Song of Reasons Study Guide

Song of Reasons by Robert Pinsky

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Introduction

Readers unfamiliar with Robert Pinsky's poetry may find his "Song of Reasons" a bit daunting because of its rambling prose, mixture of subjects, and historical allusions to remote people, places, and events. Yet this poem is very typical of Pinsky's style and themes and, more importantly, very typical of what has made him one of the most renowned poets of latter twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American poetry□among scholars and fellow poets, at least. That said, his work should still be considered accessible to anyone interested in pursuing it, and this poem is a good place to start. One first needs to understand that what it is about is more abstract than concrete and that the clue to its overall theme is in the title.

The poem is essentially about looking for the reasons that things are the way they are. Whether it is why an old song makes listeners both sad and happy, why an ancient Jewish noble family was allowed privileges by Christians at Notre Dame, or why Pinsky's own daughter finds such comfort in reading the daily newspaper's "Question Man" column, each of these seemingly unconnected events must have a reason for occurring, but perhaps not one that can be pinned down. The challenge in reading "Song of Reasons" is to determine if the poet's "song" really offers any "reasons," and, if so, what they are. This is a clever, somber, and provocative work all at once, with its odd parts held together by the development of one thing leading into another, making an apparent disjointed poem cohe- sive after all. "Song of Reasons" is included in Pinsky's *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems 1966-1996,* published in 1996.

Author Biography

Robert Pinsky was born on October 20, 1940, in Long Branch, New Jersey, a former resort town along the Atlantic coast whose slow decay would figure into much of Pinsky's autobiographical poetry later on. He grew up in what he terms a "nominally orthodox" Jewish family, well respected in the community, but with as many secular activities as religious ones. Both parents attended synagogue only on high holy days. As the oldest son, Pinsky was required to go to synagogue every Saturday to attend a three-hour orthodox service in which he listened to the elders chant prayers in Hebrew, a language he did not understand. This experience, too, would figure into his future work as a poet.

In 1961, at the age of twenty-one, Pinsky married Ellen Jane Bailey. The following year, he received his undergraduate degree in English from Rutgers University. He enrolled for graduate studies shortly afterwards at Stanford University, earning his Ph.D. in 1966. In the mid and late 1960s, he began publishing poems in various prestigious journals, but his first collection, *Sadness and Happiness,* did not appear until 1975. Since then, Pinsky has published seven books of poems, including *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems 1966-1996,* which won the 1997 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Pinsky is also noted for his critical work and has published four volumes of criticism, including *The Sounds of Poetry,* which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. His 1984 poetry collection *History of My Heart,* which includes the poem "Song of Reasons," was chosen for the 1984 William Carlos Williams Prize awarded by the Poetry Society of America. His most recent works include the poetry collection *Jersey Rain,* published in 2000, and a new volume of critical essays, *Democracy, Culture, and the Voice of Poetry,* published in 2002.

Perhaps one of Pinsky's greatest honors was being selected U.S. Poet Laureate in 1997, a post he held through 2000. He is currently poetry editor of the weekly online journal *Slate* and teaches in the graduate writing program at Boston University.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2

The first word of "Song of Reasons" is a direct tie-in with the title. Opening with the word "Because" implies that the poem may be full of answers and explanations as to why things are as they are, but one does not have to read very far to find that this is not the case. Instead, the first word gets attached to a sudden shift of key in an old Italian repertoire favorite, popular among opera singers. When the pitch in the "little tune" becomes higher, Pinsky claims that "everyone feels / A sad smile beginning," but who "everyone" is and what role nostalgia plays at the outset of the poem is not clear.

Lines 3-6

The second half of line 3 begins a new sentence, but it starts with the word "Also," linking it to what has already been said. Apparently, the human reaction evoked by "Come Back to Sorrento" is a "customary" one, but the reason for it is "forgotten" just like the reason that "the Dukes of Levis-Mirepoix," an old French noble family, are allowed to ride horses into "the Cathedral of Notre Dame." Even though he has just claimed the reason is forgotten, Pinsky still offers a possible explanation for the noblemen's privilege: their ancestors "killed heretics in Languedoc"□an area of southern France known for its revelry in good food and wine as much as for being the birthplace of troubadour romantic poetry. Getting rid of sinners apparently earned the dukes favor with the Church.

Lines 7-8

Line 7 throws a new twist into the already odd depiction of the dukes, for now "they are somehow Jewish," which would seem to negate their privileges at Notre Dame, but to offset that, they "claim / Collateral descent from the family of the Virgin Mary." In other words, they explain their Jewish link to Christianity by saying they share a common ancestor but are descended from a different line.

Lines 9-12

Line 9 begins with the word "And," and line 10 ends with the word "too," both implying a connection to what has been said previously. Here, the shift is from the Dukes of Levis-Mirepoix to "the people in magazines and on television" who also have "some reason" for being who they are and looking how they look. Pinsky offers specific examples of how even the most intricate details have a "history" that brought them to where they are today. From the "angle of [the celebrities'] furniture" and "every nuance of their doors" to the "shapes of their eyebrows and shirts," each feature has a reason for being the way it

is. Note that the poet says some reason, suggesting an uncertainty as to what it really is.

Lines 13-14

Line 13 continues the idea of each thing having its own "history / Or purpose" and then describes those purposes as "arcane," or mysterious, "as the remote Jewishness of those far Dukes," leading the poem back to the subject of lines 4-8. Perhaps the twists and turns of the poem so far are summed up best in the phrase "great half-crazy tune," which also lends itself well to the irony that infuses the entire work, including the title. The song of reasons□logic, rationale, explanation, and so forth□is characterized as half-crazy□illogical, nonsensical, and just plain silly. The obvious contradiction here is a strong hint that beginning this poem with the word "Because" was only playful deception because real reasons are hard to come by. One other point to note about line 14 is the use of the word "tune" again, tying Pinsky's "song" to the "little tune" of "Come Back to Sorrento." While the latter is described as "little," the poet calls his own "great."

Lines 15-19

The next shift in the poem is to Pinsky's daughter who "has learned to read" and especially enjoys the newspaper's "The Question Man" column, a person-in-the-street type of article in which normal, everyday people reveal personal favorites or experiences. Typical inane questions concern one's "Most Romantic Moment," "Family Hero," and "Worst Vacation," but Pinsky also tosses in a topic that most current newspaper editors would likely find offensive or, at least, politically incorrect. Asking for one's "Favorite Ethnic Group" may not be realistic today, but the subject does connect to the earlier dubious blending of Jewish dukes descended "from the family of the Virgin Mary." Pinsky's daughter also enjoys the photographs of the column's people "next to their answers," and line 19 ends by emphasizing her pleasure in the simple, routine article: "She likes it."

Lines 20-21

These two lines present a possible reason that the little girl finds "The Question Man" column so attractive. There is something comforting about finding "exact forms" in an "ordinary" morning, something "indomitable," or unconquerable, about the charm of expected, routine events, even if it is something as common as "the names and occupations" of the people featured in the newspaper. This is another irony in the poem, considering that its motley selection of topics and the blending of them into a stream of quirky connections represent anything but "exact forms."

Lines 22-23

These lines reinforce the idea of the goodness of simple routine, as Pinsky compares his daughter's fascination with an uncomplicated news article to a "bedtime story in reverse." Most children's stories involve fanciful and fabulous accounts of unusual characters and places, but his daughter is content with the "unfabulous" Question Man, as well as the unfabulous "day that she enters out into," happy to greet it in her routine manner, "businesslike as a dog / That trots down the street."

Lines 24-26

The final lines of the poem string together images that glide from one to another like phantasmagoric scenes in a dream. A dog trots down the street, the street becomes "sunny pavement, plane trees . . . a flow of cars" that become "throaty music," returning the poem to the song allusion that began it. All these images, as the last line claims, are "Like the animal shapes that sing at the gates of sleep"□shapes that come and go, fade in and fade out, with no reason that is readily evident.

