Ways to Live Study Guide

Ways to Live by William Stafford

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Introduction

"Ways to Live" was written from July 19 through 21 of 1993, just over a month before William Stafford's death in August of that year. Stafford was well known as a hard worker and diligent poet, often producing a poem a day. This poem comes from his book *The Way It Is: New & Selected Poems,* in a section containing poems that Stafford wrote in his final days that is titled "There's a Thread You Follow." It is a mark of Stafford's dedication to poetry that this collection contains a poem written on the morning of his death at age seventy-nine.

Stafford's method of producing "Ways to Live" is evident in the final product. On the one hand, it is clearly more spontaneous and loosely knit than poems that have been worked over and revised constantly. The four sections could almost stand as separate poems themselves and have only a thin, abstract relationship to each other. On the other hand, Stafford shows the poetic sensibilities that developed over years of daily practice so that even a poem that he had no time to revise shows more clarity and coherence than another poet might get from working and reworking a piece. This is a poem about growing old and giving up life gracefully, and it has the authority of having been written by an expert on the subject, a revered wordsmith at the very end of his life.

Author Biography

William Stafford was born in 1914 in Hutchinson, Kansas. His parents instilled in him moral values and a decidedly nonconformist, independent view of the world. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the family moved frequently within Kansas. Stafford worked constantly, delivering papers, harvesting beets, or apprenticing as an electrician's assistant. He attended junior college and then the University of Kansas, where he received a bachelor's degree in 1937. When America entered World War II in 1941, Stafford registered as a conscientious objector. In place of military service, he worked in government camps in a program of "alternative service under civilian direction." Throughout the war, he was sent to California, Illinois, and Arkansas, where he was involved in soil conservation projects and battling forest fires. The experience of standing up for his pacifist beliefs during a war that was widely supported made Stafford comfortable with following his own ideas. It also honed him as a writer; because the labor assigned to conscientious objectors was so grueling, he was too tired to write at night, so Stafford and some of the other men in the camps would rise before the sun to write, a practice he continued throughout his life.

During the war, Stafford met and married Dorothy Frantz, a school teacher whose father was a minister. He returned to the University of Kansas after the war and earned a master's degree before moving to San Francisco to work for Church World Services, a relief agency. His memoir about life in the conscientious objector camps, *Down in My Heart,* was published in 1947. He wrote constantly and had several poems published, and then in 1948, he accepted a teaching position at Lewis and Clark college in Portland, Oregon, with which he was affiliated off and on for the rest of his life.

During the first years of the 1950s, he attended the writing program at the University of Iowa, receiving a Ph.D. in 1954. It was not until 1960, when he was forty-six, that Stafford published his first book of poetry with a small press in southern California, selling a few hundred copies. It was his second book, *Traveling Through the Dark*, that made Stafford a major figure on the poetry scene. That book won the National Book Award for 1963. The following year, Stafford won the Shelley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America, and two years later, he received a Guggenheim fellowship. Stafford continually wrote and published and kept on teaching in Portland. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the generation that opposed the war in Vietnam embraced Stafford's meditative, pacifist beliefs, and he was frequently invited to be a guest speaker at college campuses around the country. Stafford also toured on behalf of the U.S. Information Agency to Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh in 1972. Stafford retired from teaching in 1980 but continued to write throughout the rest of his life. "Ways to Live" was written within months of his death in 1993.

Poem Text

1. India

In India in their lives they happen
again and again, being people or
animals. And if you live well
your next time could be even better.

That's why they often look into your eyes
and you know some far-off story
with them and you in it, and some
animal waiting over at the side.

Who would want to happen just once?
It's too abrupt that way, and
when you're wrong, it's too late
to go back□you've done it forever.
And you can't have that soft look when you
pass, the way they do it in India.

2. Having It Be Tomorrow

Day, holding its lantern before it,
moves over the whole earth slowly
to brighten that edge and push it westward.
Shepherds on upland pastures begin fires
for breakfast, beads of light that extend
miles of horizon. Then it's noon and
coasting toward a new tomorrow.

If you're in on that secret, a new land
will come every time the sun goes
climbing over it, and the welcome of children
will remain every day new in your heart.
Those around you don't have it new,
and they shake their heads turning gray every
morning when the sun comes up. And you laugh.

