We Live by What We See at Night Study Guide

We Live by What We See at Night by Martín Espada

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

First published in the collection *Trumpets from the Islands of Their Eviction* in 1987, "We Live by What We See at Night" is an example of Martín Espada's longing and nostalgic voice as a Puerto Rican American distanced from his family's homeland. Using a simple tone and many images throughout, the poet imagines what it must have been like for his father as a young man, a new immigrant living in Harlem but dreaming nightly about his home. He contrasts the lush and colorful Puerto Rican landscape against the bleak New York cityscape, then shifts to the present, years later, himself now living in the same city. Although he wasn't born in Puerto Rico, Espada ends the poem expressing a sense of comfort in having "inherited" his father's nightly visions of the tropical island, memory as deeply rooted, perhaps, as race and culture. As the title might suggest, it is these dreams that sustain people and help them survive, looking forward while understanding their own past.

Author Biography

Espada was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1957, to a Puerto Rican father and a Jewish mother. His father, a photographer whose pictures have been featured in Espada's volumes of poetry, aspired to play professional baseball. His disappointment over not having realized that goal (a difficult one for a dark-skinned Puerto Rican in the late 1940s) influenced the young Espada, and he later wrote about the experiences of his father in the poem "Tato Hates the New York Yankees." Espada's first book of poetry, *The Immigrant Iceboy's Bolero,* published in 1984, reflects the experiences of Spanish-speaking migrants. A tenant lawyer in Boston, Espada continues to write socially and politically informed poetry.

Poem Text

for my father

When the mountains of Puerto Rico
flickered in your sleep
with a moist green light,
when you saw green bamboo hillsides
before waking to East Harlem rooftops
or Texas barracks,
when you crossed the bridge
built by your grandfather
over a river glimpsed
only in interrupted dreaming,
the craving for that island birthplace
burrowed, deep
as thirty years' exile,
constant as your pulse.

This was the inheritance
of your son, born in New York:
that years before
I saw Puerto Rico,
I saw the mountains
looming above the projects,
overwhelming Brooklyn,
living by what I saw at night,
with my eyes closed.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2

These first lines of "We Live by What We See at Night" introduce the tropical island of Puerto Rico, though readers are not sure who the poet is speaking too; who the "you" is yet (later in the poem readers learn he is referring to his father). The mountains "flicker in your sleep," suggesting this person isn't in Puerto Rico anymore, but rather, dreaming about it.

Lines 3-4

Still referring to the mountains in the first lines, here the poet describes the lush Puerto Rican landscape. Note the combination of sensory details used here: not only does the poet describe the color of the mountains, but he also uses the word "moist," allowing readers to imagine the scene using touch as well, like the feeling of a moss-covered rock under their hand. By repeating the same color twice in two lines, the poet is perhaps trying to express the overwhelming sight of green covering the entire countryside.

Lines 5-6

The poet, having described the lush green mountains of Puerto Rico in his father's dream, contrasts this with what his father saw when he woke up in New York or Texas, having been "evicted" from his homeland. Whereas the visions he saw while sleeping were natural and "green," when he wakes he sees more man-made structures like "rooftops" and "barracks," perhaps contrasting a more ideal garden-like island to cities where people have to crowd together in small apartment buildings or even bunks.

Lines 7-10

It's difficult to tell if this is a real bridge that the grandfather built, or just a figurative one. Often, the image of "crossing a bridge" is used as a metaphor to express a passage from one world to another, to express a personal growth and progression. In this case, since in the ninth and tenth lines readers learn the bridge is built over a river seen only in a dream, they might guess this is not a real bridge. Through figurative language, this image helps extend the scene into the past four generations: the poet, his father and his father's grandfather. Perhaps the poet is emphasizing the deep sense of tradition, son following father in a continuing line from the past, crossing the same bridges. Note, too, this is the second time the poet mentions dreaming, though this time it is "interrupted," suggesting his father's difficulty sleeping.