Themes

Reasons and Nonsense

Pinsky chose the title of this poem for a reason, but what is it? Does the "Song of Reasons" really offer any? If not, why not? These questions may seem as jumbled and nonsensical as some readers find the poem itself, but sorting through them leads to the discovery of an important theme in the work— how reasons and nonsense are sometimes hard to distinguish from one another and how they often work together in spite of apparent contradictions. Most writers choose their titles carefully, some trying to make them alluring in order to attract readers and others simply naming a piece after whatever the subject actually is. There is no reason to suspect that Pinsky was any less careful in titling this poem, and its name is sober enough and easy enough to accept as appropriate for what the work is about. But what it is *about* is not so easy.

Themes are not meant to confuse, but to stimulate thought, and "Song of Reasons" is a good stimulator. Take a close look at its supposed reasons, from the obvious to the not so obvious. It begins with the simple premise that a song's pitch "comes back higher" *because* of a change in key midway through it. This cause-and-effect sequence is so blatant that it seems hardly worth noting. In the next scenario, a family of noble dukes "are permitted to ride horseback / Into the Cathedral of Notre Dame" *because* they "killed heretics in Languedoc seven centuries ago." This reason is a bit murkier and made even more so by the dukes' claim to be "somewhat Jewish," a reason, in those days, that they would *not* be in Notre Dame. Next, "the people in magazines and on television" also have reasons for being the way they are, but this time Pinsky does not identify any. Instead, he leaves them "arcane" and "remote," offering neither a sensible nor nonsensical explanation. In the final scenario, Pinsky's daughter likes reading "The Question Man" in the newspaper because there is comfort in its routine simplicity, much like the routine simplicity of her normal day. The reasoning here makes sense, but it is not as straightforward as a song changing pitch. Neither is it as convoluted as Jewish dukes in Notre Dame claiming "Collateral descent from the family of the Virgin Mary." While all these images may take some time and effort to sort through, in the end, they provide a good look at the relationship between seemingly opposite properties—opposites that often work together to create a diversified whole.

Making Connections

A second important theme in this poem is the desire to make connections between unlike events— large and small, past and present, cosmic and personal. Pinsky uses the techniques of blending images into one another and forcing common bonds among odd companions to accomplish his goal. Start to finish, a motley assortment of people, places, and things march through the poem to the same beat: an old opera tune, an even older French family, television and magazine personalities, the poet's own daughter, a newspaper article, a dog, a city street, and, finally, dream images. Much of

Pinsky's work explores the relationship between the history of the world and the history of the individual, drawing from each the patterns of movement that eventually converge. The Dukes of Levis- Mirepoix, the Cathedral of Notre Dame, and the region of Languedoc all share a significance in the larger realm that moves forward into the personal realm of a child's fascination with ordinary people in the newspaper. A concrete connection is unnecessary when the deeper bond is made through a shared "indomitable charm," at once both satisfying and inexplicable. The "change of key midway in 'Come Back to Sorrento'" moves forward into the "animal shapes that sing at the gates of sleep," just as the "remote Jewishness of those far Dukes" shares its history with present-day television celebrities, both possessing "purpose[s] arcane."

The "businesslike" dog connects to the street, which connects to its pavement, which connects to the traffic that travels on it. The idea here is that the world is made up of crossing paths—of large and small histories, people and things that do not exist in isolation, but, in fact, share the inexact, "throaty music" of the universe.

Style

Checking a few dictionaries for the word *discursive,* one may find such definitions as rambling, covering a wide range of subjects, or moving from topic to topic without order. But most dictionaries also include a secondary definition, noting that discursive talk or thought is marked by analytical reasoning, or proceeding to a conclusion through reason. Both these meanings apply to Pinsky's "Song of Reasons." A more common style, the *lyric,* also pertains to this poem, although it may not be apparent until over halfway through. Simply put, a lyric expresses subjective thoughts and feelings, which Pinsky works his way into at line 15, when the topic suddenly switches to his daughter.

Obviously, "Song of Reasons" covers a wide range of topics—from Italian music, French history, and Judaism, to TV stars, a child reading the newspaper, and a city street. Knowing only that, one could assume the poem must ramble incoherently, and, even after reading it, some would say that that is a valid assumption. But the second meaning of the word "discursive" plays a more important role in the poem's style—for Pinsky uses analytical reasoning and a careful blending of diverse subjects to reach a unified conclusion. Rambling, yes, but with a purpose. The movement from seeming incoherence into reasonable development is accompanied by the movement into poetic lyricism, as well. The topic first appears fairly objective with an account of historical events and comments on the irony of religion and the features of remote television and magazine personalities. But when Pinsky states, "A child has learned to read," the poem becomes more subjective and expressive of his personal take on events—whether those events are as close by as his daughter's daily routine or as distant as the Dukes of Levis-Mirepoix.

Historical Context

Pinsky's exploration of the interplay between public and private history and the connection of both to present-day life is well-documented. A wellknown comment on the state of affairs within his own country□and within his own life□appears in his 1979 publication of a book-length poem called *An Explanation of America* . In this book, he divides the country into three main areas as indicated by the section titles: "Its Many Fragments," "Its Great Emptiness," and "Its Everlasting Possibility."

When *History of My Heart* appeared five years later, the majority of its poems reflected the culture and society of the late 1970s and early 1980s, in which Pinsky was writing. America was still a nation of contradictions, still a fragmented land of both great emptiness and everlasting possibility.

The most dominant American figure of the 1980s was Ronald Reagan, president for nearly the entire decade and symbol of the country's retreat to conservatism after the liberal, anything-goes 1960s and 1970s. But if Reagan embodied the traditional values and old-fashioned politics of rightwing fundamentalists, he did so in spite of the obvious contradictions that racked both sides of the conservative/liberal divide. Some say his training as an actor carried over into his performance as president, which made him one of the most popular of recent presidents, even though many of his policies were economically and socially devastating to some groups. With Reagan's supply-side economics, society saw its largest transfer in history of wealth from the middle class to the wealthy. The phrase "the rich get richer" was given new life, as the restructuring of tax codes allowed the wellto- do more disposable wealth, and Wall Street responded with one of the greatest bull markets ever.

On the surface, America *looked* healthy and prosperous, but in reality less than 1 percent of workers were doing extremely well, and some faltered to new depths of poverty and despair that rivaled that often found in developing nations. While the wealthy took advantage of the latest medical technology, such as laser surgery, gene therapy, and artificial insemination, skyrocketing medical costs left even middle-class Americans without basic health benefits and retirement security. Although the American dream of home ownership and a comfortable living was still at least superficially alive in the 1980s, in reality, the number of homeless people grew an estimated 25 percent per year, and school-age children living in the streets turned to violence and drugs in record numbers. While many Americans held staunch beliefs about the rights of citizens to bear arms, in reality, hand gun sales, both legal and illegal, boomed, resulting in the United States having the highest incarceration rate in the world.

The cultural arts in the 1980s also experienced much fragmentation and contradiction, with both blurred lines and great rifts between what some called pornography and some called art, what some said was freedom of speech and others decried as anti-American and anti-God behavior. The idea of *freedom* in a democratic society is held dear by all citizens who believe in it, but what freedom means is not agreed on by all. Affirmative action, gay rights, and feminism were already a part of the culture by 1980, but artists of

the decade such as Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Robert Mapplethorpe took dead aim at religious and political fundamentalists with art addressing such issues as the AIDS epidemic, abortion, homosexuality, and hero-bashing in a male-dominated society. As a response, conservatives rallied to denounce public funding of the arts, and museums and arts councils across the country felt a serious blow. These titfor- tat moves, of course, did not originate in the 1980s, nor did they end in 1990, but the decade of Reaganomics and old-fashioned values was the perfect setting for escalating them. All the while, even the most conservative right-winger and the most liberal left-winger would both claim the title of "true American," and, ironically, both would be correct. In the same vein, Pinsky's land of fragments and great emptiness is an accurate description□ and so is the notion of everlasting possibility.

