derisive.

Lines 13-16

In this stanza, the absurdity of assigning code names for scenarios of nuclear holocaust and of Tate's own poem comes to a head. "First strike" refers to the military strategy of initiating nuclear war. First strike was a viable option in the Pentagon during the cold war. The idea behind such a strategy is that by striking (bombing) the enemy first, you take away their ability to respond. By saving this military operation as the last to be named, Tate underscores its inherent absurdity, and the absurdity, in general, of planning for a nuclear war. The code here mimics song lyrics and underscores the continued deterioration of the logic that links the code to what it represents.

Lines 17-20

This is the only stanza in which there is no code. Yet the stanza itself needs interpreting and so can be seen as a code, as can much poetry. The madman here might be any tyrant with access to nuclear weapons, or maybe even someone at the Pentagon caught up in the image of himself as a hero or patriot. Popular culture is full of just such figures. By using the pronoun "it" to refer to "one of those babies," Tate shows his contempt for such people. He dehumanizes those who treat others as numbers in a war game and can even imagine a world after nuclear war. These madmen "get bigger" because they get madder when "kicked" by their enemies. Tate uses these terms figuratively. "Getting bigger" suggests becoming more outlandish in one's behavior, more self-righteous. The poem ends on this ominous note, creating a sense of imminent doom.

Themes

Language and Meaning

Modern poetry has long been considered a rarified form of expression, accessible only to those trained in the "art" of interpretation. In this sense, it can be seen as a code needing deciphering. "Smart and Final Iris" alludes to poetry's reputation as a difficult art by making a poem out of the very subjects of obscurity and codes. The title of the poem highlights this fact. Just as the U.S. military uses words bearing little discernible logic to the events they signify, so too does Tate use a title with no seeming logical relationship to the poem it names. In copying the military's naming tactics, however, Tate makes poetry out of them. Although "Smart and Final Iris" alludes to a chain of grocery warehouses— something most readers would not know—it is also a somewhat fitting image for nuclear apocalypse. The image of the nuclear mushroom cloud is flowerlike, and the words "smart" and "final" can be read as both ironic (what's smart about dropping bombs?), and descriptive of a nuclear holocaust. By appropriating the Pentagon's naming practices, Tate is able to show the irony inherent in attempting to imagine the end of human civilization while at the same time working to prevent such an event.

Popular Culture

By referring to and incorporating elements of popular culture into his poem, Tate reconfigures readers' expectations about poetry's subject matter. Historically, critics have judged "great" poetry to be that which transcends historical circumstances and says something universal about the human condition. "Smart and Final Iris," however, is rooted in history and American culture. Readers need to know what the Pentagon is, the American military's practice of giving code names to operations, the double meaning of the title, and something about the fear of nuclear war to fully appreciate the poem. Arguably, such topical subject matter also makes the poem more immediately relevant to readers' lives than, say, another love poem.

Cold War

Historians often date the Cold War from the end of World War II until 1989, with the opening of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The term refers to the struggle for power between Western powers and Communist countries during this time. The nuclear arms race between the Soviet Union and the United States is a direct result of the Cold War, and the scenarios Tate satirically describes would not be imaginable without the race. In the second half of the twentieth century, many of the images and much of the discourse on nuclear war in popular culture assumed it would result from a clash between the superpowers.

Style

Definitions

"Smart and Final Iris" is written as a series of definitions. Definitions are statements that attempt to express the meaning of a word, word group, sign, or symbol. Tate inverts the conventional order of defining terms by first supplying the definition and then the name of the thing defined. For example, he first gives the definition of "rural paradise" in the opening stanza, writing, "Pentagon code / for end of world." This is similar to how questions and answers are formulated on the popular game show, *Jeopardy*. By using code words to name the thing defined, Tate is creating metaphors. Metaphors are figures of speech that draw similarities between two unlike things or ideas. Tate's metaphoric definitions are often ironic because the similarities are the opposite of what one would expect. For example, "paradise" isn't what most people think of when they think of the end of the world. The effect of providing ironic definitions is that readers see things in a new light.