Lines 11-14

Here the poet moves from more descriptive and figurative language to a voice that tells readers explicitly how much his father must have "craved" to go back home after "thirty years exile." Again, the sense of deep tradition is emphasized through the word "burrowed," and in the simile "constant as your pulse." By using this image, perhaps the poet is reminding readers of the "bloodline," which is often used as a synonym for lineage or family record, again emphasizing the link of culture and ethnicity.

Lines 15-16

Here the poem shifts from past remembrance to the present. These lines help express how even though the poet, the son, was born in New York, he "inherited" his father's dreams of the island.

Lines 17-21

These are the first lines that introduce the speaker of the poem, the son, who insists he sees the same visions as his father. The poet transposes the mountains of Puerto Rico over the run-down city, perhaps helping create a sense of blending landscapes and cultures. Notice the verbs "looming" and "overwhelming," which seem to make the son's imagined visions predominant over the real projects in Brooklyn. It's the stories his father told of the garden-like island, perhaps, which are more important than the real city the exiled families now inhabit.

Lines 22-23

In these last lines, readers find the source of the poem's title, as well as a return to the world of dream. When the poet says he lives by what he sees at night with his eyes closed, perhaps he's suggesting that the dreams of Puerto Rico help sustain him through the harsh realities of the New York projects. Having come from a long line of exiled people, the poet learns from his father how to live on dream, hope and myth.

Themes

Inheritance

When one considers what a child inherits from a parent, the things that come to mind most often are either tangible items□money, houses, furniture, and so forth□or certain physical and personality traits□brown eyes, big feet, a hot temper, and so on. In "We Live by What We See at Night," Martín Espada addresses a different kind of inheritance, one more abstract and transcendental than the usual legacy. He has derived from his father the desire and the ability to dream of Puerto Rico, not in the typical sense of daydreaming about a beautiful tropical island but of a mental "transportation" there when he lies down to sleep.

Espada was born in New York, but his father was a native Puerto Rican. Before the poet ever had the opportunity to visit his family's homeland, he learned about its simplistic beauty and lush terrain from his father who had left the island decades before. The strong bond between the Espadas is typical of Puerto Rican family life, and not even the many years they had spent in the United States lessened the ties. It is both a sense of undying unity among family and a "craving for that island birthplace" that the father wants to pass on to his children, and this poem reflects his success in doing so.

The theme of legacy plays out not only in such direct references as "This was the inheritance / of your son" but also in the description of parallel dreams between the poet and his father. The dominant object in each is the mountainous countryside of Puerto Rico, and both men can envision it despite their actual physical surroundings of "East Harlem rooftops" and "the projects" of Brooklyn. Although much of the island's once-forested land has now been cleared for commercial purposes, still about 75 percent of the area consists of hills and mountains too steep for cultivation. This physical fact is likely a good reason that the mountainsides figure so heavily in the images that many Puerto Rican immigrants "crave" in the midst of skyscrapers and crowded streets. The father, here, has been able to convey that longing for and appreciation of the island's natural beauty to his son, although the young Espada never grew up surrounded by it.

A preference of Puerto Rico's attractive "moist green light" and the "green bamboo hillsides" over the very unattractive, poor areas of New York City is easy to understand. But an obvious partiality is not what makes inheritance so important in the Espada family. Actually, this theme stretches far beyond any one family to encompass the plight of many immigrants. People who have left their homelands to start new lives in America usually do so because they believe their lives will improve in many ways. Of course, that is not always the case, and leaving their homelands does not necessarily imply any hatred for the customs and natural surroundings of their native lands. Even though many families, including Espada's, may move to another country for economic reasons, it is very important to retain a sense of family and cultural traditions. Inheritance is valued, not just as a means of passing on whatever possessions a parent may leave to

a child but as a way of holding on to the customs, beliefs, rituals, and ethics of a family's native land.