Critical Overview

Pinsky's election to the post of U.S. Poet Laureate in 1997 is a testament in and of itself to his critical reception. His work has been well received— from his first published collection, *Sadness and Happiness* in 1975, through his most recent work, but mostly by other established poets and scholars in the field. While readers in general may find his style somewhat jumbled and his subjects too erudite, these are the same aspects of his work that well-seasoned critics find so appealing. In a review for *The Hollins Critic* titled "Proving Irony by Comparison: The Poetry of Robert Pinsky," which came out shortly after the publication of *History of My Heart,* critic Charles Molesworth says Pinsky "manages to be personal without being confessional, sophisticated without being glib, and knowledgeable without being world-weary or cutely playful." About *History of My Heart,* Molesworth goes on to say that Pinsky's "poetic language has many of the best features of good prose, as its connections and complexities flow from a straightforward approach to his subjects." Ten years later, in an article for *Salmagundi,* called "Robert Pinsky and the Language of Our Time," critic James Longenbach says, "Pinsky's is a poetry of acknowledgement, and its power grows from his deep awareness—sometimes wariness, sometimes worship— of the literary linguistic, and the historical precedents that continue to design his life even as he writes today." Logenbach's notion that Pinsky writes in the "language of our time" may befuddle some readers who would say just the opposite is true. Whatever one's opinion, however, no one can deny Pinsky's success as one of America's most highly regarded contemporary poets.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill examines Pinsky as both a scholar's poet and a general reader's poet, focusing on his declared determination to be both.

When Pinsky handed over the title of United States Poet Laureate to his successor, Stanley Kunitz, in 2000, Pinsky was the first Poet Laureate to have held the position for three consecutive years. While Kunitz was a couple of generations older than Pinsky, his own successor to the post, Billy Collins, the current U.S. Poet Laureate, is a direct contemporary of Pinsky's. Both have long-term ties to the northeastern area of the country, as Pinsky was born in New Jersey in 1940 and now teaches in Boston, and Collins was born in New York in 1941 and still lives and teaches in New York. Both poets also write critical material, and both draw from poetic themes based on popular American culture, mixed with personal commentary and political pitches. So why has Collins enjoyed an audience of *both* general readers and literary scholars, while Pinsky is critically acclaimed but stands accused of going over the heads of average poetry readers? Perhaps it is more a matter of style than erudition□more a form of presentation than of addressing different subjects. Pinsky himself does not aspire to be too lofty for a popular audience and makes that intention clear in an interview with critic Harry Thomas and others, published in *TriQuarterly* in 1994. When asked about the role of history and culture in the language he uses, Pinsky says, "I would like to speak and write a language that does not deny either my lower-middle-class childhood or all the books I've read." The question, then, is whether a poem like "Song of Reasons" reflects more his humble beginnings or his eventual education and scholarship.

One unfortunate aspect of this poem is simply its layout. The difficult material comes first, setting up a kind of language roadblock to the rest of the poem for readers who are too turned off by its beginning to make it to the end. Understandably, not many students today□or members of the general public, for that matter□have ever heard of a little Italian opera song called "Come Back to Sorrento." That in itself should not preclude Pinsky's use of it in a poem, but he does not spend enough time with the "little tune" to offer even a clue as to its meaning or significance in this part of the poem. Instead, his subject quickly switches to the just-as-obscure topic "the Dukes of Levis- Mirepoix." Again, it is safe to assume that the average student, including those majoring in history, and the average person on the street, are not familiar with this royal family nor with a place called "Languedoc," which figures into the Levis- Mirepoix history for at least seven centuries. Readers who make it this far into the poem, and are in doubt that what they are reading makes any sense whatsoever, have their suspicions confirmed when the subject switches yet again to an even more convoluted notion. Now Pinsky introduces religion into the mix, though even that is not as simple as it seems. Are the dukes Christians or Jews or both? Why are they riding horses "[i]nto the Cathedral of Notre Dame?" More importantly, what difference does it make? These questions are not easy for anyone to answer, particularly someone who has picked up this poem to

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read for pleasure or for a bit of personal enlightenment. It is hard to be enlightened when the words themselves leave one completely in the dark.

In the *TriQuarterly* interview, Pinsky is asked to talk more about his essay titled "Responsibilities of the Poet," particularly his notion about a poet's needing to "transform" a subject for the reader. His response is, in part, "Bad art does what you expect. To me, it's not truly a poem if it merely says what most intelligent, well-meaning people would say. . . . I don't mean to say that one is on a quest simply for novelty. . . . Your job [as a poet] is to do something that the reader didn't already have." What Pinsky means is that tossing random, odd words onto a page *simply for the sake of randomness and oddity* does not make a good poem, or, for that matter, any kind of poem. However, trying to get a message across□even a commonplace or unremarkable message□in a fresh, creative manner, using strange images or unusual language, should be the goal of the poet. Pinsky demonstrates his point with a non-poetic example, comparing the plot and characters of the renowned Russian novel *Anna Karenina* to those of modern-day soap operas. What gives the book a much "loftier reputation" than the TV shows is that its author, Leo Tolstoy, had a "powerful individual imagination" and was "a great, particular transformer" of language. His subjects may be as common as love affairs, money, power, adultery, and other such stuff commonly seen in soap operas, but his presentation of these subjects turns them into art. Pinsky's intention is to do the same with his poetry.

In "Song of Reasons," Pinsky uses a mixture of both odd and commonplace subjects and addresses them with a blend of both scholarly and humble language. Placing the more easily understood images in the latter half of the poem seems almost an attempt to clarify, if not excuse, the more difficult beginning. From the far reaches of European history and ancestral religions, the topic narrows to the daily routine of a little girl reading her favorite column in the newspaper. The shift implies that even the more scholarly musings can share a space alongside the simple delights of a child and that both have "reasons" worthy of seeking out. No thought and no behavior operates solely in isolation but, rather, evolves, blends, shifts, and *becomes* something else. This is how "Song of Reasons" can move so effortlessly from a song to a noble family, from the Cathedral of Notre Dame to Languedoc, from the Virgin Mary to "the people in magazines and on television," and from the "great half-crazy tune" of itself to its author's daughter reading "The Question Man." Attempting to understand one notion independent of any other is a common mistake that readers make. Pinsky's motive, as well as his result, is based on connections□the past with the present, the remote with the familiar, the universal with the personal, and, yes, his lower-middle-class childhood with all the books he's read.

The answer to the question posed earlier□ whether this poem reflects the poet's humble beginnings or his eventual education and scholarship□ is, simply, it does both. While it may take a well-educated, highly skilled poet to successfully work Italian opera, French history, Judaism, and Christianity into his poem, it takes only a man of simple pleasures and fatherly love to write: "A child has learned to read, and each morning before leaving / For school she likes to be helped through The Question Man / In the daily paper." Now the reader can breathe a sigh of relief. Now, one can say, "I get that." This

sentiment is perfectly understandable, but it should not be thought of as a reason to dismiss the poem's more challenging parts. Instead, note how *all* its parts complement one another, helped by the smooth transitions from topic to topic, even when such shifts would seem to necessitate awkward leaps and confusing blends. Pinsky rolls right along as though the subjects just naturally go together. In the *TriQuarterly* article, he talks about written works that contain things "both recognized and strange" and goes on to say that "Somewhere in that recognition and strangeness lies your job as an artist." But why would a poet feel the need to go to such lengths—to force together such odd components and make them seem natural—when he would probably have a greater general audience if he did not? Is there an advantage?