Satire

"Smart and Final Iris" satirizes the U.S. military's attitude toward nuclear warfare by poking fun at the way the Pentagon gives secret code names to various scenarios for nuclear war. Satire often uses irony, wit, and sarcasm to reveal humanity's vices or stupidity and to make change possible. The purpose of satire is primarily moral, that is, it aims to provoke a response. A favored classical genre, satire remains popular in literature, film, and other art forms today, often targeting political figures and institutions.

Historical Context

Tate wrote this poem in the early 1980s, when Ronald Reagan was president of the United States. A conservative Republican and staunch advocate of a strong defense, Reagan was a militant Cold War politician who once called the Soviet Union an "evil empire." In 1981, a year after Reagan's election, Congress approved an $18 billion increase in defense spending. Part of this increase included the creation of a rapid deployment force, and the construction of the neutron bomb, a nuclear weapon that maximizes damage to people but minimizes damage to buildings and equipment. Reagan's hard-line stance against arms control as a means of dealing with the Soviet military threat included public statements about the Unites States' chances of winning a "limited" nuclear war by confining losses to Europe. However, the nuclear freeze movement, a group dedicated to halting the production and proliferation of nuclear weapons, made it more difficult for Reagan to maintain his hardline stance. Although Congress passed Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (dubbed "Star Wars"), based on the use of space satellites equipped with lasers to shoot down Soviet missiles in the air, it appropriated only a fraction of the Reagan administration's requested budget for SDI. In 1986, Congress prohibited further SDI tests and cut the SDI budget by one-third. Although the military budget under the Reagan administration increased from $157 billion in 1981 to $233 billion in 1986, Americans were no more secure than before.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union was undergoing tremendous changes, as the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, was pushing for reforms to liberalize the country. Reagan and Gorbachev met in Geneva in 1985 in a superpower summit, and Reagan agreed, in principle, to Gorbachev's proposal for both countries to cut nuclear weapons by fifty percent. In 1987, the United States and the Soviet Union signed the Intermediate Nuclear Force treaty (INF), in which both countries agreed to dismantle more than 2,500 Soviet and American short range missiles based in Europe.

The subject of nuclear war pervaded the music of the 1980s as well, whether it was heavy metal, reggae, rock, or folk. Pink Floyd sang about the finality of nuclear war in "Two Suns in the Sunset," while Underworld's "Underneath the Radar" used early warning systems for nuclear war as a metaphor for love. Many songs protested the Reagan administration's pronuclear stance in their lyrics, such as Escape Club's tune, "Wild, Wild West": "Gotta live it up, live it up / Ronnie's got a new gun / Headin' for the nineties, livin' in the eighties, / screamin' in the backroom, / waitin' for the big boom." Reagan didn't help matters when, before one of his weekly Saturday radio addresses in 1984, he jokingly said into the microphone (which he thought was turned off), "We are going to bomb Russia in fifteen minutes." His gaffe was later incorporated into a number of rap and pop songs of the era.

Critical Overview

Tate has always had both fans and detractors, and critical responses to *Reckoner* (1986), the volume in which "Smart and Final Iris" appears, illustrate this. Chris Stroffolino, for example, notes that the volume marks Tate's turn "toward society and sociopolitical themes," and says that "Smart and Final Iris" is about the public's "helplessness in the face of the doublespeak of 'Pentagon code.'" Lee Upton similarly notes that many poems in the collection appeal to readers who have lost faith in conventional institutions of the state. Dick Allen's review is typical of the position taken by Tate's detractors. Known for his love of formalist poetry and his own formalist poems, Allen calls the poems in *Reckoner*, "basically a self-indulgent exercise for which there is no excuse." Allen faults Tate's poems for their lack of social significance and, mimicking Tate's penchant for using surrealist imagery, writes, "This is occasional surrealistic poetry, written with the fingernails on stumps of fog."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition whose essays, poems, and stories regularly appear in journals and magazines. In this essay, Semansky considers how Tate's poem on the topic of weapons is also a kind of weapon itself.

James Tate's poem "Smart and Final Iris" is both about the terrors of nuclear weaponry and is a kind of weapon itself. As a poem, it examines the rela- tionship between war and language, showing the part words play in the construction of popular images about nuclear war. In doing this, the poem intervenes in the ways readers think and, hopefully, respond to the threat of war.