3. Being Nice and Old

After their jobs are done old people
cackle together. They look back and shiver,
all of that was so dizzying when it happened;
and now if there is any light at all it

knows how to rest on the faces of friends.
And any people you don't like, you just turn
the page a little more and wait while they
find out what time is and begin to bend
lower; or you can just turn away and
let them drop off the edge of the world.

4. Good Ways to Live

At night outside it all moves or
almost moves□trees, grass,
touches of wind. The room you have
in the world is ready to change.
Clouds parade by, and stars in their
configurations. Birds from far
touch the fabric around them□you can
feel their wings move. Somewhere under
the earth it waits, that emanation
of all things. It breathes. It pulls you
slowly out through doors or windows
and you spread in the thin halo of night mist.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4

The first section of "Ways to Live" is subtitled "India." The most common religion in India, Hinduism, holds firm to the belief that all souls are returned to Earth in new bodies after their deaths□ the doctrine of "transmigration" or "reincarnation." The first line of this poem mirrors the circular motion of reincarnation with repetition, using "in" twice (actually, three times, since the sound is part of "India") and putting "they" and "their" close together. This same effect occurs in the second line with "again and again." This stanza ends with an optimistic note, of life going from "well" to "better," with no mention at all of a poorly lived life. This optimism is offered to the reader, since the poem uses the words "you" and "your" to describe this better life.

Lines 5-8

In the second stanza, the distinction between those who believe in reincarnation and those who do not, between "them" and "you," is made clearer. "They," the people from India, are the ones who remember past lives, while Western thinkers, even the ones who were part of those past lives, do not remember them. This leads to the odd situation described in the second stanza: an Indian, looking into the eyes of a Westerner who does not understand reincarnation, can see a scene from another life, "some far-off story." The Western person will not remember it. Oddly, the scene might involve previous incarnations of both participants. Even though they might be from different parts of the world in this life, the poem is indicating that they were both acquainted in a past life.

Line 8 adds an unusual twist to the image of two people meeting and only one knowing that they have met in a previous life: Stafford adds "some / animal waiting over at the side." There is no explanation for this detail, but the fact that animals are beyond philosophical systems makes this one an appropriate way of bridging the differences between Eastern and Western philosophies.

Lines 9-12

In the third stanza, Stafford extols the benefits of reincarnation, phrasing it in terms of opportunity to make up for past mistakes. When life happens "just once," he says, one finds out too late how to avoid things that go wrong. There is a permanence to action that the poem presents as being almost too frightening to think about, making reincarnation seem a much more comforting, preferred system of belief. The rhetorical question at the start of this stanza, in line 9, serves to make readers agree with the narrative point of view, making it seem ridiculous to believe in anything except reincarnation.

Lines 13-14

In the short couplet that ends this section, there are two words emphasized. The first is the word "soft," which is used to sum up the poem's depiction of the way reincarnationists view the world, capturing its gentle and forgiving nature. The second most important word is the last word in this section, "India." Stafford uses this word to refer to the religious theory of reincarnation because it gives the theory a human presence, not a familiar one, but an exotic one, adding an element of mystery and respect that would be missing if he only talked about the abstract concept.

Lines 15-21

The second section of the poem, called "Having It Be Tomorrow," discusses the movement of the sun across the face of the earth. It starts with sunlight represented as the light of a lantern that precedes day. The poem views the earth from far above, tracking the movement of sunlight as it creeps across the face of the globe, but in lines 18 and 19 it focuses closely enough on worldly matters not only to identify shepherds but to identify their purpose for lighting fires before sunrise, for making their breakfast. Line 20 has an abrupt time shift: whereas this stanza tracks the slowly rising sun for five lines, there is a sudden jolt when the poem announces, "then it's noon." After noon, the height of the sun's climb, Stafford does not view the sun in terms of setting but as starting the process that will lead to the sunrise the next day. This mirrors the optimism of the first stanza, which only presented good and better lives and did not raise any potentially negative aspects.

Lines 22-28

Stafford presents the motion of the sun as a "secret," because most people fail to think of it in the way that he presents it, as a "new land" that arrives over and over again every time a new day begins. For those who look at it this way, the poem promises a continuously new perspective, described here with the "welcome of children" that can be felt constantly in the heart. In the last half of this stanza, he contrasts those who have this ever-renewing perspective with those who lack it. Those people are burdened with negativity—they shake their heads—and age takes its toll on them, turning their hair gray. Although there is opposition between the two ways of viewing things, Stafford does not present it as a bitter contest. The side that he advocates as being the correct view, the one that is always renewed, sees the bitterness of the other side and laughs.