Pinsky would likely say yes. Granted, he runs the risk of turning some readers off by mixing so many "recognized" images and events with so many "strange" ones, but his work has proven over and over that the same technique is both intellectually stimulating and rewarding for those who pursue its quirky connections to the end. Sometimes a reader may be left with only a *feeling* of understanding the poem's message, as opposed to having any real cognitive comprehension of it. And that's okay. In some cases, it is even preferable to respond with emotion over intellect, as too much analysis and too much demand for clarity can rob one of a good chance just to consider something different. "Song of Reasons" is a good example. Even if a reader never understands what "Come back to Sorrento" has to do with anything else in the poem, or who the "Dukes of Levis-Mirepoix" were and whether they were Jewish or not, one can still appreciate the movement of the poem—its curves and connections and constant flow. A grasp of what it all means may come later, but, meanwhile, there is much to be said about a poem whose scholarly parts may furrow the brow but whose humble parts can bring a smile of familiar recognition. **Source:** Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Song of Reasons," in *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Goldensohn hails Pinsky as "one of the most sophisticated technicians of his generation and perhaps one of its finest poets," examining the range of Pinsky's reach into the larger literary culture through his work in poetry and prose.

If there is a consistent ground rule for Robert Pinsky's poems, early to late, it is that apparent simplicity is the invitation to troubling complexity. It is an attractive movement of the mind, finding exceptions to simple rules, unexpected textures to smooth surfaces, division and ambivalence to simple feelings. And the strategies are abundance, surprise, and variations on a theme. In "Poem about People," the first poem in his first book, *Sadness and Happiness,* what begins as genial and compassionate people watching□

Balding young men in work shoes
And green work pants, beer belly
And white T-shirt, the porky walk
Back to the truck, polite; possible
To feel briefly like Jesus,
A gust of diffuse tenderness . . .
□turns to a friend's painful divorce and then to a movie clip that in turn leads to a burning vision of desperate personal shame□
. . . the sensitive
Young Jewish soldier nearly drowns
Trying to rescue the thrashing
Anti-semitic bully, swimming across
The river raked by nazi fire,
The awful part is the part truth:
Hate my whole kind, but me,
Love me for myself.

It is not a predictable sequence. The most ambitious poems in the book are meditative sequences□"Tennis," the title poem "Sadness and Happiness," and "Essay on Psychiatrists"□that are in the form of theme and variations. The last includes comic social scenes, satire, a discussion of Pentheus and Dionysus as psychiatrists, and Yvor Winter's defense of madness in poets, and it concludes that we are all psychiatrists fumbling our way between stars. It is a poem designed to make psychiatrists uneasy, being itself uneasy about their claims to power over the secret life. Predictably, psychiatrists might say that jealousy for their mastery of the sexual secret underlies the poem. *An Explanation of America* is just that. Its classical antecedent is not the Juvenal-Johnson-Lowell "Vanity of Human Wishes" but rather Horace's Epistle I, xvi, written from his Sabine farm, which Pinsky translates as part of his text. It is philosophical discourse, not satire. The poem is addressed to his oldest daughter, much of it quite genuinely so, for the mode of address is not merely a trope in some of the poem's very challenging passages.

The daughter is often a real presence in the poem and appears to be too iconoclastic, intelligent, and searching to be satisfied with easy answers. She is a critic of "that tyrant and sycophantic lout, the Majority," and the speaker says,

. . . Political Science bores you,
You prefer the truth, and with a Jesuit firmness
Return to your slogan: "Voting *is not fair* ."

A sense of the poem's complexity and uneasiness of feeling is implicit in the following list:

I want for you to see the things I see
And more, Colonial Diners, Disney, films
Of concentration camps, the napalmed child
Trotting through famous news film in her diaper
And tattered flaps of skin, *Deep Throat,* the rest.

This is not an American free of cruelty, nor with the last entry is the monologue to the daughter easy about domesticated sexuality. The explanation is not tidy or even terribly analytic. It is impressionistic, rather, and concludes with a sense of America as dreamlike□"So large, and strangely broken, and unforseen."

Pinsky's commitment to discursive poetry is seen in his next book, *History of My Heart,* in which he adopts his method defiantly in the face of the dominant approach to his subject, which is the shaping of his feelings. Instead of confession or epiphanies of the atomistic ego or intimations of moral instructions that thwart childhood narcissism, Pinsky offers explanations that are complex, ironic, and allusive. In the title poem of the volume history becomes family mythmaking in his mother's fantasy of meeting Fats Waller, which was drawn from a movie, in the way language creates experience in an account of a first sexual tryst ("To see eyes melting so I could think *This is it, / They're melting!* "), and in a cluster of images we are presented with the overarching erotic revery that

Makes the one who feels seem beautiful to the beholder
Witnessing the idea of the giving of desire□nothing
more
wanted
Than the little singing notes of wanting□the heart
Yearning further into giving itself into the air, breath
Strained into song emptying the golden bell it
comes from,
The pure source altogether out and away.

It should be clear that the explanatory and discursive mode has not eliminated lyricism. It has in fact restored to the lyric the modes of discourse that have been rare in the twentieth century. The strategy is continued in the remainder of the book. In "The Unseen," set in a tour of a concentration camp, Pinsky addresses the absent God:

O discredited Lord of Hosts, your servant gapes
Obediently to swallow various doings of us, the most
Capable of all your former creatures□we have no
shape,
We are poured out like water, but still
We try to take in what won't be turned from in despair.

This is not cold exposition but rather intelligent discourse about the heart's history in history. In his poem "The Cold" Pinsky retrieves this fashionable, exhausted word and moves the philosophical cold outdoors as weather, where it belongs:

Or like me, working in a room alone,
Watching out from a window . . .
. . . not having been out in hours
I come up close idly to feel the cold,
Forgetting for a minute what I was doing.

The Want Bone refers not a phallic image but to an oral one, the dried mouth bones of a shark, an emblem of its desire to live. It is death longing for life and love, food and family. In the poems of this book pastiche and assemblage have joined the technique of variations on a theme to produce deliberate derangement of the apparent subjects and greater tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces. We find an explicit celebration and savoring of the richness of words and of their anarchic history. There is more play with language than in previous books, and Pinsky has adapted stories of Jesus' childhood from the Apocrypha and embroidered the story of the prophet Daniel. In a prose section Jesus, in the form of a ciclogriff, befriends Isolde to learn about love. Tristan is a violent bard, however, and Jesus cannot save Tristan or Isolde, who is boundlessly committed to him. We see it coming, but the charm is in the telling. This is the book of a poet approaching fifty who is determined to expand his art. Pinsky maintains his sense of the well-shaped line, stanza, and poem. He strays far from the iambic but never entirely moves out of its range. His rhymes, typically off-rhymes, are inventive and formal without being insistent. The volume shows him to be one of the most sophisticated technicians of his generation and perhaps one of its finest poets.

The new poems in *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems 1966-1996* extend his mastery, and the book contains poems that may well become American classics. Particularly effective is "Avenue," a poem central to a sequence about cities, and an elegy for Elliot Gilbert called "Impossible to Tell," which is built around two jokes.

This is a new and daring type of elegy, and I like to imagine the author of "Lycidas" being thrilled by its rightness. The new poems in the volume are not a random assortment. In a note to "Avenue," with reference to an explanation of Yom Kippur as the day of "at-one-ment," Pinsky says, "All, one: a play of unity and diversity that in turn makes me think of the fragmented, plural American city, held together visibly by words, by the signs and spoken or sung syllables of its streets, where all our 'they' is somehow 'one.'" This motif is woven throughout the new poems, many of which deal with the city as the figure for the multiplicity and "numerousness" of the soul. It is the interwoven web

of our humanity in which the matrix of Charlie Parker, Pushkin, Sax (the inventor of the instrument), and the sax-playing Pinsky is united in "Ginza Samba." Pinsky's vision (and is it right to speak of it using this term) has a lot of the philosophical playfulness of Borges mixed with the air of the historical menace of Milosz.

