Starlight Study Guide

Starlight by Philip Levine

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"Starlight" first appeared in the journal *Inquirey* and was reprinted in *Ashes: Poems New and Old* in 1979, a collection that won both the National *Book* Critics Circle Award and the American Book Award. This short 31-line poem, written in free verse, opens the second half of the book. Like the book's first and last poems, "Starlight" marks an attempt by the poet to come to terms with memories of his father. As the title of the collection itself implies, the primary subject of *Ashes* is loss. Like much of Levine's work, "Starlight" is a confessional poem, describing an experience from the poet's past. The narrator recounts a brief discussion from his childhood between himself and his father about happiness. Though the meaning of the experience was not clear to the narrator as a child, it is as an adult. The speaker obviously has grown emotionally and now has perspective on his past. He empathizes with his father, which makes sense when we understand that although Levine writes the poem from the viewpoint of an adult remembering himself as a child, the real change in the poem happens to the father. It is worth noting that Levine himself has three sons and may well be thinking of his own current relationship with them. Exploring ideas of innocence and experience, the poem suggests that regardless of how tired one may be, emotionally, psychologically, or physically, it is always possible to renew oneself through the experience of another, especially if that other person is a child. Levine presents his poem as a comment on the human condition, rather than merely an adult's memory of a childhood experience.

Author Biography

The second of three children□first of identical twins□Philip Levine was born in 1928. His parents, Harry Levine and Esther Gertrude Priscol were Russian-Jewish immigrants who had met in Detroit, the city of Philip's birth. He grew up among that city's working class, and although he received a B.A. in 1950 and an M.A. in 1955 fromWayneState University, he was no stranger to manual labor. Levine worked in a number of Detroit's automobile factories while earning his degrees. His experiences during this time helped to solidify the allegiances he already felt to the working poor and manifested themselves in his poetry which damned greedy capitalists as frequently as it praised the "lowly" wage-earner.

Levine's own desire to be a writer was in large part formed by the hardscrabble working world in which he grew up. Though he admired and paid homage to the working-class heroes of Detroit's factories, he himself desired a different life. Levine took an M.F.A. in creative writing in 1957 from the University ofIowa and won a Stanford University Jones Fellowship in poetry shortly thereafter. In 1958 he became a full-time faculty member at Fresno State College. By 1979 when "Starlight" appeared in *Ashes,* Levine had established his reputation as one of America's leading poets, having published a number of well-received poetry collections and having been awarded fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. He had also fathered three sons of his own, and poems about his sons, his father, and other family members pepper his collections.

Like "Starlight," many of these poems are narratives. Levine sees his task as poet to tell stories as well as he can. He claims that a successful poem is one in which the words become transparent and the reader is immersed in the world being described. One of theUnited State's most decorated poets; Philip Levine lives in Fresno, California and New York City, and teaches atNew York University.

Poem Text

My father stands in the warm evening
on the porch of my first house.
I am four years old and growing tired.
I see his head among the stars,
the glow of his cigarette, redder
than the summer moon riding
low over the old neighborhood. We
are alone, and he asks me if I am happy.
"Are you happy?" I cannot answer
I do not really understand the word,
and the voice, my father's voice, is not
his voice, but somehow thick and choked,
a voice I have not heard before, but
heard often since. He bends and passes
a thumb beneath each of my eyes.
The cigarette is gone, but I can small
the tiredness that hangs on his breath.
He has found nothing, and he smiles
and holds my head with both his hands.
Then he lifts me to his shoulder,
and now I too am there among the stars,
as tall as he. Are you happy? I say.
He nods in answer, Yes! oh yes! oh yes!

And in that new voice he says nothing,
holding my head tight against his head,
his eyes closed up against the starlight,
as though those tiny blinking eyes
of light might find a tall, gaunt child
holding his child against the promises
of autumn, until the boy slept
never to waken in that world again.

Plot Summary

Title:

Titles of poems can be deceptive. Their relationship to the writing they name is as varied as the writing itself. They can function to sum up a particular theme of the poem by providing an image which embodies that theme, or they might simply be named after a character or event in the poem. "Starlight" prepares us for a poem which involves revelation, as the image of light traditionally symbolizes insight or the achievement of wisdom.

Lines1-3:

These first lines identify the speaker's point of view as an adult looking back on his childhood. The "warm evening" and the fact that the speaker's father is standing "on the porch of my first house" create a domestic scene and invite readers to see the same things that the speaker sees. The third line echoes both the world weariness felt by the father in the poem and that of the speaker himself. The line also tips us off that the memory might be more of an imagined event rather than an actual one. How many people can remember with such detail events that happened when they were four years old?

Lines 4-9:

The younger version of the speaker looks up at his father. That he sees his head "among the stars" is both literal and symbolic. From the perspective of looking up at someone much taller than himself, the child could literally see stars in back of his father's head. This image also captures the awe a young child feels for his father. By comparing the glow from his father's cigarette to the summer moon, the speaker conflates the romantic image of the moon, with the prosaic image of a cigarette, presenting an almost nourish scene of father and son. The moon, and all the romance and otherworldliness it represents, is close enough to touch, helping to create a dreamlike atmosphere. The phrase "the old neighborhood" underscores the nostalgic quality of the memory. Telling readers that the two are alone, a detail easily inferred, highlights the intimacy between the two. The father's question, an odd one to a four year old, and the child's inability to answer it, tells us more about the father than the boy, and our expectations are geared to learn more about the father.

Lines 10-15:

These lines remind us that the poem is a description of a memory. They have an almost incantatory effect. The speaker remembers himself not understanding the word "happy," and focuses on his father's voice, which he describes as "thick and choked." We

understand that the father is very emotional, on the verge of tears, and that the speaker remembers seeing his father this way "often since" this episode, which highlights the significance of the event, for both father and son. The act of passing his thumb beneath his child's eyes implies that the father is looking for something in his son, a different way of seeing, perhaps. This physical gesture further develops the intimacy between the two. The father might also be reenacting a ritual the two have when the son gets tired, such as looking for sand from the sandman, a character from fairytales and folktales who sprinkles sand in children's eyes to put them to sleep. Or the father might be looking for tears.

Lines 16-23:

Images of residue mark these lines: the spent cigarette, the father's breath and weariness, the speaker's memory of the experience. Out of this residue, these "ashes," the father renews himself by bonding with his son, holding his head and lifting him to his shoulders. He has seen something in his son which allows him to see something in himself. Implied is a sense of recognition by the father that his question to his son has more to do with himself rather than his son. When the father lifts the boy to his shoulders the boy is now where he saw his father at the beginning of the poem, "among the stars." As a (symbolic) peer, he now asks his father the same question he was just asked, and the father responds affirmatively, enthusiastically.