Lines 29-38

The third section of the poem is called "Being Nice and Old." It begins by mentioning a time when old people can look back over their lives. The phrase "after their jobs are done" generally means retirement, in a culture that looks at a person in terms of employment, but the poem implies that it means something more general, referring not

just to paying jobs but to responsibilities and personal duties. The previous two stanzas focused, first of all, on making clear distinctions between Westerners and Easterners, and then on the distinction between optimists about the future and those who see no reason for optimism. This stanza has a central distinction between friends and "people you don't like." The friends, lines 32-33 explain, will be lit by memories of "all that was so dizzying when it happened." The poem does not advise bitterness toward enemies, explaining that they will suffer by becoming older and that one can eventually just ignore them until they fall away from notice ("drop off the edge of the world").

Lines 39-50

"Good Ways to Live" is the fourth and final section of the poem. It is a twelve-line stanza that shows the author's awareness and acceptance of his impending death. Nature is presented as a continuum of life. The trees and grass and clouds are moved by the wind. Birds touch the sky, which is seen as a continuous fabric that reaches down to the ground, so that humans on the ground can feel the effect of their flapping. For a short while, in lines 46-48, the poem hints that the life force that runs through all of these things might be dark and sinister: it exists under ground and reaches out to pull people to their deaths. The last line, though, brings the focus of the poem back to the discussion of reincarnation at the beginning. Death is presented as a release that puts the human spirit back into the same atmosphere that "Good Ways to Live" presents as being alive, implying that the spirit will live again in the things of nature. The use of the word "halo" in line 50 hints at a beautification of the spirit as it becomes angelic in death.

Themes

Reincarnation

In this poem, Stafford talks about reincarnation as a second chance to correct the things that were done wrong in this life. His version of this religious belief might be a little oversimplified, in that he presents this doctrine as if it means that one will lead the same life, over and over, with added understanding of what was done right and wrong each time before. If it were that simple, then reincarnation really would be a matter of steering around troubles that one can anticipate coming. True Indian beliefs about reincarnation are, of course, much more complicated, with the spirit ending up in worse circumstances or better circumstances, depending on the *karma* gained in subsequent lives. In Eastern religions, one's chances with reincarnation are more uncertain than Stafford presents them here, but the idea of reincarnation does help this poem make a point about the abruptness of life, as it is understood by Western thinkers.

By personifying the idea of reincarnation, Stafford is able to present a small drama between a stereotypical Indian character, called "them" in the first section of the poem, and a stereotypical Westerner, referred to as "you." "They" have the power to look into "your" eye and see a scene from the past involving both participants. This concept of reincarnation has more poetic than religious significance, but, as a poetic situation, it does provide a powerful image. Stafford seems to understand that the mystical powers that he attributes to Indians are exaggerated, given the way that he says, at the end of the first section, "the way they do it in India." The tone of this line suggests a winking selfmockery, to suggest that he is fully aware that the Indian belief in reincarnation does not operate in the way he has presented.

In the last section of the poem, Stafford presents a more spiritual view of reincarnation, as opposed to the exaggeration in the first section. The poem's last line has a dying person "spread into the thin halo of night mist": the person is joined with nature, which the earlier lines in section 4 show to be alive, but is not concerned with past lives and previous episodes that were lived between strangers hundreds of years earlier.

Hope

The metaphor of the sun circling the earth in the second section of the poem is one that radiates a sense of hopefulness. As is often the case, sunlight is used to represent security and knowledge, as a result of the way it overcomes the uncertain shadows of night. Stafford refers to the moments before sunlight arrives, providing readers with a striking visual image of darkened hills lit sporadically with campfires, anticipating the light and heat that will soon blanket the land. As the sun rises over the earth, it is personified, compared to a person lighting a dark place with a lantern, implying that the rising sun is on a mission to bring light.