Pinsky includes "The Rhyme of Reb Nachman," a poem composed for a Halloween celebration, among his selection of translations and a poem by Milosz, "Incantation," among his own poems. The latter is explained, at least in part, by the fact that his translation of "The World" was rejected by Milosz as not being sufficiently subordinated to the Polish, as being an English poem in its own right. It is an odd situation but entirely appropriate to the overlapping boundaries Pinsky's new work celebrates.

Like all of his previous books, *Jersey Rain* reflects Pinsky's determination to expand his art. The move in this case is toward a high style, a solemnity, a high seriousness in the Arnoldian sense. It was not that Pinsky did not demonstrate this quality before, but earlier it was accompanied by a subversive metaphysical wit, for example, the jokes in his elegies and his sly satirical flashes. Such qualities are rarer in this book. The move is similar to what is seen in a number of important American writers, for example, Eliot, Faulkner, William Carlos Williams, and Hemingway, late in their careers. The poems are still rooted in Pinsky's vernacular strength that flourishes in delicate tension with his formality, which is itself subtle and not selfassertive. For this reason it can be missed by young, infatuated readers, just as they may not notice the loosened formality of Yeats, Bishop, Lowell, or Stevens. Consider the lines that conclude "Autumn Quartet," a birthday poem:

Among the epic bravos, a civic man. The centaurs showed him truth in fabulation, In every living city the haunted ruin. The reach is impressive, seeing Odysseus as artist, explorer, and destroyer, the latter usually reserved for Achilles. And Odysseus takes his place in a row of heroes that include Lincoln, Washington, Leopold Bloom, and Jackie Robinson. "Ode to Meaning" is an elegy with no jokes. Its reach is straightforwardly metaphysical, and its tone and music are elevated. The poem begins with□

Dire one and desired one,
Savior and sentencer
□and concludes with□
If I
Dare to disparage
Your harp of shadows I taste
Wormwood and motor oil, I pour
Ashes on my head. You are the wound. You
Be the medicine.

The meaning invoked here has become deeply interwoven with death and its meaning. The poem is very different from the improvisational and digressive prose piece "An Alphabet of My Dead," one of the few works in the collection that points backward toward Pinsky's earlier work. It is nostalgic and full of a sense of real loss, but it lacks

the grief-driven desperation for meaning of the "Ode to Meaning." It is this latter quality that characterizes the book.

Pinsky's translation of *The Inferno of Dante* is the most idiomatic and vigorous adaptation of terza rima in English. His strategy of using consonantal rhyme in place of exact rhyme has enabled him to avoid much of the artificiality of earlier translations and to approximate Dante's famous compression. In fact, he is so successful that Dante's tercets seldom last three lines in Pinsky's English, and the direct link in Italian between syntax and stanza structure is abandoned. Unlike the original, almost all of Pinsky's tercets are enjambed.

Among Pinsky's other books is *The Sounds of Poetry,* a guide to prosody for students that focuses on accents and sound patterns without scansion or the customary classifications of accentual-syllabic poetry. The starting point is vocal reality rather than traditional prosody, although a discussion of meter and the sounds it explains runs throughout. The books restricted, however, and gives way to a nontechnical empirical approach. In effect, Pinsky is paraphrasing technical prosody for technophobes at the same time that his sustained attention to sound reveals patterns that were not attended to before. Someone looking for connections between Pinsky and his graduate school mentor, the important and charismatic Yvor Winters, would strain to find them. Pinsky is a poet-critic, and the priority of poetry is important. Early in his career he lost Winters's tone of fastidious, moralistic criticism that did not suffer opposition gladly, and he has restored Winters in the long poem "Essay on Psychiatrists," what survives of the influence in Pinsky's poetry is a philosophical coldness and certitude in only a few early poems. Pinsky's criticism likewise has grown free of Winters's influence. It is urbane and international and lacks the odor of orthodoxy.

Pinsky has taken his elevation to the poet laureateship of the United States with deep seriousness, and he has taken on the task of establishing a record of the "best-loved poems" of the American people, of a fluid and dynamic vernacular canon. His approach is to exclude the customary canon shapers, the poets and scholars, in order to discover a popular, demotic consensus. This is part of a somewhat quixotic overall project of recovering or defining the historical memory of a pluralist culture of improvised traditions, one that is separable from the commercial project of pop culture. In addition, Pinsky's presence on the Public Broadcasting System's *Newshour* every week has made poetry present to a wide audience.

Source: Barry Goldensohn, "Pinsky, Robert (Neal)," in *Contemporary Poets,* 7th ed., edited by Thomas Riggs, St. James Press, 2001, pp. 951-54.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay and interview with the poet, Suarez discusses the position of Poet Laureate and Pinsky's "Favorite Poem Project."

In his second term as poet laureate of the United States, Robert Pinsky expanded "The Favorite Poem Project," which he had started the previous year. Pinsky first thought the project would include 100 people, some of them well known but most of them coming from a cross section of the American public. Individuals would be audio- and videotaped reading their favorite poems, with the project becoming part of the bicentennial celebration of the Library of Congress. The program has ballooned into Pinsky's major undertaking as laureate. Pinsky now plans to choose 1,200 people to read their favorite poems on audio- and videotape. The two hundred video recordings are to represent the nation's bicentennial in the year 2000, and the one thousand audio tapes are to commemorate the millennium. Pinsky feels that the recordings will form "a record, at the end of the century, of what we choose, and what we do with our voices and faces, when asked to say aloud a poem that we love."

In contrast to the Library's Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature, Pinsky's project is not centered on professional poets. Pinsky claims that people's bodies instinctively react when reading a poem aloud. The act of reading the poem "engages the mind and the body in a genetically primary sensation that involves a column of air in the trunk and the production of syllables. The sensation causes comfort and alertness. Thus the individual body, no necessarily even the individual artist, can be a medium for art." He is "convinced that this video and audio record of many Americans reading aloud poems they love will have a lot of value for our country: as a record of where we stand, as a model for education in the future, and as testimony to the possibly neglected state of the culture we already have."

The poet laureate is appointed by the librarian of Congress annually, with the term running from October to May. The position□which was called consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress until 1986□was founded in 1936, when Archer M. Huntington endowed the Chair of Poetry at the Library of Congress. Archibald MacLeish, who then served as librarian of Congress, made the consultant a yearly appointment, with the provision that it was possible to serve more than one term. As laureate, Pinsky receives a $35,000 annual stipend. The laureateship is intended to provide the appointee with the freedom to create a special project.

The previous laureate, Robert Hass, created the "Watershed" conference, uniting novelists, poets, and storytellers to speak about the relationship between writing, community, and nature. James Dickey videotaped noted poets reading their work. Joseph Brodsky championed placing poetry in hotels, supermarkets, and airports. Gwendolyn Brooks started poetry workshops for elementary school children.

The laureate also gives a reading of his or her verse and presents an annual lecture, which the library publishes. Through the annual reading series, laureates collectively

have brought more than two thousand writers to read for the Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature. In 1997 Pinsky delivered a lecture titled "On Digital Culture and the Individual Soul" at the library. For his inaugural lecture, which was held in the Montpelier Room on 9 October, Pinsky claimed that "The first and main thing about digital culture is that it is a part of history. It smells of us. It is human. We made it. It is an outcome." He wants to approach the "new cultural developments through the lens of poetry," stressing that the "computer is an extension of poetry. Poetry is a technique developed by this animal, the human□a fairly useless animal. It has no claws, no hide, no real teeth and it doesn't run fast, but it is clever and it looks around a lot. For survival it developed forms of communication evolved for the purposes of memory, for the effective storage of important information and the transmission of that information accurately and effectively from one person to that person's peers."