Lines 23-31:

These lines complete the father's emotional epiphany. He no longer speaks with a tired voice but with a "new" one, one that says "nothing," telling us that true happiness is beyond language. Holding his son's head to his own is the only language he needs. As in the beginning of the poem, the father's head is among the stars, only this time his eyes are closed, suggesting that his newly acquired vision is internal. The image of starlight ("those tiny blinking eyes") underscore the theme of renewal and its universality as well, and because the stars "might find" (i.e., witness) the father holding his child, they can be seen as a symbolically religious presence or consciousness. The father is now a child, albeit a "gaunt" one, which might represent both the father's physical appearance and his thin emotional life, and the child is sleeping, to wake, presumably, to an adult world. "The promises / of autumn" is an ambiguous phrase. Literally, it suggests the coming season, but it could also suggest the time of life for the father, in which case "holding the child against [those] ... promises" could be read as ironic.

Themes

Change and Transformation

"Starlight" suggests that world-weary and emotionally exhausted adults can be inspired to keep going by the very promise of future generations. Such adults literally come to live their own lives through the lives of their children. Their children, and particularly the hope children hold for the future, provide meaning for their lives. In some ways this theme echoes the myth of the Phoenix. According to the Roman poet, Ovid, the Phoenix is a bird which lives for 500 years, at the end of which it builds itself a nest and dies. Out of its own body, a new Phoenix is born which also lives 500 years, and the cycle repeats itself. Like the Phoenix, the father in "Starlight" is reborn. Through his own son, he becomes a child again. He is renewed by his love for his son, and his son's love for him. The speaker, too, experiences renewal through his own memory of his childhood experience. We can infer that the speaker had probably reached a point of exhaustion in his own life, an exhaustion which led him to remember how his own father had made it through this same point. The final image of the sleeping boy underscores the cyclical and universal theme of change and transformation, as it suggests the child's own move into the adult world.

Innocence and Experience: The Human Condition

The movement from innocence to experience is integral to the human condition and continues to be represented in coming of age novels and other forms of literature. In the eighteenth century William Blake popularized the very phrase in his collection of poems, *Songs of Innocence and Experience.* In "Starlight" the speaker narrates his own movement from innocence to experience by detailing an incident from his past in which as a child he learns about the difficulties of adulthood. Though he may not have been conscious at the time of the incident that he was learning this, the speaker narrates the situation as such. Thus the incident becomes a watershed in the speaker's own story of his life. The narrator explores the relationship among time, memory, and consciousness in the poem's final image. We can take that image to mean that, quite literally the boy never awoke to "that world again" because the moment was gone. We can also take the image to mean that the distance in the narrator's life between that moment and his current telling of the story has been considerably shortened. Once he entered the world of experience, time itself sped up. He is telling this story in order to remind himself that renewal is possible, that entry into the adult world of experience, though it is also entry into the world of knowledge, does not necessarily mean that all hope is lost.

Language and Meaning

"Starlight" asks if language creates the human world or reflects it. That the child did not even know what the word "happy" means tells us that his world, for him, was still largely

one undivided by adult categories and language. That his father not only knows the word but uses it as a gauge for meaning in his own and his child's life shows us the relationship between language and experience. Specifically, it shows us that entering the world of language means entering a world which is able to be differentiated, categorized, and measured. Language, in effect, constructs that world. It provides ways of seeing it, understanding it, and interpreting it. Acquiring language means acquiring self awareness and ways of consciously thinking about our own relation to things and people around us. The speaker's very recounting (or creating) of the event, which may or may not be mythical, also suggests the speaker's own paradoxical relation to language: although language is the "thing" which creates and names our world, it is (or can be) also our undoing.

Style

"Starlight" is a free verse poem, almost artless in its construction. The tone is conversational, as if the speaker is recounting the memory at an intimate gathering of friends. This tone is fitting for the anecdotal quality of the poem. Although Levine does not use much rhyme in this poem, he does use repetition, and light use of synaesthesia to give the memory a dreamlike character. Apposition, a grammatical construction in which a noun or a noun phrase is placed with another as an explanatory equivalent, is a form of repetition which Levine uses in the following lines:

and the voice, my father's voice, is not his voice, but somehow thick and choked,

a voice I have not heard before, but heard often since....

These lines thicken the description of the father's voice and readers have to slow down to digest them, just as the child in the poem has to slow down because he cannot understand the word "happy."

Contributing to the dreamlike quality of the memory is the quietly surreal imagery, as found in the lines, "The cigarette is gone, but I can smell / the tiredness that hangs on his breath." Describing one sense in terms of another or using one type of stimulation to evoke the sensation of another is known as synaesthesia and was a favorite technique of both the surrealists of the early twentieth century and some poets of the late twentieth-century, Levine among them, who at various points in their careers have been named "neo-surrealists." These poets include Mark Strand, James Wright, Robert Bly, Diane Wakowski, and others.

Historical Context

Levine wrote "Starlight" in the 1970s when he himself was close to fifty years old, much older, in fact, than the age of his own father in the poem. But there is nothing necessarily historically specific about "Starlight." The poem may or may not relate an actual experience or memory. It may be just a mythical anecdote meant to evoke an idea of fatherhood, or a point about reasons human beings find for continuing in their lives in the face of emotional or spiritual exhaustion. This type of poem often short, anecdotal, first person, frequently confessional, vaguely surreal was in vogue during the 70's in the United States. Some critics have called the poems resulting from this formula "McPoems," a pejorative designation used to underscore the seeming simplicity of their composition. Critics largely blamed university creative writing workshops and in particular M.F.A. programs for helping to produce so much of this type of writing. Levine himself taught in such a program for years, first atCalifornia State University at Fresno, and then atNew York University.

The idea of "voice" became increasingly important in American poetry of the 1970's, and according to some critics underscored the growing proliferation and popularity of the poetry reading, the return to narrative poetry, and the emergence of the importance of personality in poetry. Voice based poetry frequently focused on the authenticity of individual experiences, and the degree to which the poem succeeded rested on the degree to which those experiences were believed. The diversity of experience, then, underwrote the explosion of poetry during the last twenty years by groups previously underrepresented. One can now easily find anthologies and single-authored collections of self-described lesbian poetry, Czechoslovak-American poetry, Native-American poetry, Sado-Masochistic poetry, etc. More than merely thematic groupings, these books rely on the very identity of the authors to establish the category under which the poems are published.