Most of the first stanza of "Having It Be Tomorrow" focuses on the rising sun, which is almost a universal symbol of hope. When the focus shifts, late in that stanza, to the afternoon sun, there is more than an abrupt time change: the symbolic meaning of the afternoon sun is different. If the sun is charging toward light in the morning, in the afternoon it is charging toward the darkness of night. That is not the way this poem presents it, however; instead, Stafford willfully ignores the symbolic implications of the coming night and views that sun after its zenith as "coasting toward a new tomorrow."

The second stanza of section 2 presents hope as a "secret," one that most people are not aware of. Stafford makes this hope attractive by presenting the benefits that it offers: the land is always new, and "the welcome of children / will remain every day in your heart." Those without hope still have the sun come up upon them every morning, but they do not embrace it, instead facing it with a negative shake of the head. The person with hope faces each new day with a laugh.

Maturity

This poem is about spiritual maturity, but it approaches such maturity through the most familiar sense of the word, that of human aging. The third section of the poem, "Being Nice and Old," uses the word "nice" ironically, to play off expectations that people have about elderly people. There is, in fact, nothing particularly "nice" in the traditional sense about the vision of old age presented here. Instead, Stafford defines what he thinks is nice about growing old. Whereas traditional concepts of maturity tend to discourage looking back at one's life as a kind of weakness, "living in the past," this poem shows a light from the past events that shines on the faces of one's friends. Also, maturity often is taken to include a sort of benign acceptance of those whom one has had trouble with in the past. Stafford's version does include a peace with one's former enemies, but this peace is not reached through a spirit of charity. Characters in this poem reach maturity when they are able to turn away from those whom they do not like. The enemies, he assures readers, will feel the effects of old age, and because they will suffer in this way, there is no reason for the individual to wish ill upon them. Even if they are not punished by old age, the poem still advises readers to ignore those whom they do not like, and as the reader ages, the others will "drop off the face of the earth." Although the poem does not equate maturity with being charitable, the end result is the same: anger and hatred are ignored, and peace is gained.

Harmony

The end of this poem describes a mystical harmony of nature, with the actions of all things affecting others. The phrase "it all moves or / almost moves" implies an interconnectedness that most people do not see when they look at the world. Stafford gives examples of trees and grass moved by the wind, and, high above, clouds moved by a wind that cannot be felt on the ground. The reference to stars indicates a heightened sense of awareness, since the naked eye cannot generally observe such

motion. All of these motions, from the obvious to the sublime, are catalogued under the heading of "Good Ways to Live."

In the middle of the final section, Stafford shifts his focus from things that can be observed visually to things that are connected by touch. The sky is not seen as something far away but as a "fabric" that responds to the motion of birds flying by, so that a person on the ground can feel the ripples made by their wings. By pointing out the harmony between the sky and the ground, Stafford brings together all of nature.

In the end, the poem also brings the supernatural into the equation. Although it had previously denied that Western thinkers—"you"—would have the sensitivity to understand the afterlife, the final lines describe the experience of death as being joined with the other aspects of nature that have already been joined together. Death, "that emanation of all things," rises up from under ground and pulls the essence of the person into the air, turning life into a night mist. The reincarnation explored in the first section is achieved in a more meaningful way than just repetition of past scenes; the rising sun presents the hope of bringing warmth and light to the night mist; and the truest sign of maturity in this poem is a willingness to let go of the good and bad things of life.

Style

Structure

It is not very unusual for a poem to be broken down into numbered sections the way that "Ways to Live" is. The most frequent observation about such poems is that each of the four segments, each of which has its own individual title, could stand by itself as an independent poem. This may be true, but once that is established, it helps to consider why Stafford decided to present them as one entire unit. There are similar themes that run through all of the sections of this poem, drawing relationships between them even when the subject matter of each might seem unrelated to the rest.

The first section, "India," for instance, is narrowly concerned with Hindu religious beliefs, a subject that is not discussed in the rest of the poem. In a more general sense, though, it is about what happens after death, a subject that is implied in the second section in the sun heading toward a new tomorrow and in the fourth by the "emanation" spreading one's life into the halo of night mist that makes all things move. In the third section, the Hindu seeing a "far-off story" in one's eyes is repeated by the way old people see the light of the past on their current friends. This third section, "Being Nice and Old," is the part of the poem that fits least securely with the rest because it is the only one that focuses entirely on worldly events. It comes in the right place for such an unusual stanza: the theme of continuing life is shown in the first section and then anchored by the second section, and, after the third section diverts slightly, the fourth section brings that theme back again.