Pinsky, who was the poetry editor for *The New Republic* in the 1980s, currently edits poetry for *Slate,* a weekly Internet magazine. He believes that computers can convey information much as storytelling bards once did through poems. Computers can convey mass art and culture, because "an image of Michael Jackson singing with brilliant cinematography is reproduced and duplicated tens of thousands of times and it can spread all over the globe very rapidly . . . The medium for mass art is by its nature highly duplicable. I do not deplore or applaud it, but I am trying to understand it. My idea of body piercing is that it is not a revolt against parents, it is a revolt against one's own childhood, the Electra winky-gahinky action figure. American 12-and-13-year-olds hunger for something that's no likely to be in the Sears Roebuck catalog. The individual soul loves mass art but we become jaded. Sometimes I just turn off the TV and reach for a copy of *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* ." He relishes the opportunity to deliver his message because "It is appropriate for a poet to be attached to a place of memory because poetry is an ancient way of enhancing memory, a means that predates writing. . . . The Library of Congress is the greatest house of memory in the world. There is more human striving recorded and cataloged in this institution than there has ever been anywhere."

A professor of creative writing at Boston University, Pinsky was awarded the Leonore Marshall Prize in 1997 for *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems, 1966-1996* . His other volumes of verse include *Sadness and Happiness* (1975), *An Explanation of America* (1979), *History of My Heart* (1984), and *The Want Bone* (1990). The Academy of American Poets gave Pinsky's verse translation *Inferno of Dante* (1994) the Harold Morton Landon Translation Award, and in 1996 he received the Poetry Society of America's Shelly Memorial Award. His essays are collected in *Landor's Poetry* (1968), *The Situation of Poetry* (1977), and *Poetry of the World* (1988). His new book is *A Brief Guide to the Sounds of Poetry* (1998).

On 26 June 1998 I met with Pinsky in his suite of offices at the Library of Congress, where we discussed his recent work:

Suarez: Your essay "Poetry and the World" addresses poems that deal with the court, things having to do with the world. But in that essay worldly things imply the metaphysical.

Pinsky: I was reacting to the weary, worn-out idea of poetry and politics. I was trying to come at the same material in a different way. And one of the ways you would define the distinction between the worldly and the political is that the worldly encompasses and implies the metaphysical realm as well as the realm of interaction of power and people.

Suarez: How does this operate within your own poetry?

Pinsky: To put it as simply as possible, for a long time I have tried to look around me. At a certain point early in my career, I realized I had actually made more than one attempt at writing about the personal things that had concerned me from my childhood on. Introspection is an important part of a work of art for me. But my next ambition as an artist was to look around me and to try and think what things seemed important and manifest in my life and the lives of other people who had not yet made their ways into poems. So, I try to absorb what I think and see and feel a great deal that does not immediately remind me of something by Rimbaud, or Allen Ginsberg, or John Donne, but seems significant.

Suarez: How does this concept operate within recent poems of yours, such as "The City Dark," "Ginza Samba," and "Avenue"?

Pinsky: "Avenue" is an attempt to include details of retail, of the life of the agora. Very often the word "marketplace" is entirely pejorative, when in fact the marketplace or the agora is the common place where we come together and meet one another. And "Avenue" is an attempt to find a suitably flexible and complex way to see that marketplace, rather than sentimentalize it and ignore the capitalistic nature of it. I did not want to denounce it in a stock or stereotypical way, but rather try and approach it without egotism. The poem uses a lot of hovering pronouns, so it is not me on the avenue, but me trying to catch the life of the avenue.

"Ginza Samba" is horizontal in space. I suppose you can say it is vertical in time. It tries to look again at all the transactions between souls and the worldly historical world□enslavement, sale of a human being, abortion, marriage, mastery of a musical instrument□and see them in their ugliness and beauty and all the other qualities they have. 'The City Dark": is probably the most traditional of the three poems. It is an attempt to write something that does what those two poems do, but with more of the familiar rhetoric of a nature poem. I'm trying to look at the city as you would a mountain or a lake and to feel the bars, the glitter of the mica in the concrete pavement, and to feel the city the way you might feel natural beauty.

Suarez: You mention the hovering pronouns in "Avenue." Were you trying to interject a Whitmanian consciousness into the poem?

Pinsky: I think that is a fair description of the poem. And, shifting rapidly amongst "he," "we," "I," and "you" was a way to get there by a different route, to see if you could discover a different reality by using a different path to get there.

Suarez: Why that particular decision?

Pinsky: It's hard to say. A lot of these thing are intuitive, but one gets impatient with structures: the structure of I do this or I did that. That is a familiar structure. It's like tapping the kaleidoscope. The kaleidoscope is quite interesting at one stage, but if you look at it a long time, sooner or later you want to tap it. Or if you play a tune at one temp. you might suddenly decide to try it in another temp. I believe that musicians sometimes just transpose the tune in order to make it sound a little different. Most musicians even improvise so the music can take a different form.

Suarez: Are you saying that the decision was a sonic one?

Pinsky: All decisions in poetry are sonic. All poetry comes through either the ear or the voice.

Suarez: As you are saying, all poetry is sonic, but at the same time, you are applying language which is rational in one way or another.

Pinsky: Yes, you are making a decision with your voice; you are writing with your voice. You're trying it out to see how it sounds. And you can rationalize music too. You can say the harmonic structure indicates that certain notes would be played in certain ways in order to remind you of where you are. You can rationalize all those things. You can look at a tune, or some great chorus in the tune, and make up a reason why there is a flat nine. There is a rational explanation for it all, but you have to try it out with your ear.

Suarez: What's the relationship between the sound and the subject matter?

Pinsky: In a word, the relationship between sound and subject matter is art. That is the whole art: managing to get the emotions to be expressed by the actual sounds you are making. Sometimes, sounds like "ah" are there, but in the right context, an "ah" or "oh" can mean quite a lot. It can sound stupid or it can sound great.

Source: Ernest Suarez, "Robert Pinsky Reappointed Poet Laureate," in *Dictionary of Literary BiographyYearbook: 1998,* Gale, 1999, pp. 292-94.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay excerpt, Molesworth explores how "Song of Reasons" is like a "nursery rhyme we sing a child to sleep by, covering up the narrative or logical holes with false totality and sweet song."

In his third and latest book of poetry, *History of My Heart,* Pinsky leaves the epistolary style and epic subject of *An Explanation of America* to return to the scale of the intimate lyric. In doing so he gives vent to an attitude that is in part confessional, but he never relinquishes the moral and public tones of the previous book. This mix of private and public stands apart from the work of most contemporary poets, and does so in part by reversing certain obvious and hidden features of American poetry. First, Pinsky willingly makes clear his wanting to connect the large patterns of fate with his homebound destinies. There are several poems here ("The Street," "Song of Reasons," "The Figured Wheel," chief among them) that juxtapose large historical or even cosmic figurations against Pinsky's personal feelings and memories. Many poets, of course, invoke or hint at larger patterns of significance, but do so glancingly or only with protective irony. On the other hand, what Pinsky conceals or at least underplays is the tendency of the lyric to fondle its own metaphoric energies, to become intoxicated with its own tropes. (This is especially true in American surrealist poetry.) Pinsky does sometimes make his trope quite obvious, as in "The Figured Wheel," but just as often his comparisons, analogies, inversions, and closures exhibit an understatedness that can make some of the lyrics seem off-hand, almost apologetic. To illustrate this latter point, let me quote the second two-thirds of "The Questions," a poem about the people the poet met, or rather half-met, in his father's office, where hearing-aids and glasses were dispensed and where the tissue and mystery of everyday social reality were first clumsily deciphered by the son. After recalling some of the customers in a detail that occasionally reads as if it came from prose fiction ("The tall overloud old man with a tilted, ironic smirk"), he suddenly realizes a depth of feeling for them, and his compassion is soon tested by a self-correcting irony. Notice, too, how the issue of abstract charity, in the form of the nun, settles in against the particular identities of a child's first roster of adults:

Why do I want them to be treated tenderly by the
world, now
Long after they must have slipped from it one way
or another,
While I was dawdling through school at that moment
or driving,
Reading, talking to Ellen. Why this new superfluous
caring?
I want for them not to have died in awful pain,
friendless.
Though many of the living are starving, I still pray
for these,
Dead, mostly anonymous (but Mr. Monks, Mrs.