The weariness his father feels in the poem could very well be the weariness of work, a common theme in Levine's poetry. Levine's father immigrated to the United States from Russia and worked in Detroit his whole life, and Levine himself worked in the city's automobile factories while attending university atWayneState in Detroit. Many of his poems describe the struggle of blue collar urban workers to survive while keeping their families intact. When Levine wrote "Starlight" in the late 70's, the face of labor in America was dramatically changing. In 1977 more than two thirds of Americans worked in service industries. Technology, particularly computer technology, made information-based industries such as health, finance, government, and communications, more efficient, and lucrative, and many young professionals flocked to them. These young urban professionals, called "yuppies," were voracious consumers of technology as well, buying videocassette recorders and cameras, personal computers, answering machines, and the like. Ironically, many of these young professionals had been a part of the rebellious youth culture of the 60's and early 70's which had eschewed excessive material consumption and spoke out against the intrusion of big business into our lives.

Critical Overview

Ashes: Poems Old and New, the collection of poems in which "Starlight" appeared, received, along with 7 *Years from Somewhere,* the National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Book Award in 1979 and 1980, and was widely hailed as Levine's best book to date. Reviewing *Ashes* in *Soho Weekly News,* Rochelle Ratner writes that

"The remnants of his working-class childhood carry through an identification with the workers, the oppressed, he meets now, as if in a romanticized attempt to call back his childhood." Commenting on Levine's "great compassion and tenderness," Ralph Mills points out that poems about the poet's father frame the book, and claims that Levine "frequently views himself under various forms as dying and being reborn within the compass of an individual lifetime." Such a volatile view of the self intrigues many critics, who, like William Matthews, see in Levine's intensely emotional poems "a sense of time different than that of most lyric poetry." Commenting on "Starlight," Matthews writes "How rapidly Levine can move, the way our inner lives move, from truculence to tenderness, and back, and back and forth." He manages those movements both when writing about his family and writing about others for whom he feels empathy. In a New York Times Book Review article, Herbert Leibowitz says that in *Ashes* "Levine has returned again and again in his poems to the lives of factory workers trapped by poverty and the drudgery of the assembly line, which breaks the body and scars the spirit." Levine also has his detractors, many of them criticizing his seemingly artless style. A representative detractor is Helen Vendler, who writes: "Often Levine seems to me simply a memoir-writer in prose who chops up his reminiscent paragraphs into short lines." Vendler also attacks Levine's realistic bent, saying that, "He believes, as a poet, only in what he can see and touch."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Jonathan N. Barron

Jonathan N. Barron is associate professor of English at the University ofSouthern Mississippi. The author of numerous articles, he has edited several books of essays on poetry and is editor of The Robert FrostReview. *In the following essay, Barron shows how "Starlight" explores the complex emotion that is happiness and, in so doing, risks being too sentimental and nostalgic. Barron judges the poem successful because of the way it uses the techniques of an early twentieth-century free-verse poetic movement called Imagism.*

In her textbook*Poems Poets Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology* (1997), Helen Vendler, professor of poetry at Harvard, singles out one distinctive element common to the best poetry everywhere. She tells her readers that good poetry "manages to avoid cliché." What Vendler means is that good poetry is determined to combat both the language of cliché as well as the attitudes, sentiments, and thoughts that have also become cliché. Poetry, in short, is that which is surprising, fresh, new, and unusual both in terms of the language and words used and in terms of the ideas, attitudes, feelings, and thoughts expressed by those words.

One of the most persistent set of clichés that Vendler has in mind takes the name "sentimentality." The sentimental poem, as a type of poetry, has only one goal: to provoke the reader to some intense, already familiar, easily recognizable emotion. Rather than upset the reader with uncomfortable, surprising, even dangerous thoughts and so provoke frightening emotions, the sentimental poem wishes to comfort the reader by reminding her or him that other people too have the same problems. Sentimental poetry, then, depends on cliché. At their best such poems want to comfort and ease the reader; at their worst, they merely provoke an emotion for no other purpose than entertainment and "cheap thrills." Not surprisingly, then, a poetry whose goal is to produce an emotion in the reader and render in familiar language easily recognizable emotions often makes use of the language of cliché: long familiar images and metaphors that provoke no surprise whatsoever.

Such sentimental poetry is today as popular and widespread as ever. One finds it in nearly every greeting card, and in the works of such "best-selling" poets as Susan Polis Schutz. In the first decade of the twentieth-century, such poetry was equally present and even more popular. Its popularity eventually provoked a group of Modernist poets, particularly T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, to establish counter-poetics, a movement dedicated to nothing less than the eradication of sentimentality from all "good" poetry. Henceforth, they argued, one would determine a poem's value by virtue of its ability to war against sentimental themes and language. For the most part, the past 90 years have endorsed this anti-sentimental standard. Today, in fact, one usually measures the artistic value of a poem by assessing its anti-sentimental themes and language.

Given this general disdain for sentimentalism in poetry, Philip Levine's poetry is particularly intriguing. As the contemporary American poet Dave Smith once said of Levine's work: he "risks the maudlin, the sentimental, the banal." Rather than go to war against sentimentality, in other words, Philip Levine actively courts it. He welcomes it into his poetry, and takes the risk that those schooled in the anti-sentimental attitudes of Modernist poetry might well condemn him for it. In fact, the occasion for Dave Smith's praise was his review of *Seven Years from Somewhere* (1979), the collection that contains, among other fine poems, "Starlight."

What makes "Starlight" so interesting is that it plays the sentimental, even maudlin theme of the love of a child for his father and of a father for his son against the flat, anti-sentimental language and techniques of Modernist Imagism. Imagism was the name given to the first specific, self-declared Anglo-American poetic movement devoting itself to anti-sentimentalism. Announced to the literary community in 1913 in a now famous manifesto printed in *Poetry* magazine (a magazine still flourishing today), Imagism called on poets to turn their attention to the precise, concrete visible image rendered in poetry. Rather than focus on meter, and the music of language created by a traditional metrical system, the Imagists argued instead for a free-verse line, a rhythm built out of breath units: as Ezra Pound phrased it: "compose in the sequence of the musical phrase not in the sequence of the metronome." This new free-verse music would help eradicate what Pound referred to as the sticky "cream puffs" of an all too lush and all too musical sentimental poetry. Sixty-six years later, one can measure the success of Imagism merely by reading poems like Levine's "Starlight," which tell their story entirely through a set of precisely rendered visible images in mostly free-verse lines. In its 31 lines, "Starlight" paints an extremely visible vignette of a summer evening between a tired working class father and his four year old son. So precisely drawn is the scene that we see it as if the words themselves did not matter.