Dreams and Reality

Throughout "We Live by What We See at Night," there is an interplay of dreams and reality. The poem begins with the father dreaming about "the mountains of Puerto Rico" before he awakens to the reality of "East Harlem rooftops / or Texas barracks." The dream reference returns immediately with the father now dreaming about crossing a bridge in Puerto Rico with his grandfather, glancing at the river below. But this is a scene that he can envision "only in interrupted dreaming," implying that wakefulness and, therefore, reality, keeps interfering with his ability to satisfy "the craving for that island birthplace" when he goes to sleep. The back-and-forth scenario is not as clear in the second stanza, but now it is the son, Espada himself, who fluctuates between pleasant dreams and harsh reality. He acknowledges that he, too, envisions at night the beautiful island where his father was born and was dreaming about Puerto Rico even before he had visited there himself. Reality checks back in with a mention of the "projects" in Brooklyn, the not-so-beautiful place where the poet actually lives.

The importance of dreams in the lives of immigrants and their offspring is evident in the title of the poem itself. To say one *lives* by what the mind sees at night while asleep makes a very strong statement about what day-to-day reality must be like. Many families who left Puerto Rico for the United States after the island became an American commonwealth in 1952 found themselves crowded into the slum areas of large cities, particularly New York, where the environment was a shocking change. Many also found themselves victims of racism as well as of poverty and unemployment, so it is easy to see why pleasant dreams of their native land were such a welcome relief after a day spent trying to survive harsh conditions, both mental and physical. Espada uses this theme very effectively in "We Live by What We See at Night" by concentrating on appealing descriptions of Puerto Rico while at the same time implying more subtly the ugliness of real life in a dilapidated area of a city.

Style

"We Live by What We See at Night" is written in free verse, which means the line length varies according to the changing moods of the poem rather than being determined by a set number of metric feet or syllables, as in formal verse. In this example, Espada uses fairly short lines throughout, which help slow down the speed of the poem, perhaps matching the quiet and contemplative voice of a man recounting a fond memory. If the lines were longer, stretching across the page, the poem would seem to gain more momentum, building up a chant or prayer-like effect. Espada chose to break his lines earlier, perhaps in order to create a slower effect and isolate the images, in turn emphasizing each further.

Historical Context

So much of Martín Espada's work is a reflection of his cultural and historical perspective that nearly every poem could be discussed in terms of what it says about a political or social event, military action, or displacement of immigrants. He often makes a point about a public act by describing its personal impact on an individual, whether it is a war, a riot, or an "eviction" of a people from their native land. "We Live by What We See at Night" takes place in both Puerto Rico and New York, and it spans the time of his father's youth on the island to thirty years later when the poet is dreaming of it, just as the older man does. This puts the poem's time frame in both the 1950s and the 1980s.

Puerto Rico's history is made up of one struggle after another to survive domination by countries seeking control of this beautiful, lush island whose name is Spanish for "rich port." Spain was in control when it went to war with the United States in 1898. The Spanish-American War ended the same year it began with the signing of the Treaty of Paris granting the United States sovereign power over Puerto Rico. For decades, there was an attempt to Americanize all aspects of the island and its people, including a failed effort to make English the dominant language. American corporations took over the sugar industry, resulting in a plantation economy that meant great wealth for some and destitution for others. Throughout this time, three main political factions came into existence in Puerto Rico, all with platforms based on the island's relationship with the United States: one group favored becoming a state, a second preferred maintaining the tie but having more self-government, and the third advocated total independence. Each faction had a strong voice at one time or another over the years, but the dominant force between 1940 and 1968 was the Popular Democratic Party, which favored a new self-governing relationship with the United States. In support of this party, the American Congress passed a law in 1950 allowing Puerto Ricans to draft their own constitution and to have full local self-government. The new constitution led to the establishment of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico in 1952, meaning it became an autonomous political entity whose association with the United States was voluntary.

Because of the booming job market in America after World War II, mass migration of Puerto Ricans began in 1947 and peaked throughout the 1950s. Between 1951 and 1959, an average of 47,000 islanders per year arrived in the United States, many settling in New York City. Such was the case with Espada's father. But, as "We Live by What We See at Night" implies, the dreams of a more prosperous and better life in America soon became nightmares for many immigrants who found themselves unwelcome in their new home. Racism, job discrimination, poverty, and a feeling of displacement all contributed to the disillusionment of immigrants, causing them to dream more of their homeland than of America.