By taking as his subject the Pentagon's practice of giving secret code names to its nuclear defense strategy, Tate foregrounds the role of language in how human beings imagine death. Like death, codes are a secret, standing in a metaphoric relationship to the thing or things they represent. Their purpose is to obscure or hide what they name.

Consider the poem's title, which is taken from the name of a chain of grocery stores. To most readers, who do not understand the reference, the title would remain a mystery. Even if a reader did catch the reference in the title, its meaning might still remain a mystery. After all, what does a grocery warehouse chain have in common with a poem about nuclear war? Many readers would simply chalk up the reference to poetry's reputation as a difficult and esoteric art form. They might even think that they're not "smart" enough to "get it."

But "getting it" is precisely the idea the poem addresses. By foregrounding the ways in which poems are codes, Tate implicitly asks readers to consider how the Pentagon keeps secret information about their own future from them, citing reasons of "national security." Like the Pentagon, many modern and contemporary poems are deliberately obscure, and poets often rationalize poetry's difficulty by claiming that it takes a special kind of person or mind to understand them, someone who is aesthetically sensitive to language, or who knows how to read "correctly." For many, poetry remains a kind of "secret language," accessible only to the initiated. By parodying the ways in which the Pentagon uses code names for unimaginable events, Tate calls into question the moral authority of those who create the codes and keep the secrets, and he points out the irrationality of the practice.

Tate also touches on the questionable practice of preparing for nuclear war in order to avoid it. Critic John Gery notes the absurdity as well, writing:

What distinguishes our contemporary sense of annihilation,
whether it come about by nuclear, ecological,
biomedical, or other technological forces, is that
we imagine it will occur not *in spite of* our human
efforts but *because* of them.

This idea is embedded in Tate's poem, as all of the scenarios suggest failure of the "plan."

Tate treats catastrophic results of a nuclear holocaust such as a mutating race, widespread death, and famine as opportunities to lampoon the military and underscore humanity's current predicament. His darkly humorous codes for these scenarios attest to his vision of a world gone mad, where the only rational response to imminent doom is laughter. Black humor has a long history in American literature. Novelists such as Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, and Thomas Pynchon, among others, have used it to emphasize the absurdity and paradox of modern life and, especially, of modern warfare. Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr. Strangelove; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1963) is perhaps the best-known black humor response to the threat of nuclear war and draws on the Cold War fears of the 1950s and 1960s. The film's cast of characters includes a mad scientist, an inept president, and a pair of macho, psychotic generals intent on world destruction. Tate alludes to just such characters in the last stanza:

A madman comes,
one of those babies
the further you kick it
the bigger it gets.

Tate's associative logic and surrealist imagery formally parallel ideas associated with the fear of nuclear war: randomness and accident. However unlikely or impossible, the chance that a nuclear war could be started by someone pushing the wrong button or by misunderstanding orders is an idea often presented in films and writing on the subject. Indeed, a large part of society's "nuclear anxiety" stems from the belief that nuclear war could occur despite best intentions and current controls. Such potential miscommunication highlights the importance of clear channels of command and precise language in keeping the world safe. By suggesting that the Pentagon's "plan" to keep the world safe contributes to the possibility of miscommunication and heightens the chance of nuclear outbreak, Tate underscores the perilous nature of language. He elaborates on this belief in his essay "Live Yak Pie," written as an introduction to *Best American Poetry 1997*. The idea is a central part of his own poetics:

The poet arrives at his or her discovery by setting
language on edge of creating metaphors that suggest
dangerous ideas, or any number of other methods.
The point is, language can be hazardous as it is our
primary grip on the world. When language is skewed,
the world is viewed differently. But this is only effective
if the reader can recognize this view, even
though it is the first time he or she has experienced
the thought.

Recognizing how Tate skews the language is the reader's challenge. The "dangerous idea" in "Smart and Final Iris" is that our image of the world is being configured by

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forces beyond our control and without our approval. It isn't only the idea that a nuclear apocalypse is a strong possibility, but that individuals can do nothing to prevent it. The crumbling relationship between code and referent in Tate's poem attests to the fact that the system itself is breaking down.

First strike and
I sniff your nieces
I fall to pieces
Get hell out . . .