This attention to the image, to what we see, is a particular point of pride for the craftsman Levine. In a much cited comment from an interview he gave in the poetry journal *Parnassus,* Levine went so far as to say that in his "ideal poem ... no words are noticed. You look through them." In this comment, made in 1978 when he was composing the poems of the volume containing "Starlight," Levine explains that his goal in crafting his work is to make the reader see the characters, the scene, the event rather than the words that portray the event. This goal is common to the Imagist tradition of using free-verse lines to render descriptions with exactitude.

With this in mind, then, look again at the first seven lines of "Starlight." Combined they account for three and a half sentences. Also, each line breaks when the image concludes. In other words, the rule of thumb for the rhythm of the line breaks is a visual one: new image, new line. This rule, too, is in keeping with Imagist tradition. And, like the Imagist poetry of the 1910s, it is virtually impossible to paraphrase the poem without at once reciting it. The images are rendered so exactly that to say what they reveal is quite literally to repeat the poem word for word. Nonetheless, what are the images that stand out in these seven lines? A man standing on the porch of a house, the speaker's father; the speaker himself as a sleepy four year old;

the glowing tip of a cigarette; and the red moon of late summer.

Ironically, these images, in conjunction with the title, create exactly the kind of atmosphere, mood, and thematic message that Imagism was designed to eradicate once and for all from poetry. For in these opening lines, Levine establishes what the poet Dave Smith rightly refers to as a nearly "maudlin" connection between father and son in the glowing dusk of summer. The emotional core of the poem is as familiar as the filial relationship. There is no surprise here in terms of what the poem is saying. Rather, the surprise comes from how the poem says it. Rather than resort to poetic cliché about a "blood red moon" or the "dying embers of summer," Levine merely depicts the "glow of his cigarette." If readers are reminded of such clichés they will do well to note that they do not come from the poem's language.

As an anti-sentimental counter to his sentimental theme, his decidedly flat descriptive language has also gotten Levine into much trouble. Such prose-like, "unpoetic" language is regularly cited as poor poetry because it asks readers to attend to character and story detail (classic issues for prose) rather than to the words themselves (the classic concern of poetry). For nearly twenty years now, critics have condemned Levine as much for ignoring the music of language in poetry as for being too sentimental in his themes. Those who attack his diction□his language use□claim that in any given poem he has merely chopped up a good story into arbitrary lines. This criticism, however, ignores or, worse, is blind to Levine's heritage in Imagism. For, as already indicated, there is nothing arbitrary about his line breaks. But, more importantly, the prose-like language is poetically, stylistically necessary because it acts as an antidote, a counter, to the sentimental themes Levine's poetry so often address.

In "Starlight," for example, Levine presses the sentimental expression of love between father and son so far that he sends the poetic theme into the even more sickly sweet land of nostalgia. Already risking the loss of respect from readers trained in anti-sentimentality, Levine, through the verb tense and other clues, pushes this poem's story over the edge of a certain kind of respectability when he makes it clear that this is a nostalgic memory and not just a "you are there" anecdote. In the poem, it is clear that the speaker, the child, is now himself a grown man, possibly much older in the telling of the poem than even his father was in the scene depicted. In other words, not only does Levine take the risk of writing a sentimental poem but he also locates the sentiment in nostalgia: a double-dare, and a major risk for a poet as much today as in 1979.

The risk pays off, and the poem is a triumph of art and wisdom. It is the highest expression of what poetry does best. What makes a poem like "Starlight," then, both a triumph and an example of great technical skill? Simply stated, by line 13, the poem takes a dramatic turn so that it does surprise, and does, paradoxically, war against the cliché sentiments it appears in the first 12 lines to endorse. The opening lines of the poem make one think that this will be another example of a poem saying little more than "those were the good old days" and "gee, how I miss my dad." While those feelings are no doubt powerful and true, in poetry they can too often become merely banal tricks that do little more than the poetic equivalent of a bad vaudeville performer saying "let me make you cry by merely tapping into feelings you yourself have long had." Levine,

however, only seems to resort to these tricks. By the eighth line, just as the poem has traveled into the twin realms of sentiment and nostalgia, he reverses our expectations and calls into question the easy emotion he made possible with his stark images of moon, cigarette, father, son, and porch. By line eight, the poem's sentimentality itself is called into question.

When the father asks the son if he is happy, he is, by extension, calling into question the very purpose of the poem. Is the poem just an exercise in nostalgic memory? Is it just a magic act designed to make the poet and his audience feel better? Or, instead, is the poem questioning the very heart of sentimentalism itself, the very idea of "happiness"? In this question, in other words, the father speaks from his own sad life experience recognizing that his four year old son's future will yield not more joy but only the grim reality of future pain. In the telling of the poem, that four year old, himself an older man, realizes how right his father was about that future pain and, also, how wrong. At the time, when he was four, he did not understand this very complicated adult emotion called "happiness": few, if any, four year olds could or even should. But rather than meditate poetically on that adult emotion, Levine, instead, continues the father-son tale by reporting to us the gesture his father makes after asking his son if he is happy. After the father presses his fingers into his son's face, after the son smells the "cigarettes and sadness," a single line offers what amounts to a very mysterious conclusion. So mysterious is this line that it could very well have concluded the poem: "He has found nothing, and he smiles." Had the poem ended here, the images in conjunction with the precise, flat language would have established an ironic dance between nostalgia and pain, sentiment and wisdom. As it is written, however, the line comes a little more than half way into the poem. And its placement has the effect of reversing the anti-sentimental direction of the poem that had begun in line eight. For this weird smile, we are told, comes from finding nothing in his son's expression. What happens next is both unexpectedly exuberant and wonderfully strange.

The smile brings us back into the sentimental terrain Levine has been both courting and challenging:

Then he lifts me on his shoulder,

and now I too am there among the stars,

as tall as he. Are you happy? I say.

He nods in answer, Yes! oh yes! oh yes!

Here, the father, seeing in his son's future a grim destiny of more of the same hard luck he has had in his own life, finds a way to combat such pessimism by putting his son on his shoulder. To combat the future he foresees, the father celebrates their life together now, this evening, on the porch. When the son asks his father the same question, "are you happy?" he may not have any idea of the full implications, the sadness latent in that question. But what this scene tells us is that, in answer to his father's question, right now the son is happy. And so too is the father. Are the words, "Yes! oh yes! oh yes!"

actually spoken? Notice they have no quotation marks. I believe these words are what the father's gesture, his nodding head, imply: they are not what he says. The fact that his joy is implied but not actually spoken explains the concluding sentence of the poem: a sentence consisting of the final eight lines.