Audience

This poem is addressed to a fairly specific audience, as is indicated by the frequent use of the second person, "you." In "India," Stafford is quite specific about what he thinks his audience believes, defining his readers by how they differ from "them," who would be the people of India. He is not specifically addressing all of the world's population outside of India, but rather the people who do not hold the particular beliefs that he ascribes to Indians here. Later, in the second stanza of "Having It Be Tomorrow," his reference to "you" allows that his reader might have the sort of insight that was only allowed "them" in the first section. The "you" in the third section is someone that the speaker of the poem is giving advice to, explaining how to deal with friends and family alike. In the fourth section, the reference to "you" is descriptive, showing what happens to any person upon death.

Of course, a poem written in the second person is not limited only to the people described. The effect of addressing readers as "you" is to establish whom the author is thinking of, but that does not mean that other people cannot understand and appreciate the concepts being discussed. For instance, people of India are clearly "them" in the first section, but the sentiments Stafford examines here are accessible to Indian

readers. Addressing readers as "you" does not exclude readers who are not described by a poem's use of that pronoun; it just gives readers a fair understanding of whom the author has in mind while writing. Readers can then adjust their expectations and their judgments to help get a clearer sense of the points the author is trying to make.

Tone

The "tone" of a written work is determined by the author's attitude that the author shows toward his audience. In "Ways to Live," Stafford's tone is the one that runs throughout most of his poetry: calm, assured, and insightful. It is not too abstract or intellectual, even though the subject matter of the poem itself has more intellectual depth than many readers are accustomed to. One reason this poem can be viewed as welcoming the reader is its use of "you," which serves to bring readers into the material being discussed. Readers might not feel that Stafford actually knows them, but the use of "you" does establish a conversational tone that tends to make people feel comfortable and to establish them as part of the discussion.

The strongest impression of this poem's tone is one of good-natured forgiving. Emphasis is given to things like light, laughter, and "the welcome of children" that is felt in your heart. The word "halo" in the last line is instrumental in establishing how readers feel about the overall piece. It is a word usually used in a religious context, but it also describes an indistinct, vague light. It is a word that evokes feelings of warmth and spirituality, and this mood fits perfectly with the subject matter being discussed.

Personification

In order to make a greater impact on the reader's imagination, Stafford uses personification in several places in this poem. In several places, he talks about inanimate objects or abstract concepts as if they have human behavior and motivations. In "Having It Be Tomorrow," for instance, "day" is said to be holding a lantern and consciously using that lantern to brighten the earth as it eases across the land. In "Being Nice and Old," the light "knows how to rest on the faces of friends." The most striking examples of personification occur in the last section, "Good Ways to Live." This section starts by hinting that all of the things of the earth move because that is what they want to do. It then goes on to describe the motion of clouds and stars across the sky as "parading," to give a sense of the self-assurance to their motion. The vague concept that is referred to as "that emanation of all things" is treated like a person: it breathes, it waits, and then it moves to abduct a person as if it knows that this is its purpose in this world.

Historical Context

Written in the 1990s, when "multiculturalism" had become a common idea among academics and intellectuals, this poem shows enough awareness about world culture to recognize that reincarnation is one of the central tenets of the Hindu religion, which is the dominant religion of India. Still, it shows little understanding of the details of the Hindu belief in rebirth, other than the broad idea that humans may come back as other forms of life after they have died. William Stafford was a poet well known for his skill in capturing the feeling of the American West, with its open plains representing both desolation and possibility, and for understanding the American moral beliefs that his countrymen so seldom saw represented in print. To some degree, his superficial rendering of Asian religious belief can be considered another facet of his regional identity, since Americans are notorious throughout the world for understanding little about cultures outside of their own.

There are over 790 million Hindus in the world. Of these, nearly 750 million reside in India, making up 80 percent of that country's population. The roots of the Hindu religion can be traced to the year 1500 B.C., when it was brought into India by the Aryans, an Indo-European race of warriors that then merged with Indian intellectualism. As such, Hinduism is one of the world's oldest religions, and its ideas about the existence of an individual soul that continues after death have probably had an influence on all major religions that have followed. It is safe to assume that, when Stafford refers to Indian religious belief in "Ways to Live," he is referring to the religion called Hindu by outsiders, although it is important to note that this religion's practitioners have no such word for their system of beliefs.