Puerto Ricans who remained on the island during the 1950s saw an economic growth unlike any previous. As American industry moved in, many farmers and sugarcane growers became factory workers, and by 1955, income from manufacturing was greater than from agriculture. Individual income rose from $296 per year in 1950 to $1,384 per year in 1970. But the 1980s saw a downturn in both the American and Puerto Rican

economies. The recession in the United States during 1980-1981 had a dramatic effect on Puerto Ricans living in both countries. Jobs with decent wages became even harder to acquire, especially for immigrants in America who were already struggling with racial and ethnic issues in the work place. In Puerto Rico, the commonwealth's gross national product declined by 6 percent in 1982-1983, and federal budget cuts resulted in the loss of a jobs program and less availability of food stamps. Tension brought on by a steadily worsening economy on the island led to increased political unrest, particularly by those groups who continued to favor a complete break from the United States. During the early 1980s, there were several terrorist attacks on American military units in Puerto Rico, but the island endured the political strife and remained a commonwealth, as it still is today.

Writing poetry and essays as a young man in the 1970s and 1980s, Espada was more familiar with the downside of Puerto Rican immigration into the United States, based partly on his father's experiences as an immigrant and on his own observations of living conditions in barrios and slums. In an essay called "Postcard from the Empire of Queen Ixolib," he relates the story of his visit to Biloxi, Mississippi, to see the place where his father had been jailed fifty years earlier. The older Espada had refused to sit in the back of a bus as he traveled across the South and was arrested because of it. When young Espada arrived there, he found the jail and bus station had been torn down and replaced by casinos. In the essay inspired by this trip, he notes the irony of a Southern effort to pave over its old mistakes while shrines to Confederate President Jefferson Davis still dot the countryside. Although the poet and essayist would likely agree that millions of immigrants to the United States have not regretted the decision to leave their homeland and have indeed lived prosperous lives in America, he would probably also point out that there is another side. That side is the one portrayed in "We Live by What We See at Night," the one that assures that family history and culture remain alive from generation to generation.

Critical Overview

"We Live by What We See at Night" was first published in Espada's second collection *Trumpets from the Islands of Their Eviction* in 1987. Many critics praise Espada for his rich and nostalgic voice while recounting an "insistent theme of migration," as Robert Creeley writes in the book's introduction. As the title of the book suggests, the poems from this collection often serve as "songs" of a dislocated Puerto Rican people, recounting the stories, hardships and longings of those islanders forced from their homeland. Concerning the book's title, Diana Vélez, in her essay included in Espada's book, points out that "Puerto Ricans are a people evicted: evicted from an island in droves in the nineteen fifties by a development program called Operation Bootstrap."

Because Espada himself was born in America, he often focuses on the life of his Puerto Rican father, who was a very influential figure in his life. The poet in turn draws from the rich source of memory, myth, and dream found in his unique culture. Linda Frost, writing for *Minnesota Review,* calls this Espada's "mythic urge□[which] collapses historical event into personal experience." "This, too," Vélez adds, "is part of the poetic function□to bring that dream material to our awareness, to help us remember or re-member ourselves to a lost wholeness via a re-reading of our dreams."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in journals, and is an associate editor for a university communications department. In the following essay, she explains how such a brief, apparently simple poem can have far-reaching aspects and be much more complex than it may seem.

A poem that contains a dedication line□such as, *for my wife, to John,* or, in the case here, *for my father*□often connotes sentimentality, signaling that the work is very personal, if not autobiographical. Martín Espada's "We Live by What We See at Night" is both, and on the surface it is a thoughtful poem about a son's understanding and appreciation of his father's nostalgic feelings for his native country, Puerto Rico. Espada seems to offer this work as a loving tribute to keeping family unity and ethnic tradition alive in spite of the mental and physical barriers he and his relatives encounter on a daily basis in America. At the core of it, though, is something more complex, something inevitable and disturbing, especially to those immigrants who experience mixed feelings about migration and also for those citizens of the immigrant's new country who may mistake an immigrant's doubts for ungratefulness and disrespect. In other words, the problem presented in this poem is one of duality, and it is a problem that makes some Americans say to immigrants, If you think you've got it so bad here, go home.