It is no coincidence that Tate mocks the Pentagon's strategy of first strike capability in his penultimate stanza. Critics of the first strike strategy routinely point out its status as the very catalyst for the nuclear arms race. In short, first-strike capability denotes a country's ability to eliminate retaliatory second-strike forces of another country. At the height of the Cold War in 1962, then U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara explains the "logic" behind staying ahead in the nuclear arms race in his speech, "Mutual Deterrence":

Now what about the Soviet Union? Does it today possess
a powerful nuclear arsenal? The answer is that
it does. Does it possess a first-strike capability against
the United States? The answer is that it does not. Can
the Soviet Union in the foreseeable future acquire
such a first-strike capability against the United
States? The answer is that it cannot. It cannot because
we are determined to remain fully alert and we will
never permit our own assured-destruction capability
to drop to a point at which a Soviet first-strike capability
is even remotely feasible.

By 1986, when Tate's poem appeared, McNamara's words still expressed the Pentagon's policy. Despite the Soviet Union's dissolution, President Bush's decision to pursue Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative is only the latest manifestation that the arms race is alive and well in the twenty-first century.

Tate's poem, though, is a strike against the Pentagon's attempt to dictate the world's future with policies built to fail. Gery emphasizes poetry's power in the atomic age, writing, "without having to lay claim to universality or transcendence, poetry can still, to paraphrase Theodore Roethke, learn by going where it has to go□not only as an agent *for* change but as an agent *of* change." Psychologists Robert Jay Lifton and Nicholas Humphrey, experts on the psychology of surviving war and living in the atomic age, second Gery's view, suggesting that poets are among the frontline soldiers in humanity's fight for survival:

If anything in our culture symbolizes the fact and hope
of human continuity, it is the continuing presence of

the poets, philosophers, and thinkers of the last few
thousand years, who in the service of life once
stretched their imagination and can now stretch ours.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "Smart and Final Iris," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about various forms of literature. In the following essay, Poquette explores Tate's use of polarities in his poem.

James Tate's Pulitzer Prize-winning poetry is marked by both comedy and surrealism—a mixing of reality and fantasy that produces unusual scenes that are often found only in dreams. Says Stephen Gardner in his entry on Tate in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, "The poems themselves are rooted in landscapes that are often—if not generally— bizarre and surreal." In "Smart and Final Iris," Tate's use of comedy and surrealism reaches an apocalyptic level. Through the poem's use of pattern and word choice, Tate gives the reader a false sense of security, setting the reader up for the climactic end of the poem in which all sense of security is lost.

The poem follows an obvious pattern, employing polarities—or opposites—to trick the reader into feeling that the Pentagon has everything under control. In each of the first five stanzas, the speaker in the poem gives a description of an apocalyptic situation that could happen in a post-nuclear attack. These descriptions are followed by a "Pentagon code." Whereas the description of the apocalyptic situation is very grim, the Pentagon codes, by contrast, are light-hearted, sometimes surreal, and even humorous, as if the Pentagon does not take the situations seriously. By categorizing these apocalyptic situations with such light-hearted codes, the Pentagon gives themselves mental control over these post-nuclear possibilities.

The divide between grim reality and lighthearted code is emphasized even more by the style of the text. The real situations are written in plain text, while the Pentagon codes are all in italics, drawing attention to them.

With or without italics, however, the codes draw attention to themselves. As the poem progresses, the codes become ever more surreal and humorous, playing off the real apocalyptic descriptions that they represent.

The first stanza introduces the idea of the Pentagon code:

Pentagon code
for end of world
is *rural paradise*,
if plan fails
it's *rural paradise*

Unlike the other stanzas, in which the code is only featured once, this stanza features the code, "rural paradise," in two separate places. Poets use repetition like this when they want to draw attention to a key idea or image. In this case, Tate is trying to impress upon the reader the idea of the end of the world, and the finality that this idea brings with it.

Apocalyptic landscapes are not usually described as either "rural" or as being a "paradise." But in Tate's poem, the surreal images make sense upon closer inspection. A rural area is usually fairly unpopulated. By magnifying the idea of "rural" into a "paradise," or the ideal form, a "rural paradise" becomes a world without any people at all□which is what would happen if the world ended. The term paradise is significant in another way. According to Biblical history, the world's first rural paradise, the Garden of Eden, started with no people. So, it is fitting that the paradise at the end of the world would also have no people.