The Hindu religion centers on the belief that each individual has a soul, which is a part of Brahma, the Supreme Soul. At death, this soul is separated from the body that it occupied, but it does not leave Earth. Instead, it comes back to life as another living thing. What it comes back as is determined by the *karma* that it has accumulated in the most recent existence. Karma comes from the degree to which one has avoided causing injury. Those who are truly malicious are burdened with bad karma and will return the next time around as a lower form of life, such as an animal or a member of one of the lower classes. Good karma assures one a higher form of existence. Through eliminating passions and gaining knowledge, one can, over the course of several lifetimes, be freed of reincarnation. For followers of the Hindu faiths, the goal is, in the end, to be liberated from suffering and from having to be reborn, and to have one's soul joined to the Supreme Soul.

Critical Overview

William Stafford was recognized as a unique poet, one who focused his attention on common life and moral decisions at a time when most poetry was moving away from a general moral judgment and toward an expression of individual perspective. Critics seldom failed to note Stafford's kind, gentle, fatherly poetic voice, which was perhaps a result of the fact that he was older than many of his contemporaries when he started to gain critical attention□ Stafford was forty-six years old when his first book of poetry was published. For example, Louis Simpson, himself a respected poet, noted while reviewing Stafford's first collection in 1961 the way that he was able to maintain a personal voice while writing about significant matters that affect all readers. "Contrary to what many poets believe nowadays," Simpson wrote, "it is not necessary to spill your guts on the table in order to be 'personal,' nor to relate the details of your aunt's insanity. What is necessary is originality of imagination and at least a few ideas of your own." These are the graces that he found in Stafford's work, and this assessment of Stafford stayed fairly consistent over the next thirty years.

Perhaps Stafford's most lasting impression on critics was his independence from the poetic trends of his time. In the 1960s, he became recognized by a small group of writers and intellectuals with his second collection *Traveling Through the Dark*. His audience was impressed with his moral strength in a time of shifting moral values. The public, divided over the increasingly unpopular war in Vietnam, also respected Stafford for his personal history as a conscientious objector during World War II. At a time when he was riding high in public esteem, though, when he could have rested on his popularity, he wrote poems that broke from the style expected of him and took the chance of alienating fans. Gerald Burns noted, while reviewing a 1970 collection, that "Stafford is three very hard things to find in America: an adult, a poet, and an adult poet□and he does a very hard thing in *Allegiances*. He drops out. He can afford to; in his case, it's being a good citizen." Burns explains that the poems are dense and deliberate: "Reading them slowly is almost frightening because you see how thoroughly they are *meant*."

By the 1990s, Stafford was just as respected as he ever was, and just as prolific, still writing a poem a day and publishing dozens each year in little magazines. Ben Howard started a review in *Poetry*, one of the most influential poetry periodicals published in America, by telling his audience directly, "Schools and movements come and go, but over the past three decades the steady, demotic voice of William Stafford has deepened rather than changed." Howard recognizes the fact that Stafford's "casual tone" is frequently incongruous with the subject matter he explored in his old age, such as death and loss of old friends. In his review, Howard points out places in Stafford's poetry where lines that seem intended to spread comfort and cheer to the reader fall flat, making the intelligent optimism he was known for seem forced and unconvincing. Still, he is unwilling to go along with other critics who do not think Stafford has the emotional depth to recognize the negative side of life. As Howard puts it, "Stafford's controversial 'way of writing' has produced its share of ephemera, here as in his previous collections; but it has also allowed access to the 'rich darkness' of the unknown and has

strengthened a capacity, rare in contemporary poetry, for intuiting the miraculous." He could have been writing about "Ways to Live," which was written the following year and not published until years later, when he observed that "in the best of his new poems, a poet's sad wisdom fuses with a child's sense of wonder and a grown man's reverence for nature."

The book in which "Ways to Live" was published, called *The Way It Is*, was published five years after the poet's death. In general, it is rare to find a reviewer willing to speak ill of the dead, especially about an author as universally revered as Stafford. The worst that can be said about him, so soon after his death, is that his poetry is still considered outside the mainstream, still frequently overlooked when anthologies are assembled, and too seldom discussed along with the important poets of the twentieth century. By every indication, this is not a reflection of the quality of his work so much as it is a sign that he made poetry look natural and easy.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature at Oakton Community College. In this essay, Kelly explores what aspects of "Ways to Live" make this poem about death believable.