Rose Vogel)
And barely remembered: that they had a little
extra, something
For pleasure, a good meal, a book or a decent television
set.
Of whom do I pray this rubbery, low-class charity?
I saw
An expert today, a nun□wearing a regular skirt
and blouse,
But the hood or headdress navy and white around
her plain
Probably Irish face, older than me by five or ten
years.
The Post Office clerk told her he couldn't break a
twenty
So she got change next door and came back to
send her package.
As I came out she was driving off□with an air, it
seemed to me,
Of annoying, demure good cheer, as if the reasonableness
Of change, mail, cars, clothes was a pleasure in
itself: veiled
And dumb like the girls I thought enjoyed the rules
too much
In grade school. She might have been a grade
school teacher;
But she reminded me of being there, aside from
that□as a name
And person there, a Mary or John who learns that
the janitor
Is Mr. Woodhouse; the principal is Mr. Ringleven;
the secretary
In the office is Mrs. Apostolacos; the bus driver is
Ray.

The "Mary or John" comes with the echo of the surname "Doe," so in a sense this is anyone's remembrance of those first names, the ones that originate our sense of social interaction and, in their later recall, summon the sources of affection and puzzlement, as we realize both how we cared for such people and how little of their adult identities were ever, in fact, revealed to us. I find this a very moving poem□more than a "touching" one□and for me the quiet casualness of the last five words has a surreptitious eloquence about it.

As for the other point, the connection of large patterns and personal feelings, this is well displayed in "The Street," which begins with a description, half mythical, half historical, of the street through which the funeral procession of the Emperor's child is conducted. From this we move to Pinsky's childhood street, "Rockwell Avenue," where he watched

as his neighbors all rode "the vegetable wave of the street / From the John Flock Mortuary Home / Down to the river." Here there's one incident singled out, as a betrayed husband throws his shoe at the adulterer's car being driven away with the wife inside. Somebody returns the shoe to the man: But the man had too much dignity To put it back on,

So he held it and stood crying in the street:
"He's breaking up my home," he said,
"The son of a bitch
Bastard is breaking up my home." The street
Rose undulant in pavement-breaking coils
And the man rode it
Still holding his shoe and stiffly upright
Like a trick rider in the circus parade
That came down the street
Each August.

Here the simile leads us into an ironic bathos drawn from popular culture. But we recall the pomp of the Emperor burying his dead child, and so we see the husband between two perspectives, one ironic, one compassionate. Of course there is irony in the pomp of the Emperor which we are likely to see as misplaced and melodramatically excessive ("Slaves throw petals on the roadway"), but Pinsky gives the husband his own dignity, however tattered and helpless, as he is caught in a public display not of his own making. But the poet makes the most of it. The personal scale of grief is measured, proven by, the juxtaposition with the public, "state" ceremony, and there is dignity and fatuity in both. The metaphor in the poem works on the surface by equating the two streets, but of course it is also the grief of the two men and the mechanics of emotional display that are truly the poem's metaphoric center. In a sense, this metaphoric transformation is hidden (or perhaps completely transparent), so the poem reads in part like a fairytale, in part like a story by, say, Ann Beattie. But it combines the richness of each into a blend of its own, a blend that welcomes the comparison of large, abstract notions of grief with specific instances of it. Co-incidentally, the poem reminds me of Randall Jarrell's "Nestus Gurley," where the everyday and the world-historical are brought into a juxtaposition at once ironic and compassionate.

I don't mean to suggest that all of Pinsky's poems are judiciously measured through a grid of perfectly balanced irony and compassion. Indeed, at least two of the poems in *History* that are most memorable, "Song of Reasons," and "The Unseen," face considerable challenges of tonal balance. The first of these uses a structure similar to "The Street": it begins with two perspective that look at first to be totally abstruse, a change of key in the song "Come Back to Sorrento" and the right of certain French noble family, the Levis-Mirepoix, to ride their horses in Notre Dame. The theme of the poem is how any "history or purpose arcane" that is used to explain odd facts or relations in the world manages to be both "businesslike as a dog / That trots down the street" and as phantasmagoric as "the animal shapes that sing at the gates of sleep" in our childhood. The song of reasons is just that: a lyric finesse of the rational, a way of

charming and disarming the ineradicable inexplicable facticity of events and the way they express human nature. The Levis-Mirepoix have their extraordinary privilege because they "killed heretics in Languedoc seven centuries ago," and yet "they are somehow Jewish" and claim "collateral descent" from the Virgin Mary. It is a reason, and it isn't a reason. The girl in the poem (apparently Pinsky's daughter) loves the part of the daily newspaper called "The Question Man," that column of manin- the-street responses to such inane questions as "Your Worst Vacation?" or "Your Favorite Ethnic Group?" Again, people have reasons for such heartfelt responses, and the reasons even have a history□ every heart has a history as well as reasons it knows and knows not of□but the "Song of Reasons" can not offer any reason why all this should be so. Pinsky's irony appreciates the bizarre humor of claiming descent from the Virgin Mary, and his compassion appreciates the way the child's favorite newspaper feature steadies her world: "The exact forms of the ordinary . . . show / An indomitable charm to her." But the aesthetic charm of the poem, its ability or luck in finding a fact such as that of the Levis-Mirepoix on which to build its wry playfulness, means it cannot give or challenge any final explanation. In one sense this is only fair, as the lyric mode is not charged with providing philosophical certainty or rigorous logic. Finally, I think, the affection of the speaker for the child saves the poem, for it is here that the lyric impulse is truest. The poem is like a nursery rhyme we sing a child to sleep by, covering up the narrative or logical holes with false totality and sweet song ("and down will come baby, cradle and all"). This, too, in an oblique way is a poem about nominalism, about the refusal of certain facts to yield to classification or clarification, to offer their "indomitable charm" on any but their own terms.

But there is another poem in the book whose rhetorical authority is even more challenged: "The Unseen." The obvious point must be made at the start that no poem about concentration camps can be without flaw. Just to attempt the subject, especially in a short lyric of over fifty lines, shows moral courage or artistic aplomb beyond the ordinary. Luckily for us, Pinsky has both. So when I question the poem I do so only on the highest level. Briefly my point is this: the stance at the end of the poem is accusatory, not towards the Nazis only and obviously, but toward the Godhead, the "Lord of Hosts." But can such an accusation stand? Ordinarily such accusatory rhetoric is the privilege (if that's the right word) of mystics and rationalists. The "regular believer" cannot claim the depth of experience or the alternative ontological grounds by which to challenge the deity. (That Pinsky speaks as a Jew to a deity imaged in Christian terms alters this argument only slightly, I think.) If I'm right in this, then Pinsky's speaker (to use that old-fashioned literary convention) must base his rhetorical authority on being a rationalist (he clearly is no mystic in the poem), and not a regular believer. But the compassion of the closing lines is not a rationalist's compassion; it's that of a believer. Thus Pinsky must somehow combine the ironic scepticism of a rationalist and the compassionate acceptance of a believer. To my mind he doesn't fully succeed, though that he nearly does so is enough to make the poem gripping and memorable.