In the second stanza, "losses under 100 million," is given the code of *"a trip on the wayward bus."* A "wayward bus" implies that somebody has made a minor mistake and taken the wrong bus. In a global nuclear war, under 100 million dead people would, in fact, be seen as a minor mistake, when compared to the total amount of people who could have potentially been killed.

It is in the next stanza that Tate hits his surrealistic and comic stride: "For a future of mutants, / *bridal parties collide."* As with the previous codes, the words seem out of place at first. However, when one starts to analyze the stanza based on the "mutants" description, the words start to fit. The "bridal parties" colliding provides a surrealistic image of several people in formal wear who have been scrambled into mismatched body parts and outfits during the nuclear attack, becoming mutants. It is a surreal image, yet one that elicits a small laugh on the part of the reader. "There's a nervous, high-strung humor which often seems intended to bring forth an equally nervous titter from the reader as reality and fantasy are deftly and intricately intertwined," says Stanley Wiater, in an interview in the *Valley Advocate* in 1984.

The next stanza is even more surreal and comical: "World famine is / *a plague of beatniks."* Although there is nothing funny about famine, or hunger, it is amusing to imagine a horde of beatniks, considered a type of "starving artist," roaming the earth.

In these first four stanzas, the poem's pattern of offsetting serious descriptions with increasingly humorous images makes the reader feel as if there is nothing to worry about□the Pentagon has everything under control. With the next stanza, however, Tate changes tactics and disorients his reader, shaking the reader's confidence in the Pentagon:

First strike and
I sniff your nieces
I fall to pieces
Get hell out . . .

This unusual language does not readily invoke any humorous images as the other codes do, but it does grab the reader's attention through several of the words. Up until now, the Pentagon codes have been described in an impersonal fashion by an unseen speaker, allowing the reader to distance themselves from the horrors being described in the poem. This code, however, yanks the reader back to reality, and pulls them into the action by using the personal "I," and by addressing the reader directly by talking about

their family members ("your nieces"). Suddenly, more seems to be at stake, and nobody is laughing. The pattern of this stanza yields even more insights. As the stanza progresses, the lines get shorter and shorter, invoking the image of the types of countdowns generally used to launch nuclear weapons. Something bad is definitely happening.

At this point, the normally vivid, concise codes have deteriorated into desperate thoughts. "I sniff your nieces" alludes to the fact that after a nuclear bomb has struck, you can smell the stench of those of the dead who aren't totally obliterated, which may include a reader's family. In a similar style, "I fall to pieces" indicates that the Pentagon staff and their carefully laid out plans are crumbling. Finally, "Get hell out . . ." is a curious positioning of words.

Normally, one would use the phrase "get the hell out" to talk about evacuation during a nuclear attack. However, without the word "the," the line instead becomes a directive to the Pentagon to unleash hell. In other words, a counterstrike. The finality of such a move is underscored by the ellipsis at the end of this line, which implies that the counterstrikes will continue indefinitely until everything is gone, blown into oblivion. This is the beginning of the end.

The word "hell" itself is important and has been used many times by writers throughout history to describe the horrors of war. In the 1980s, the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a tense standoff known as the Cold War, where each superpower hovered over its respective buttons for launching nuclear weapons, just waiting for the sign that its adversary was going to attack. In these times, when the threat of nuclear war was ever-present, hell could be unleashed by the push of a button.

After all of the Pentagon codes that offset the realistic descriptions, and the three-line code that announces the devastation of a "first strike," the last stanza serves to blindside the reader with a sense of dread. There is no humorous or surreal code to offset the final situation, where "a madman comes." During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was the primary enemy of the United States, but there also existed a number of smaller countries who had access to nuclear weapons, and these countries were sometimes run by people who were considered "mad."

"Smart and Final Iris" was "written at the height of Reaganism," says Chris Stroffolino in his entry on Tate in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. During this time, Tate turned "toward society and sociopolitical themes," according to Stroffolino. One of these themes was how nuclear war was ever-present, and how the United States was encouraging it through certain actions or inactions.