William Stafford's poem "Ways to Live" offers readers advice about life, taking the grandest overall view of it by looking squarely at life's biggest challenge: how to deal with death. It does this with sober sincerity. This is a topic open to many different opinions, but this poem leaves its readers feeling confident that it comes from a poet who knows what he is talking about and secure in the belief that the truth the poem gives corresponds with the way the world really is.

Part of that confidence comes from the poet's biographical situation. Stafford wrote "Ways to Live" over the course of three days, July 19-21 of 1993, just five weeks before his death. It is difficult to ignore the timing: whether he was preoccupied with his approaching finale, as other poems written around the same time seem to suggest, or whether he just knew death was lurking around the corner with the same intuition that shows the Indians in the poem scenes from their past lives, it would be hard for any reader not to believe that Stafford had a considerable amount of insight into what it is like to be near the end. The fact that he was seventy-nine years old alone gives him a perspective that most of his readers will lack.

Another factor that gives readers cause to trust this poem's insights is that it was, after all, produced by William Stafford, whose poetic voice had been clear and honest from the start and then polished daily for almost half a century. It is a voice that rings true to most readers, free of the bends that most people can sense when authors condescend to literary trends. Rhetoric is the art of making things sound true whether they are true or not. The kind of honesty that radiated from Stafford's work, especially his later work, is almost impossible to fake. In Stafford's meek language, his wry wit, and his ease in discussing things of nature, readers recognize that this is not a poet who needs to claim truths that he does not actually feel.

But these are things about the author, not the poem. If sincerity and old age alone were enough to make an effective work of art, then anything he said would be effective. In studying Stafford's latest works, it would be easy to fall prey to admiration and believe that he actually could sit down with a pen at any given time and churn out truth□he was one of the few writers who never coasted along or used the same tried-and-true verbal tricks that served him so well over the course of decades. But there is no need simply to trust that the poem of an honest author is true; there are aspects about "Ways to Live" that in themselves give the poem the authority to advise readers about how to face death.

There is good reason to be suspicious of poems that are too loud about accepting the inevitable, that find beauty in nature and comfort in old age. Too often, writers are able to achieve these positive outlooks only by paying no attention to all of the unpleasant

things that become associated with them. Sentimental verse shows mighty eagles soaring and innocent bunnies hopping but has nothing to say when the eagle swoops down for the kill. As the saying goes, "Ignorance is bliss." The great and undervalued thing about "Ways to Live" is that it is a blissful poem that does not need to hide any portion of the truth in order to maintain a convincing balance. In a few short sections, and using an even tone, it presents a range of emotions that conflict with each other but end up offering a wellrounded picture of the world.

For instance, the poem starts out with a section called "India," which touches upon the subject of reincarnation. It touches the subject, but in no way does Stafford claim any sort of expert knowledge about it. One clue of this is the section's title: naming it "India" is the poet's admission that the religious belief he describes is foreign to him, which puts him in the position of being a curious spectator, not a teacher. This idea is made even more forcefully at the end of the section, which is emphatic about the fact that reincarnation is a belief understood by "them," in India, not by the poem's speaker or his probable audience. Ameri- cans "can't have that soft look" that comes into the eyes of those who truly understand reincarnation. For Stafford, another culture's religious belief only leads to the commonsense observation that it would be better to have more than one chance to live life right and to redo past wrongs. This is the extent to which he is willing to claim any understanding of Indian religious beliefs.

Separating the parts of the poem with section numbers, subtitles, and different structural styles, Stafford is able to change moods quickly. The second section leaves behind the sad regret of the first. In "Having It Be Tomorrow," one small metaphor is built up to proportions that it could not command if it were not in this particular place in this particular poem. Basically, all this part of the poem does is take the light of the sun, which shines indiscriminately in all directions, and explain it in terms of a lantern beam that is aimed with conscious effort. Sunrise crawls progressively across the face of the earth, and the poem relates that progression to the sense of improvement that is often associated with "tomorrow." Again, Stafford is not so narrow-minded as to claim that things will always be better tomorrow, only that those who fail to see life getting better will feel old, whereas those who do feel the improvement laugh. This is logic that is hard to argue against. If this section were a poem unto itself, and this were all that it had to tell readers, this simple observation would be too lightweight to be worth mentioning. In the middle of a complex piece with changing attitudes, it adds depth and dimension.