In this conclusion, Levine speaks for his father and for himself now that he is an older man. In these final lines, he explains what the entire scene on the porch must have meant to his father then and to himself now.

And in that new voice, he says nothing, holding my head tight against his head, his eyes closed up against the starlight, as though those tiny blinking eyes of light might find a tall, gaunt child holding his child against the promises of autumn, until the boy slept never to waken in that world again.

First, notice that the father actually says "nothing." This is the second time that "nothing" resonates with deep meaning in this poem. This time, as with its first usage, the word refers to the fact that the father's joy, and sheer pleasure in this moment with his son are beyond words. In the end, poetry itself takes us to that realm beyond words. The final sentence, these eight lines, is in fact a beautiful and precise image. The father holds his son's head and together they look at the stars. Notice, though, that Levine changes the perspective at precisely this point.

Just as he brings father and son together in a moment of pure joy, he changes the scene entirely and gives us the stars' view of it. Referring to the starlight as "tiny blinking eyes" Levine tells us that what, looking down, these stars must have seen were two children. The father, no matter how old, is still just a child to the stars' billion year history. When returned to his innocent state as a child□a child of nature□the father becomes far more understandable. His sadness has to do with protection. The father hopes to be able to protect his child from "the promises / of autumn," from the certainty of a fall from innocence and the inevitable process of death and dying. The tragic fact of the poem, however, is that while happiness is discovered here, the son also, from that moment on, lost his own innocence, his own ignorance as to the complexity of this strange thing called "happiness."

In the end, then, Levine's tender poem of a father and a son, chock full of potentially smarmy sentimental images like hugs, stars, and moonlight, becomes a powerfully wise work of art. A little four-year-old, already so young, loses his innocence as, through a moment of happiness, he discovers the reality of his father's life of pain, a reality his father wishes to hide, and protect him from, a reality the stars blinkingly

Source: Jonathan N. Barron, in an essay *fov Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Pamela Steed Hill is the author of a collection of poetry, In Praise of Motels**,** *and has had poems published in more than 90 journals and magazines. She is an associate editor for* University Communications *atOhio State University. In the following essay, Hill points how this poem quickly takes us from a summer scene of peaceful tranquility*

between father and son to one of desperation and fear, forcing a turning point in the boy's young life and leaving his father clinging to a world he knows must end.

Reading Philip Levine's "Starlight" is somewhat like reading an entry from the poet's diary, had he been keeping one at the age of four. Much of Levine's poetry is autobiographical, and many of his poems address the loss of his father when he was a young boy and the subsequent anger, grief, sorrow, and sense of abandonment. "Starlight" is a "father" poem that occurs before the parent dies, and, therefore, no mention of the traumatic event actually appears in the poem. The child's thoughts are revealed through the voice of the now-grown man who may allude to his father's eminent death only in the last line. But we understand throughout that a heaviness pervades the scene described in the poem, and even if we have not read enough of Philip Levine's work or do not know about the actual death of his father, we still sense that "Starlight" portrays an ill-fated moment marking a child's entrance into the real world□a world full mostly of hardship, brutality, and sadness.

The poem is a relatively short one, written in free verse and told in the present tense. By using the present tense, Levine provides us greater immediacy to what is going on in the child's mind as well as on the porch where he and his father stand "in the warm evening." The poet's simple description and clear language take us directly to the setting: it is nighttime, and a tired four-year-old boy is outside with his father looking up at the stars. But what the child sees when he looks up is father's "head among the stars, / the glow of his cigarette, redder / than the summer moon riding / low over the old neighborhood." (The "old neighborhood" is in Detroit, where Levine grew up and which would become the source of inspiration for many of his "working class" poems.) The scene seems peaceful at this point□a father and son enjoy a quiet summer evening beneath the stars. Serenity is short-lived, however, for the father soon brings up a subject that both confuses and, ironically, saddens the boy: the question of happiness.

Line 9 is a turning point in the poem, moving the speaker and his subject from a setting of contentment to one of uncertainty. Very often the question, "Are you happy?" makes the person being asked uneasy at best and in some cases defensive and cynical. It's a difficult question to give a blanket "yes" or "no" answer to because so many factors play into what being happy really means. Levine tells us that even a four-year-old knows that. The boy's thought on the matter is simply, "I cannot answer," and so he doesn't. Eventually, in line 22, he will offer a response that only turns the question around to the father: "Are you happy? I say." In between lines 9 and 22, though, we learn more about the relationship between the father and son and more about the pending gloom that hangs over them and that ultimately will separate them for good.

The speaker tells us that he does not understand the word "happy" and, more importantly, that his father's voice in asking it"... is not / his voice, but somehow thick and choked, / a voice I have not heard before, but / heard often since." This indicates that he now looks back on that night as a discovery of sorts□not one of enjoyment, but one that introduces the child to his father's fears and his father's sorrow. The parent does not ask the boy if he's happy in a cheerful voice and a lighthearted manner, but rather he speaks as though he is fighting back tears. Until then, the child had not heard

(or, at least, had not noticed) distress and suffering in his father's voice, but the adult speaker has by now heard it countless times. We have to assume that since his father would die a year after this poem takes place, the "thick and choked" voice that the narrator keeps hearing is not only his father's. Rather, it is a collective "human" voice, including his own that permeates human existence and exposes our pain and sorrow. By hearing it in a parent's voice, children are thrust into the real world where the comfort and security they've always known are suddenly no longer steadfast.

After asking his son if he's happy and getting no immediate response, the father "... bends and passes / a thumb beneath each of my eyes." In other words, he is checking to see if the boy is shedding tears, and the father is glad to learn that he is not: "He has found nothing, and he smiles / and holds my head with both his hands." Perhaps it is this demonstration of pure innocence and naiveté in his son—the boy doesn't "know enough" to be sad that allows the father to answer the question of happiness in a fairly exuberant way: "Yes! oh yes! oh yes!" But it is still a forced exuberance, spoken to try to convince not only his son but himself that he really is happy. Now holding the boy in his arms, their heads pressed together, the father "says nothing" and yet he says nothing "in that new voice." Since the son has heard it once, he knows it is there within his father, and he will never erase the memory of it even during times of silence.