It begins almost casually, with a feeling of modernist *sang-froid* masking deep uncertainty: In Krakow it rained, the stone arcades and cobbles And the smoky air all soaked one penetrating color While in an Art-Nouveau cafe, on harp-shaped chairs, We sat making up our minds to tour the death camp. The ironic details here□the harp-

shaped chairs, the Art-Nouveau□soon give way to a grim facticity as the speaker confronts the "whole unswallowable / Menu of immensities." During the tour of the camp everything takes on a "formal, dwindled feeling." (A sure instance of emotional rightness.) The speaker remembers a childhood game where he dreamed of killing the Nazi butchers, and his reverie is broken when he arrives at "the preserved gallows / The Allies hung the commandant, in 1947." In a sense the human vengeance ends at this point in the poem, a little past half-way.

The remaining five tercets deal with the speaker's realizing that he doesn't feel "changed□or even informed" (he's obviously come to terms with it in some way before the tour), but also realizing he must accept his own attempt to "swallow" the fact of this unbelievable crime. He fights his own despair, and the poem directly addresses the "discredited Lord of Hosts" with these words:

but still
We try to take in what won't be turned from in
despair:
As if, just as we turned toward the fumbled drama
Of the religious art shop window to accuse you
Yet again, you were to slit open your red heart
To show us at last the secret of your day and also,
Because it also is yours, of your night.

That is a ponderous "as if" and it saves the poem from being ruined by declamatory excess, but it still doesn't remove the language from the realm of the prophetic. By looking into the heart of God, Pinsky invokes a context that can only be that of a prophet. Especially in the five words that begin the last line, the poet doesn't flinch from an almost stately, judgmental eloquence. Here we must accept that God's love is dark, perhaps even evil. The human judges the divine at great peril, whether within or without the suppositions of religious faith. If said by a believer, these lines are truly awesome. If said by a rationalist sceptic, they are misdirected, since the real fury of the poem should then fall on the human criminals and not the divine shadow they did or did not evoke to cover their bestiality. We realize this poem was written by a post-Holocaust Jew and so if we detect in it an "unsteady" mix of rationalist scepticism and fervent compassion, we can hardly be surprised. Beyond this, I'll say no more on the subject.

Source: Charles Molesworth, "Proving Irony by Compassion: The Poetry of Robert Pinsky," in *Hollins Critic,* Vol. XXI, No. 5, December 1984, pp. 1-18.

Topics for Further Study

Choose a popular song that you believe has had a particular impact on listeners for a long time. Explain why the song is so influential and what kind of effect it has on the audience.

Of all the possible noble European families, why do you suppose Pinsky chose the "Dukes of Levis-Mirepoix" to mention in this poem? What is it about their history that may have made them the right or wrong choice?

Is there a particular newspaper column that you read on a regular basis? If so, tell why it is so intriguing and how you often feel after reading it.

Choose one of the purported "reasons" from "Song of Reasons" and discuss how it offers an explanation of something. Could the reason have more than one interpretation and, if so, what are some other possibilities?

Compare and Contrast

1980s: Francois Mitterrand is elected president of France, becoming the first Socialist president of the Fifth Republic. A popular leader, Mitterrand wins re-election in 1988 and becomes the longest-serving president in the history of France.

Today: The elimination of Socialist leader Lionel Jospin in the first round of the presidential election in France is the biggest political shock to any liberal democracy in western Europe since the end of the Second World War. As a result, voters from several parties unite to elect "Rally for the Republic" candidate Jacques Chirac, in order to soundly defeat far-rightwinger Jean-Marie le Pen in the final round.

1980s: MTV is launched on cable television, featuring around-the-clock music videos and impertinent, flashy "video jockeys" (or "V-Jays") who become nearly as popular among young viewers as the videos themselves.

Today: MTV has greatly reduced its airing of music videos in favor of more regular programming with such shows as "The Real World," "The Osbournes," and "Road Rules." As a result, much of the glamour and flash of its TV personalities have been replaced by the documenting of so-called "real people."

1980s: Violence re-ignites between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel in an Arab-Israeli war. Israel invades Lebanon, moving into West Beirut and ousting PLO forces.

Today: The battles rage on in the Middle East, with terrorist attacks and military strikes, costing the lives of hundreds of both Israeli and Palestinian citizens. People of all faiths seek an end to religious and political violence all over the world.

What Do I Read Next?

Jersey Rain (2000) continues Pinsky's tradition of careful crafting, but in language that is both simple and passionate. He addresses the items of popular culture and the events of everyday life in a way that makes the commonplace unusually attractive. This book has been well received and is worth reading.

Billy Collins, named the U.S. Poet Laureate in 2001 and a contemporary of Pinsky's, has won favor among both critics and the general American public. His collections have broken records for poetry sales, and his readings are usually standing-room-only. Helped by frequent appearances on National Public Radio, Collins is one of the nation's most popular poets ever. His collection *Nine Horses* (2002) appeals to both scholars and general readers alike.

The title of Gil Mann's publication exploring Judaism in twentieth-century America says it all: *How to Get More out of Being Jewish Even If: A. You Are Not Sure You Believe in God, B. You Think Going to Synagogue Is a Waste of Time, C. You Think Keeping Kosher Is Stupid, D. You Hated Hebrew School, or E. All of the Above!* (1998). Obviously, Mann has a sense of humor, but he also presents intriguing ideas and explanations that readers of any faith may find appealing.

History scholars will appreciate James Buchanan Given's thorough account of a not-too-common subject in *Inquisition and Medieval Society: Power, Discipline, and Resistance in Languedoc* (1997). This book examines everything from the Inquisitors and their "technique of punishment" to the role of social stress in maintaining political power in this area of southern France.

Further Study

Pinsky, Robert, *Democracy, Culture, and the Voice of Poetry,* Princeton University Press, 2002.

This prose publication is a little book on a very large subject. In it, Pinsky addresses the notion that poetry is a dying art with a dwindling audience, especially in American culture. Pinsky argues that just the opposite is true□that poetry is actually a reflection of and comment on the major themes at the heart of a large democracy.

□, *An Explanation of America,* Princeton University Press, 1979.

In this book-length poem, Pinsky examines the culture and history of the United States in an attempt to explain the nation's good points and bad points to his daughter. His assessment is at times negative, at times positive, and always candid. In the end, Pinsky appears to be more optimistic than not.

□, *The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and Its Traditions,* Princeton University Press, 1976.

In these essays, Pinsky addresses differences in traditional and contemporary poetry and concludes that there are not as many as would be expected. He finds a need for presenting the human soul in a seemingly "soul-less" world in all kinds of poetry and defends his beliefs with fresh, fairly accessible prose.

Thomas, Harry, et al., "A Conversation with Robert Pinsky," in *TriQuarterly,* Vol. 92, Winter 1994-1995, pp. 21-37.

In this conversation with several interviewers, Pinsky comments on a variety of topics, from the art of translating poetry into English and the role of Judaism in his life to the influence of Eastern philosophies and the importance of history in his work.

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Longenbach, James, "Robert Pinsky and the Language of Our Time," in *Salmagundi,* No. 103, Summer 1994, pp. 157-77.

Molesworth, Charles, "Proving Irony by Compassion: The Poetry of Robert Pinsky," in the *Hollins Critic,* Vol. XXI, No. 5, December 1984, pp. 1-18.

Pinsky, Robert, *History of My Heart,* Ecco Press, 1984.

Thomas, Harry, et al., "A Conversation with Robert Pinsky," in *TriQuarterly,* Vol. 92, Winter 1994-1995, pp. 21-37.

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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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