In Tate's poem, these smaller countries, the "babies," are viewed as more dangerous than the Soviet Union superpower, which is locked in a stalemate with the United States. Unfortunately, superpowers sometimes failed to realize the potential power of smaller countries with less resources, and so would "kick" them aside, not giving them a second thought, or investing minimal resources to keep them contained□saving the majority of time and effort for the larger adversary. The problem is that the more these

countries were kicked aside and out of the Pentagon's view, the larger they got and the more dangerous they became.

This is ironic in a society that is supposed to have some of the world's best intelligence officers. In fact, the title itself,"Smart and Final Iris," plays off the supposed intelligence of the Pentagon. The "Smart" refers to the highly intelligent people who work for the Pentagon, who think that they are prepared for anything. In the poem, however, they are stripped of their confidence, but not before hell is unleashed, in the form of nuclear war. Says Stroffolino, "Smart and Final Iris' deals with helplessness in the face of the doublespeak of 'Pentagon code.'"

The inability for the Pentagon to realize that they have missed a much more serious threat than the Soviet Union□and start focusing their intelligence efforts where they need to be□will eventually bring about the "Final Iris." The iris is the part of a human's eye that one sees on the outside, through which the world is viewed, so a "final iris" can be thought of as a "final" view or image.

In Tate's surreal poem, "Smart and Final Iris," the poet uses specific patterns and word choices to convince the reader that the Pentagon knows all they need to about the threats of potential nuclear war and how to handle them. As the poem progresses, Tate builds up this confidence, then suddenly disorients readers, showing them that the "smart" guys aren't always smart, and the final iris, or view, may be reserved for a madman.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "Smart and Final Iris," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

In 1992, New Letters on the Air released an untitled audiocassette of Tate reading his poems.

The Academy of American Poets has a website on Tate at http://www.poets.org/poets/poets. cfm?prmID=71 with biographical information and links to a few poems.

Topics for Further Study

Tate has written other poems on the horrors of nuclear war. Compare his poem "Land of Little Sticks, 1945" from his collection *Constant Defender* with "Smart and Final Iris." What are the differences and similarities in how they describe scenarios for nuclear annihilation?

Conduct a survey of people over forty years old and under forty, asking them to what degree they believe a nuclear war is possible in their lifetime. Then, write an essay exploring what the answers have in common and how they differ. What conclusions can you draw from the responses?

Research and report on the current strategy of the United States for nuclear defense. Do you agree with it? Why or why not?

Assume you and a few classmates have been given the responsibility of drawing up a response and survival plan for your school in the event of a limited nuclear attack on a city fifty miles away. What would your priorities be? What does this tell you about your own values?

Poll your class to see who believes that nuclear arms are a deterrent to war and who believes they are not. Then, research the positions and stage a debate.

Compile a list of code names for military operations and projects for the twentieth century (for example, the 1991 war against Iraq was dubbed "Operation Desert Storm"), then write a poem using these names.

Research the number of countries that either now possess or have the capability of making a nuclear bomb. Next, research which of these countries is currently involved in a conflict with another country or countries. Which country do you think might use the bomb first, and why? All of the following code words are related to projects associated with nuclear bombs and nuclear bomb testing by the U.S. government: "Operation Ranger"; "Fat Man"; "Operation Plumbob"; "Ranier." Research what they refer to and report your findings to your class.

Compare and contrast films about nuclear war released before and after 1980 and report on how the depiction of nuclear war has changed over time. Start with these films: *On the Beach* (1959); *Dr. Strangelove; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1963); *Fail- Safe* (1964); *Mad Max II* (1981); *Threads* (1984); and *The Day After* (1984).

Compare and Contrast

1983: President Ronald Reagan announces plans for an extensive program to examine the feasibility of a missile defense program. The concept□derided as "Star Wars" by opponents in Congress□revises the nation's 35-year-old nuclear strategy by focusing on missile defense rather than the ability to retaliate against nuclear attack.

2001: Although Russia, China, and North Korea tell the U.N. Disarmament Commission that a U.S. missile defense system would threaten international security, trigger a new arms race, and undermine the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, President Bush advocates further developing the system. The proposed 2002 defense budget allots $8.3 billion for missile defense.