These are harsh words for anyone to speak, and, of course, they are even more difficult to hear if you are the one to whom they are directed. And while there is no excuse for violent responses to uncomfortable environments on anyone's part□ native citizen or immigrant□it takes a real effort to sympathize with someone's situation before criticizing the newcomer's longing for home. In Espada's poem, the father has been living in the United States for at least thirty years, and his departure from Puerto Rico is called an "exile." This word is very telling of the double-edged sword that the father encountered in leaving the island, for it can mean two different things: on one hand, "exile" implies a forced removal from one's native land, and, on the other, it implies a self-imposed removal. So which was true of the older Espada? Did someone hold a gun to his head and tell him to get on the boat or else? Or did he feel personally compelled to leave Puerto Rico because of poor economic conditions and little hope for a successful future?

If you asked Espada, the son and poet, those questions, he would probably reply that poverty is like a gun to the head. And he would probably say that American colonialism, too, is like a pointed weapon to those who get caught in the big machine of industrialization, mass production, and other "improvements." These are points well taken, and yet there is still that other nagging side. If one is not actually physically forced to migrate to America, then there should be no complaints about the living conditions immigrants often find when they get here. If "moist green light" and "green bamboo hillsides" are what someone wants to wake up to, then East Harlem, New York, is not the place to go. So is the poem fair in its discontent with housing projects "overwhelming Brooklyn" as opposed to "the mountains"? Most likely, there is more to

the disillusionment than run-down buildings and rooftops and barracks. It is more what those items represent than what they physically are.

Many immigrants see their surroundings as a "prison" in which they have been placed by inhospitable hosts in the new country. They find the same poverty they tried to leave behind with the added frustration of discrimination and sometimes violent racial attacks. The inability to secure jobs with good wages causes most to lose hope of reaching the goals of prosperity and happiness that everyone in America is supposed to attain□this, of course, in light of the millions of Americans themselves who live with hunger and poor housing conditions every day of their lives. Most people in other lands do not see that side of America and cannot even imagine it. To them, the United States is truly that land of milk and honey where everyone lives in big houses, drives big cars, and buys whatever the heart desires. Those who live here, obviously, know better, and it does not take long for reality to set in for those who arrive with a distorted image.

"We Live by What We See at Night" suggests that Espada's father must have been dreaming an American dream before he left Puerto Rico for the United States. And if it was a mistaken image that lured him from home, it was also dreams that became his solace once the truth of day-to-day life in a New York barrio became impossible to deny. As the poem indicates, the visions that the mind conjures while asleep can be both beautiful and comforting, but an agitating reminder of real life still haunts an otherwise peaceful sleep. This is implied in the words "flickered" and "interrupted." It seems the father's rest is sometimes fitful, as though there is a tug of war between the clear image of the mountains and their sudden disappearance as the picture flickers on and off in his mind. The serene view of the river is also plagued by "interrupted dreaming," as though reality keeps banging on his mind's door to get in. But the poem is not an altogether unhappy one. Nor is it completely angry and accusatory. In its back-and-forth tone the poem mirrors the duality of an immigrant's life, and it is this duality that causes so much stress and discontent. It is also what makes the word "exile," with its dubious meaning, so important in the poem.

The title of the collection in which "We Live by What We See at Night" first appeared is *Trumpets from the Islands of Their Eviction.* Even stronger than exile, eviction leaves no room for doubt about whether a removal is forced or selfimposed. As a tenant lawyer in Chelsea, Massachusetts□ a poor suburb of Boston heavily populated by Hispanic immigrants□Espada certainly encountered his share of battles between immigrant renters and the landlords who served eviction notices for whatever reasons. As a poet, Espada compares this expulsion from one's house or apartment to the mass migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States after the island came under American control. And the numbers who left home were especially high during the period of "Operation Bootstrap" when many islanders got caught up in the frenzy of a new Americanized way of life in the 1950s. Whether this migration is equal to an eviction depends upon who is asked. But regard- less of the debate, one thing is for certain: the feeling of displacement was very real for the new arrivals, and it was exacerbated by the animosity and mistrust that greeted them from the first day in America.