By the end of the poem, the scene has changed from one of peaceful serenity to one of a desperate man clinging to his son with "his eyes closed up against" the same starlight that he had been merely gazing upon earlier. Something has altered the father's mood and, therefore, the young son's, and it is most likely the fact that the boy cannot answer whether he is happy. The father understands the irrelevance of even trying to answer for he knows that the warmth of summer will give way to the chill of autumn ("... holding his child against the promises / of autumn ..."), that young, innocent boys will become hardened, sorrowful men, and that there is nothing he can do to stop either. The speaker believes his father saw himself as a child as well as the boy he held in his arms—or at least "a tall, gaunt child" who would like to escape back into a safe, secure fantasy world and to keep his son there with him. He would like to keep the boy asleep because he knows that when he wakes, it will never be "in that world again."

We may look at the last line of the poem as an allusion to Levine's father's pending death because we know that the loss had a profound effect on the poet. It did indeed force him into a new world and forever strip him of the feeling of security he had when his father was living. Of course, given the benefit of hindsight, we know what will happen to the boy in the poem even though he is completely unaware of it at the time. This is most often the case in Levine's work—he speaks with the voice of one who knows although his subject may not be so wary. In *Kayak,* critic Mark Jarman states that "One of the powerful, unifying factors is that in all the poems [in the collection called *1933],* Levine's voice, even when remembering his perceptions as a child, is that of an adult, an adult who has not only not forgotten what it is like to be a child, but how at five years old ... one is becoming an adult: the process is one of loss, in this book intensified by the loss of a father...."

"Starlight" has not been singled out by critics nearly as often as Levine's more popular, highly anthologized works such as "They Feed They Lion," "Not This Pig," and "Animals Are Passing from Our Lives." This poem appears in the 1979 collection entitled *Ashes,* which contains 13 poems from an earlier book as well as 19 new ones, including "Starlight." The poem has been compared, however, to those in Levine's 1974 publication of *1933,* a book dealing nearly entirely with the loss of his father and so named because it was the year he passed away. While some of the father poems denote feelings of anger and abandonment, especially the early ones, just as many soften into compassion and a quiet sadness on the part of their narrator. In an *Ohio Review* article, poet and critic William Matthews contrasts the endings of "Starlight" and a poem called "Father," also contained *in Ashes.* The latter poem's last four lines are: "I find you / in these tears, few, / useless and here at last. / Don't come back." There is a striking difference between the sentiment portrayed here and that found in "Starlight." Matthews points out "How rapidly Levine can move, the way our inner lives move, from truculence to tenderness, and back, and back and forth." And in *a Margins* article, critic Christopher Buckley states that some of the father poems end "on an emotional tone of solitude, abandonment, personal anguish, but there is no anger or defiance at the world. Levine is not angry with his father for his absence but rather offers us a vision of a father we can cherish with him."

Throughout his career, Philip Levine has paid poetic homage to the world's downtrodden□the poor, the victims of racism, those persecuted by politics and wars. Though the poet would probably claim a personal happiness with his wife and children and now grandchildren, he does not shy away from displaying his contempt for the world that most of us live in, a world of hard work, low pay, and often violence born of frustration and resentment. Levine contends that all "normal" people come to that inevitable realization at some point in their lives, sometimes by way of a traumatic event. For him, we may obviously assume it was the death of his father, and yet a poem like "Starlight" indicates another possibility. Perhaps even before the father's death, the young boy was hurled into the harsh realities of a grown-up world on a peaceful summer night when he first heard something unsettling, something mournful, in his parent's voice. Although he could not know that a year later his father would be dead, he did somehow realize that his world was changing and that "happiness" was not likely to follow him into the new one.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Chris Semansky's most recent collection of poems, Blindsided, *published by 26 Books of Portland, Oregon, has been nominated for an Oregon Book Award. In the following essay, Semansky explores thematic issues of emotional survival in three of Philip Levine's "father " poems in his collection,* Ashes: Poems New and Old.

Philip Levine has written a number of poems describing his attempts to come to grips with his father's memory. In *Ashes,* his 1979 award-winning collection of poems, Levine begins both sections with poems about his father and also ends the book with a poem about him. Together, these poems provide a complex portrait of a man looking for ways to behave in the world, for ways to survive the crush of time.

The opening poem, "Father," describes a nightmarish industrial landscape in which a son searches for his father, both as a child and later as an adult.

The long lines of diesels

groan towards evening

carrying off the breath

of the living.

The face of your house

is black,

it is your face, black

and fire bombed

in the first street wars,

a black tooth planted in the earth

of Michigan

and bearing nothing,

and the earth is black,

sick on used oils.

The imagery of war and apocalypse is fitting for a poem about loss, and more so when we understand that Levine's father, a Russian Jew, fought with the British during World War I, and later immigrated to Detroit, Michigan, a heavily industrialized working-class city of automobile factories. The image of the poet as a loss-stricken child permeates

Levine's poems, as does the movement between personal and public representations of self, his and others. In "Father" the speaker moves between the past and the present to show how managing grief makes us who we are. Levine's father died when he was a young boy and, presumably, it is his absence that he describes when he writes

I waited

at windows the rain streaked

and no one told me.

It is only later as an adult, and in the act of writing about his father, that he achieves any resolution to his grief.

I found you whole

toward the autumn of my 43rd year

in this chair beside

a mason jar of dried zinnias

and I turned away.

I find you

in these tears, few,

useless and here at last.

Don't come back.

The starkness and seeming anger towards his father in this poem is tempered by his sentimental memories in both "Starlight" and "Lost and Found," the book's last poem. More anecdotal and conventionally realistic than "Father," "Starlight," a story with a moral, borders on the sappy in its treatment of the father and son relationship. In this poem the father learns from the son, just as the speaker of the poem learns from his own father, albeit years after his father has died. Presumably, the speaker has reached a point in his life that the father in the poem had also reached in his. But instead of being renewed by his own children, the speaker is renewed through a memory of his father. This type of renewal is based not on innocence, as is the father's in the poem, but on the very knowledge that experience brings. The speaker, as father *and* son, has learned how to incorporate the loss of his own father into his life and how to draw emotional sustenance from his memory in order to keep going. The concluding image of the poem, like many of Levine's conclusions, is ambiguous enough to rescue the poem from syrupy emotionality. After finding joy in the company and love of his four-year-old boy, the father proclaims his happiness:

And in that new voice says nothing, holding my head tight against his head, his eyes closed up against the starlight, as though those tiny blinking eyes of light mind find a tall, gaunt child holding his child against the promises of autumn, until the boy slept never to waken in that world again.