1986: Washington severs all economic and commercial relations with Libya, accusing it of giving aid to international terrorists.

2001: Following the Libyan handover of two suspects in the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 to stand trial before a Scottish Court in the Netherlands, the United States modifies its Libya sanctions to allow shipments of donated clothing, food, and medicine for humanitarian reasons. All other U.S. sanctions against Libya remain in force.

1986: The Soviet nuclear plant at Chernobyl in the Ukraine is destroyed by fire, sending a large radiation cloud over much of Europe and contaminating vast areas of Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus.

2001: Ukrainian officials say that 400,000 adults and 1.1 million children are currently entitled to state aid, as a result of the Chernobyl accident.

1986: President Reagan signs the tax reform bill into law, the first full scale remodification since 1954.

2001: President Bush signs into law the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001. The 10-year, $1.35 trillion package provides for the biggest tax cut since 1981 and the most sweeping changes to the tax system since the Tax Reform Act of 1986.

What Do I Read Next?

Tate's *Selected Poems* (1991) draws from all of his major collections to this date and provides an overview of his development as a poet. Tate won a Pulitzer Prize for this volume.

One of Tate's friends and a strong influence on his poetry, Bill Knott, published *Laugh at the End of the World: Collected Comic Poems, 1969-1999* in 2000. Knott's goofy vision of the world and his absurdist sense of humor are strikingly similar to Tate's.

Richard Howard's 1988 translation of Andre Breton's classic surrealist novel *Nadja*, first published in the 1920s, details the narrator's wanderings through the streets of Paris with a seemingly "mad" woman named Nadja. Breton uses his narrative to reflect on the nature of time, perception, space, and reality. Tate writes out of the surrealist tradition.

In 1977, Tate published a novel entitled *Lucky Darryl: A Novel*, which he wrote with Bill Knott. The two have collaborated on poems as well.

John Gery's 1996 study entitled *Nuclear Annihilation and Contemporary Poetry: Ways of Nothingness* examines both the direct and the indirect impact of the nuclear threat on American poets from Gertrude Stein to James Merrill, providing both detailed readings of over fifty poems and four general groups into which poems might be categorized: protest poetry, apocalyptic lyric poetry, psychohistorical poetry, and the poetry of uncertainty.

Paul Brian's book entitled *Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic War in Fiction, 1895-1984* (1986) provides a highly readable and detailed annotated bibliography of fiction depicting nuclear war or its aftermath.

In 1995, Coffee House Press released an anthology of poetry addressing the possibility of nuclear apocalypse, entitled *Atomic Ghost: Poets Respond to the Nuclear Age*. The collection, edited by John Bradley, contains poems from more than one hundred poets, including Adrienne Rich and William Dickey.

James Merrill was a widely respected poet whose work often explored human responses to living in the nuclear age. Critic Timothy Materer's 2000 study of Merrill's poetry, *James Merrill's Apocalypse*, shows how apocalyptic motifs inspire and inform Merrill's poetry.

Further Study

Bellamy, Joe David, ed., *American Poetry Observed*, University of Illinois Press, 1988.

This volume of interviews is unusual because wellknown
contemporary poets interview other wellknown
contemporary poets. As a result, the exchange
is substantive and focused.

Lifton, Robert Jay, and Nicholas Humphrey, eds., *In a Dark Time*, Harvard University Press, 1984.

Psychiatrists Lifton and Humphrey have collected excerpts
from literature of the last 2,500 years that comments
on the psychological and imaginative confusion
surrounding war. Lifton is known for his
psychological studies of survivors of the Hiroshima
and Nagasaki bombings.

Tate, James, *The Route As Briefed*, University of Michigan Press, 1999.

This volume collects Tate's short stories, interviews,
and essays. It is an engaging, accessible, and humorous
collection.

Tate, James, and David Lehman, *The Best American Poetry 1997*, Scribner, 1997.

Each year, a different poet is invited to guest edit a
new volume in this popular series. Tate selected the
poems for this volume, and his selections can tell
readers as much about his own taste as his own poetry
can. Tate's introduction, "Live Yak Pie," provides
insights into his composing process and his vision
of what poetry can be.

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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 membersnal 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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