Included in this same Espada collection are many other poems depicting the emotional and physical hardships of Hispanic immigrants to the United States. Consider these lines from one called "Toque de queda: Curfew in Lawrence:" "The mobs are gone: white adolescents / who chanted USA and flung stones / at the scattering of astonished immigrants, / ruddy faces slowing the car to shout spick / and wave beer cans." This sad and violent scene is played out over and over on the streets of New York and Boston and in any other city or town where people of different colors and from different cultural backgrounds encounter one another. Given this ominous fact, it is easy to see why a native Puerto Rican may have a "craving for that island birthplace" and why it has "burrowed" itself just as deeply in the soul of the immigrant as his "thirty years' exile" has tried to dig out.

Possibly the most discouraging aspect of "We Live by What We See at Night" is the fact that it was written in the 1980s, refers to times in the 1950s, and could just as easily be written today to describe some immigrants' lives on American streets at the outset of the twenty-first century. While several anti-discrimination laws have been passed and diversity issues appear regularly in newspapers and on talk shows across the nation, day-to-day life has not changed much for some. In all fairness, many Americans will point out instances of forced reverse discrimination and their feelings of outrage over the English language taking a back seat to Spanish in some school districts. Understandably, many citizens feel threatened by a continuing influx of people from all over the world into the United States, which has added greatly to problems of overcrowding and poverty in American cities. And some say it is time to close the door. But even if new immigration laws were passed to limit or stop (a very unlikely prospect) the movement of foreign citizens into the United States, those laws would not apply to Puerto Ricans. As members of an American commonwealth, the islanders are free to come to the mainland whenever they like and to return just as easily if they choose to do so. But in spite of any speculation about future laws, an answer to long-standing problems between cultures and races is not likely to be found in legal actions anyway. And until a Puerto Rican immigrant can lie down in his bed in New York at night and dream of the life he is living in America, he will need to find comfort and peace in living with his dreams of the land he left behind.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "We Live by What We See at Night," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Piano is a Ph. D. candidate in English at Bowling Green State University. In the following essay, she analyzes how cultural identity is transferred from generation to generation through the act of remembering.

Historically, the United States has been a place of new beginnings for millions of people from Europe, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. In fact, the "immigrant experience" is part of our cultural heritage as Americans. With its promise of economic prosperity, personal liberty, and upward mobility, the United States offers many immigrants the chance to make their lives, as well as their children's lives, better than it was in the "old country." Yet, as much as America has been described as "the land of the free and the home of the brave," expatriation, along with its attendant assimilation into an alien culture, can be a difficult experience, especially for those who still long for their homeland. In fact, the lingering memories of life before immigration and the traditions and values of the "old country" can be clung to fiercely. Therefore, for many immigrants, memories of their former homeland are an important source of cultural transference to their offspring who are first generation Americans. In his poem, "We Live by What We See at Night," Martín Espada explores the psychic landscape of the immigrant experience in the United States, revealing how cultural identity is transferred from generation to generation through the act of remembering.

Told from the son's point of view, a first-generation Puerto Rican "born in New York," the poem examines both the son's and the father's relationship to the "old world" of Puerto Rico by contrasting it to the "new world" of New York where his father now lives. The stark contrast between these two worlds is expressed in the descriptions the narrator uses. For example, the poem opens with a lengthy periodic sentence that builds up several images of Puerto Rico as a world that is tranquil, natural, and deeply familiar to the father. Thus, in the first stanza, "the mountains of Puerto Rico," the "moist green light," and "green bamboo hillsides" all reveal an intimacy with the landscape that only comes from having lived there and remembering what it was like. In addition, the image of "the bridge built by your grandfather over a river" illustrates how leaving the homeland also involves breaking family ties by leaving one's country of birth. To the narrator's father, Puerto Rico has become an "imagined geography," an alternative landscape that provides him with solace from the harsh world he confronts in the United States. Thus, compared to "waking to East Harlem rooftops or Texas barracks," the memories of Puerto Rico's natural beauty lull the narrator's father into a dream world that is peaceful and vibrant. In this way, Espada contrasts the rural images of Puerto Rico to the harsh image of the immigrant's current residence in a metropolitan environment to show the psychological strain that many immigrants undergo when leaving their homeland. Often what they have given up can never equal what they now have.