The child's implied and symbolic entry into the adult world of language marks the end of innocence. His father, trying to gauge the meaning of his own life learns that "happiness" resides not in the serf but in relation to others, in this case his own family. The lesson the boy, who becomes a poet, learns is that language lies, but it is all that we have. What ostensibly begins as a poem about the emotional life of the poet's father turns out to be a poem about the poet's own emotional life, about his ability to salvage meaning from the past and to use it as ballast for and in the future. Read this way, the "promises / of autumn" becomes ironic, if we take "autumn" to mean the late-middle part of one's life. The gesture of holding his boy "against" these "promises" is actually a gesture of protecting the boy from all he does not know, but will discover as he grows up. Like much of Levine's poetry, however, "Starlight" exists somewhere between confession and myth. Very few of us have the capacity to remember with such detail events from our lives when we were four years old. More likely the poem sprang from an impulse to put his volatile emotional life into narrative form.

In the book's final poem, appropriately titled "Lost and Found," the search for his father that the poet starts somewhat angrily in the opening poem, concludes. Back in the land of symbolic mythology, the poem presents "a boy lost in a huge city, / a boy in search of someone / lost and not returning ..." There is no mistaking that this boy is a version of the poet's serf. Gone are the realistic details tying the past to place, as in "Starlight's" domestic scene of the speaker's childhood house. Those details are replaced by the more abstract and symbolic language of a quiet spirituality. The speaker makes peace with the memory of his father, not through recounting an incident of childhood bonding, but through the realization that his loss is a universal one, part of the cycle of death and birth common to human experience.

... I have

come home from being lost,

home to a name I could accept,

a face that saw all I saw

and broke in a dark room against

a wall that heard all my secrets and gave nothing back.

Now he is home, the one I searched for.

The found father is as much a recognition of how the father has lived on *inside* the son as it is an acceptance of representative memories. Because the speaker-son has been

able to embrace the father in himself, he has also been able to accept the fact that the dead always live on. He has now learned to give them their due.

The day is here, and it will last forever or until the sun fails and the birds are once again hidden and moaning, but for now the lost are found. The sun has cleared the trees, the wind risen, and we, father and child hand in hand, the living and the dead, are entering the world.

This final image is one of reunion and recovery. Based in the universal and public realm of nature, it is free of the pettiness of personal loss, the "little deaths" that mar all of our individual lives. By locating the context of his loss (and recovery) in the natural world, the speaker recognizes that his own pain is part of life's process, and that he is not alone in it. Making peace with his father, the poet has finally made peace with himself.

Source: Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

Alice Van Wart teaches literature and writing in the Department of Continuing Education at the

University ofToronto. She has published two books of poetry and has written articles on modern and contemporary literature. In the following essay, Van Wart explains how Levine "uses a complex dual perspective" to look back upon an event from his childhood.

Philip Levine has written 17 books of poetry, studied with John Berryman and Yvor Winters, held a fellowship in poetry atStanford University, won numerous prizes including the Pulitzer and the National Book award, and earned his living as a college professor from the late 1950s to his retirement. Yet his roots remain firmly in his pre-academic and literary life. Born in 1928 into a lower middle-class Jewish family, Levine worked as a manual laborer in Detroit where he formed a strong identification with the men and women he met as an industrial worker. His work often depicts the bleak, dirty industrial cityscape of his childhood.

Levine's poetry presents a wide range of themes, particularly about the contemporary experiences of the common man and about those people who have left their hometowns for work in industrial cities such as Detroit, where they find themselves out of place and isolated. His poems provide an honest exploration of human life and its complexity, conveying a wide range of emotions from pity to condemnation, anger, awe, and lamentation. He often forces the reader to confront the unendurable and the horror that humankind has created. Writing in *Contemporary American Poetry,* A. Polin Jr. noted that Levine's poetry offers a "seemingly contradictory range of emotional, moral, and often profoundly religious responses to the horror and the beauty in the word around him."

Levine is a master of both poetic form and voice. One of his gifts lies in telling stories in dramatic and narrative voices. More recently Levine has returned to his past for his subject matter, employing free verse, a narrative style, and the use a colloquial language to present his proletarian, often autobiographical subjects. "Starlight" is such a poem. Written in free verse it deals with an incident in his childhood that integrally links the past to the present and its theme to its technique.

In "Starlight" Levine's uses free verse, a colloquial voice, and loose rhythms to create a narrative style, while he employs image and enjambment, the running together of the sense and syntax of one line with the next, to convey the complexity of the poet's private meditation as he watches his father on his porch smoking a cigarette. While watching his father, he remembers another time on a summer's evening when he was a child. Recalling the incident from the past, the poet creates a dual perspective that shows his growing awareness of the connection between the past and present and between father and son.

Levine begins his poem informally. He watches his father smoke "on the porch of my first house." The house, we assume, is the poet's house. However, in the third line the poet announces: "I am four years old and growing tired." The jump back in time suggests the house could also be the poet's first house as a child. The ambiguity between present and past time continues in line four when the poet says, "I see his head among the stars, the glow of his cigarette." The reference to the image of the "glow of his cigarette, redder / than the summer moon" is also ambiguous as to whether the poet is referring to his father in the present moment or in the past. The enjambment between lines five and six clarifies the ambiguity by linking past and present time. The enjambment of lines six and seven moves the time into the past by clarifying that the moon is "riding / low over the old neighborhood."

The use of the present tense to relate the past event creates a sense of immediacy, collapsing past time with the present as the poet relates the incident that marked the end of his childhood. Standing alone with his father under the light of the summer stars the poet's father unexpectedly asks his child, "Are you happy?" The child is confused by the question, saying, "I cannot answer /I do not really understand the word." His confusion is further enhanced by his father's voice, which the poet says "is not his voice, but somehow thick and choked." The child's response, however, merges into the adult's when the poet says, it was "a voice I have not heard before, but / heard often sense." The sound in the father's voice is new to the child, but the adult knows it well.

The poet's description of his father's actions as he remembers them on that night are immediate and physical, as if there were occurring in the present moment. He tells us his father "bends and passes a thumb beneath each of my eyes," and then "he smiles and holds my head with both his hands" before he "lifts me to his shoulders." Here Levine's use of kinetic diction creates both the physical sense of the moment and a sense of the child's feelings as he is lifted onto his father's shoulders. At the same time the poet conveys his feelings as he recalls the event. He remembers being aware that "the cigarette [was] gone" and that he could "smell / the tiredness that hangs on his breath."

While Levine creates the child's response to his father's physical presence as the father "lifts him to his shoulder," he also shows the more specific awareness of the adult looking back. In line eighteen when the poet says, "he has found nothing," he is referring both to his father's touch beneath his eyes, where there is nothing to find, and to a more general fact about his father's life. The adult suggests a larger loss on the part of his father, something in his life he never found. The grown son is aware of something about his father he could not have known as a child.