Espada emphasizes the idea of "imagined geographies" by referring to the memories of Puerto Rico that his father has while sleeping or dreaming. They flicker in his sleep and are glimpsed but not completely seen. For the immigrant whose life may not have

turned out in the United States the way he or she had expected, the dreams of a better life are now superseded by fragmented memories of what life was like back home. These memories may have faded, but they are indelibly a part of a past that can never be forgotten. Yet these memories seem to surface only in a dream state. They create an impression of hope in what appears to be dreary circumstances by providing a space for the father to revisit his past. However, the dark side of these alluring images is that they produce a "craving for that island birthplace." They make the father restless and unsatisfied. Even after thirty years of exile, these memories are as "constant as your pulse." By holding on to these memories, the father may be unconsciously refusing to embrace his life in the United States.

Thus, in the first stanza, Espada reveals the troubled psychic landscape of the father, who dreams of returning yet knows that, either for economic or political reasons, he cannot. The desire for the homeland is emphasized by Espada's repetitious use of the subordinating conjunction *when* that opens each phrase in the first stanza. In addition, because these yearnings occur when his father is dreaming, a reader senses that actually returning to his homeland is an impossibility. Thus, the father draws on these memories of the homeland for sustenance and comfort when the day-to-day circumstances of his life are most likely difficult and harsh. Images in the poem that provide glimpses of what life is like for him in the United States are few but telling. For example, "East Harlem rooftops" suggest living in a crowded ghetto that offers little in the way of vistas or natural beauty. However, at the same time that these memories reveal a separate reality to the one that the father lives during the day, they also promote a sense of pride in cultural heritage and family history. Despite his separation from his homeland of Puerto Rico, the father refuses to repudiate his cultural background. For many immigrants, assimilating into mainstream culture requires sacrificing their heritage, their native language, and their customs in order to be accepted as Americans. Yet the father seems to resist assimilation by relaying the memories of life in Puerto Rico to his son. In this way, the father provides the narrator with a sense of his cultural identity as a Puerto Rican despite his being "born in New York."

The second stanza reveals the effect that the father's memories have had on the narrator. The inheritance he has been given is not economic or material gain but pride in his cultural make up. Compared to the grim environment of the inner city, the memories that his father shares with him allow him to escape momentarily to an imaginary geography, as when he writes, "years before I saw Puerto Rico, I saw the mountains looming above the projects." In this way, father and son are joined by the commonality of their cultural heritage. It transcends the dire material circumstances of their lives and gives them something to "see at night." As the "we" in the title suggests, both father and son dream of the homeland that offers them an alternative reality to the one they live during the day. Interestingly enough, the poem is dedicated to Espada's father. This dedication offers the reader a hint that the poem's content may be autobiographical and may reflect on the poet's own relationship with his father. The poet Robert Creeley, in the introduction to Espada's book *Trumpets from the Islands of their Eviction,* claims that "it is the literal community and person of Frank Espada who so invests his own

son's commitment. It is his father's family and relationships that preoccupy the son finally."

The power of this poem lies in its ability to reveal how cultural heritage binds father and son through the contrasting of two different environments the natural beauty of Puerto Rico to the inner city of New York. The distinction he makes between these environments is, he suggests, like night and day. The night offers an alternative reality that daylight cannot. The verb "to see," which Espada uses repeatedly in the second stanza, engenders the dreams that his father has in the first stanza. For the son who has never been to the father's homeland, it is not difficult to imagine what life is like there as he has come to know it through his father's dream-like memories. These memories provide him with a vision of an alternate reality to the reality of the projects in Brooklyn; they are something he can *see* with his eyes closed.

Source: Doreen Piano, Critical Essay on "We Live by What We See at Night," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Topics for Further Study

Imagine a place where your ancestors lived that you would rather be in now, and write a poem describing it in detail.

Compare the attitude of the speaker of this poem with the attitude of the speaker in Tennyson's "Ulysses." What does each poem say about experience? About family? Which speaker are you more inclined to agree with? Why?