On his father's shoulder the child finds himself "among the stars." The repetition of this image from line four again collapses past and present time. In line four the child sees his father's head "among the stars"; in line twenty-one sitting on his shoulder, he says, "and now I too am among the stars / as tall as he." The poet's description of the child feeling "as tall as he" goes beyond the child's awareness and suggests the father and the child are now on an equal footing.

Feeling as tall as his father the child asks his father the same question his father has just asked him. He asks him if he is happy. His father's response is "to nod[s] vigorously, "Yes! oh yes!" The child is aware that in "that new voice he says nothing." The "new" voice is the voice the child has just heard his father use, which sounds "thick and choked." The child is not able to understand his father's emotions at the moment, only that he had held his "head tight against his head / his eyes closed up against the starlight."

The poet's description of his father closing his eyes "as though those tiny blinking eyes / might find a tall, gaunt child / holding his child against the promises of autumn," returns the poet to the present moment and the reader to his adult consciousness. The poet now understands his father's gesture. He expresses this awareness in his association of autumn with maturity and the relinquishing of power. He realizes his father had wanted to hold on to his child and his childhood a little longer. He had wanted to keep him for a while longer from becoming the "tall gaunt child / holding his child." "The tall gaunt child" is the poet, who is now a father, himself. Because he too is a father he understands what he could not have known as a child, the night his father held him under the starlight, the night he now sees as the end of his childhood.

Only in retrospect is the poet able to understand the significance of the night. Having fallen asleep on his father's shoulders, the poet says he was "never to waken in that world again." The night was the beginning of his awareness of his father as a fallible being, someone outside himself, capable of intense feeling, perhaps not so god-like as he had believed. It is an understated moment: the adult sees his father, the man smoking on the porch, as he is, aware at the same time that he is now the father.

Despite its surface simplicity "Starlight" uses a complex dual perspective to show the poet's empathetic understanding of an event from his childhood. The poem's lack of formal artifice, its colloquial voice, and the use of image and enjambment convey an alternating sense of past and present and the merging of the two times in the consciousness of the narrator as he silently meditates on the nature of fatherhood and the connection between past and present.

Source: Alice Van Wart, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Adaptations

Atlantic Unbound provides links to text and RealAudio versions of six Levine poems, as well as an interview with Levine by Wen Stephenson, http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/poetry/ levine.htm

National Public Radio's 1996 Fresh Air interview with Levine can be heard at http:// whyy.org/freshair/BOFA/BOFA961115.html

The Internet Poetry Archive's Philip Levine site: http://sunsite.unc.edu/ipa/levine/

Topics for Further Study

Brainstorm some memories of your own of incidents when you felt particularly close to a parent or family member. In a descriptive essay try to capture as much detail of the incident as possible, and explain why you think the memory has remained with you.

Interview five middle-aged males who are childless about what motivates them in their daily lives, and interview five middle-aged fathers. In an essay, compare and contrast the answers. What conclusions can you draw from them?

Think hard about your earliest memory that involved other people and then write down in as much detail as possible everything about that memory. Then ask the people who are a part of that memory if they have the same memory of the incident. Discuss what this exercise tells you about the reliability of your own memory, and what it tells you about why you remember some events and not others.

Compare and Contrast

1977: David Berkowitz, also known as the "Son of Sam" and the .44 caliber killer, receives life imprisonment for six murders he committed before his arrest in August.

1999: Spike Lee makes a movie, *Summer of Sam,* about the summer of 1977 in New York City and the fearful grip that Berkowitz had on the City.

1978: Earthquakes rock Greece, Japan, Mexico, Iran, and Central Europe.

1999: A massive earthquake rocks Turkey. More than 12,000 people die.

1977: George Lucas's film *Star Wars* is released and breaks all box-office records.

1999: The prequel to the Star Wars Trilogy, *The Phantom Menace,* is released. Calling it a "cultural holiday," many companies give their workers the day off on the day the movie opens.

1979: The American public's fear of a nuclear meltdown increases after an accident at Pennsylvania's Three Mile Island Nuclear plant.

Today: Largely because of the American public's continuing distrust of nuclear power, the number of nuclear reactors working in the U.S. today is 104, down from 112 in 1990.

1978: The world's first test-tube baby, Louise Brown, is born in Britain.

Today: After having successfully cloned a sheep, scientists are now exploring ways to clone human beings.

What Do I Read Next?

Don't Ask, a collection of interviews with Levine, was published by the University ofMichigan Press in 1981. These interviews are at times enlightening, funny, troubling, and annoying. Levine talks about the inspiration behind many of his poems, about his politics, and about his childhood in Detroit, Michigan.

Perhaps Levine's best-known book, *They Feed They Lion* was published in 1972. The poems in this collection waver between celebration and despair, showing Levine to be adept at crafting art from the most disparate of experiences. Included in this collection are some of Levine's most popular poems about the working class of Detroit, Michigan.

For an historical look at how Levine's poetry has been received, read Christopher Buckley's collection of criticism and reviews on Levine's poetry, *On the Poetry of Philip Levine: Stranger to Nothing,* published in 1991 by the University of Michigan Press.

Levine's 1994 collection of essays, *The Bread of Time: Toward an Autobiography,* is a collection of disparate essays about poetry, work, and the author's family life in Detroit. These essays are helpful in understanding Levine's thinking about poetics and poetry.

Further Study

Cowan, Nelson, ed., *The Development of Memory in Childhood,* Psychology Press, 1998.

Cowan edits a collection of essays detailing theories of childhood memory and why some events are remembered and others not.

Dillard, Annie, *An American Childhood,* New York: HarperCollins, 1998.

This memoir of Annie Dillard's childhood details her endless fascination with language and new experiences.

Klein, Art, *Dad and Son: A Memoir About Reclaiming Fatherhood and Manhood,* Champion Press, 1996.

This memoir is a close look at how the author found meaning in his life through fatherhood after he is stricken with a debilitating disease.

Levis, Larry, *Elegy,* Pittsburgh, University ofPittsburgh Press, 1997.

Larry Levis, who died suddenly in 1996 of a heart attack, was an outstanding poet, and a student and colleague of Philip Levine. Levine, who edited this posthumous manuscript, writes that Levis's "early death is a staggering loss for our poetry, but what he left is a major achievement that will enrich our lives for as long as poetry matters."

Linton, Bruce, *Finding Time For Fatherhood: The Important Considerations Men Face When They Become Parents,* Fathers' Forum Press, 1998.

Linton's essays are thoughtful and fascinating in their variety, ranging from revisiting the Oedipus myth, to looking at the men's movement, to examining the role food and meals play in the family, to discussing sex and fatherhood.

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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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