Do you think the beauty of Puerto Rico would be as important to the speaker if he lived in a beautiful place now? Is he saying that people should live in the past?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: "Operation Bootstrap" is set in motion in Puerto Rico, involving intensive efforts by the United States to revamp the economy, attract new industry, improve schools and hospitals, and increase manufacturing capabilities. Whereas some islanders benefit from the massive restructuring, others feel displaced and overcome by American interference.

1980s: A Puerto Rican terrorist group calling itself the Macheteros claims responsibility for attacks on American military installations on the island. This includes a physical assault of personnel on a navy bus and the blowing up of eight air force planes at an Air National Guard site.

Today: The question of Puerto Rico's status remains controversial. In a plebiscite called in the mid-1990s, a narrow majority of Puerto Rican voters decided to maintain the island's status as an American commonwealth.

1950s: Puerto Rican poets and writers seeking to publish their work are shunned by American publishing houses, leaving many creative voices silent because of prejudice and a lack of respect for immigrants' writing abilities.

1980s: Major New York publishers and other small presses come to recognize the commercial value in printing work by previously ignored writers, particularly Hispanics and blacks. A growing body of work by Puerto Rican writers living in New York□coined "Nuyorican" literature□ is especially popular.

Today: Hispanic authors receive more recognition than in previous decades and most university curricula include courses on Hispanic literature, as well as that of other minority groups. However, the playing field is by no means even for minorities seeking to publish their writing, and many times Hispanic writers must turn to presses such as Arte Publico Press and Bilingual Review Press for publication.

What Do I Read Next?

Born in 1928, Piri Thomas was a Puerto Rican immigrant who grew up in Spanish Harlem in New York City. After a life of racial discrimination, street fighting, drugs, and a prison sentence for shooting a police officer, Thomas wrote his now-famous account of growing up as an outsider in America, called *Down These Mean Streets.* Originally published in 1967, a thirtieth-anniversary edition came out in 1997 with a new afterward discussing the worsening conditions on the streets of Spanish Harlem.

Martín Espada's fifth collection of poetry, *Imagine the Angels of Bread: Poems* (1996), contains a series of autobiographical poems recalling family, school, and work experiences. This is a mixture of personal and political poems in which he addresses the bread of imagination, the bread of the table, and the bread of justice.

The Spanish-American War does not always receive as much attention in history books as other conflicts. In *Crucible of Empire: The Spanish- American War and Its Aftermath* (1993), James C. Bradford and others address the issue and show that this war was actually America's emergence as a world power.

The classic novel *Native Son* by Richard Wright, first published in 1940, tells the story of a young black man in the Chicago of the 1930s who strikes back angrily and violently against the poverty and racism he faces on a daily basis. Some critics have claimed that American culture was changed forever after the publication of this graphic, provocative, and challenging book.

Further Study

Espada, Martín, *A Mayan Astronomer in Hell's Kitchen,* W. W. Norton, 2000.

Espada's most recent collection of poetry continues his themes of displacement and despair among various groups of people. Here, he includes a nun staging a White House vigil to protest her torture and a man on death row mourning the loss of his books.

□□□, ed., *El Coro: A Chorus of Latino and Latina Poetry,* University of Massachusetts Press, 1997.

This is an excellent cross-section of contemporary Latino and Latina works. Poets range from farm workers and gang members to a medical doctor and professional chef.

Ortiz Cofer, Judith, *The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry,* University of Georgia Press, 1993.

Like Espada, Judith Ortiz Cofer is a first-generation Puerto Rican poet who grew up in a barrio in an American city. This is a collection of poems, essays, and short fiction that discuss Cofer's struggles with a cross-cultural childhood. Its themes are the same as those in "We Live by What We See at Night".

Ratiner, Steven, "Martin Espada: Poetry and the Burden of History," *The Christian Science Monitor Electronic Edition,* www.csmonitor.com (March 6, 1991).

In this online interview with Espada, Ratiner calls Espada's poetry "ferocious, tender, ardently political, [and] touchingly biographical." Reading Espada's responses to the questions is helpful in understanding his poetry.

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BOOKRAGS

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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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