"Being Nice and Old" is neither sad, like the first section, nor optimistic like the second. It is sarcastic, although, strangely, in a life-affirming way. A clue to this comes from the use of the word "nice" in the section's title. Readers have to ask themselves what use an author of Stafford's verbal precision would have for a word so vague and weak, so incapable of inspiring anything more than a shrug from readers. What Stafford does here with this unpoetic word makes readers reconsider it. Rather than serving up the tired cliches that usually arise around the concept of niceness, he ends up describing a nice old age as one in which those who disagree have fallen off the edge of the world. It is a calm and carefully phrased idea, not violent nor sweet nor angry nor sad. Ultimately, it is hard-nosed reality: what is peace in old age, or at any age, except for being with friends and being freed of those who disagree? Stafford does not sugarcoat the truth

but phrases it coldly, and he highlights his cold phrasing with the use of the word "nice." Added to the first section's sadness and the second's optimism is this section's unsentimental realism.

The last part of the poem, "Good Ways to Live," uses the sober word "good" whereas the previous section used the candy-coated "nice." It leaves behind relationships between people and, like the second section, focuses on nature. But, unlike section 2, which looked to one natural phenomenon, the progression of the sun, for hope, this section looks at nature in full. "Room," as in "The room you have / in the world is ready to change," is a well-chosen word, denoting both the social space within a house and also the portion of the whole universe that is allotted to one individual. One other word that is worth noting is "ways" in the title of this section. Since the poem only talks about one type of human experience□being drawn out by "the emanation of all things"□"ways" clearly refers to the actions of the birds, clouds, stars, and so forth. They *live* in this poem. Stafford affirms all things, just as he, in this last section, writes off all of the other ways of living covered in the rest of the poem. The Indian way discussed in the first section is incomplete because of that unspecified "animal" that stands on the side, watching the one person remember a past life and the other wish he could. The animal, like the birds in section 4, has a good way to live, too. The anticipation of each new day is good, but it ends with death. The enjoyment of friends, too, is temporal. Stafford has set each part of the poem up to give a truth, but they all fall short when faced with the eternal truth.

A poem that takes life and death as its subject matter has little chance of success. No writers have had the firsthand experience of death, and most bring to the subject all of the preconceptions and prejudices that they have learned throughout their lives. The fact that "Ways to Live" is able to make a meaningful statement comes mostly from the fact that William Stafford, in his old age, was still humble enough to stay away from areas that he did not know about. The poem goes into optimism and mysticism in places, but it counterbalances these with simplicity and the nerve to tell readers what the author does not know. The final image of death as a union with the natural world is the one luxury Stafford allows, the one place where he pretends to know the unknowable. Given who William Stafford was and how he presented himself in his poetry, most readers are willing to allow him that luxury.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "Ways to Live," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #2

Blevins teaches writing courses at Roanoke College. In this essay, Blevins suggests that in Stafford's poem, the poet uses extended metaphors to give advice on how people might live with the knowledge of impending death.

In "Education by Poetry," Robert Frost argues that "the height of all thinking . . . [is] the attempt to say matter in terms of spirit and spirit in terms of matter." What he means is that the ability to "say one thing in terms of another" *is what thinking is*. Frost is not the only poet to have made this observation. Pound's advice to go in fear of abstractions, William Carlos Williams's insistence that ideas can only be found in things, and T. S. Eliot's objective correlative are all metaphors for the idea that metaphors are indispensable to poetry (and all serious uses of language). Yet the modernists' interest in metaphor manifested itself primarily as an interest in imagery, and that interest—still strong relatively late in the twentieth century in the deepimage work of poets like Robert Bly and James Wright—may have undermined our willingness to value certain more general—more *rhetorical*— uses of comparison.

"Ways to Live" is one of William Stafford's later poems, and like much of Stafford's later work, the poem is infused with the speaker's consciousness of his own impending death. The poem's title is ironic because although it suggests that the poem is going to be about "ways to live," the poem really concerns the way people might live with the knowledge of imminent death. Although the poem contains a good many images, its effectiveness relies on the way it uses the extended metaphor to express advice about how people might live well with that knowledge. While an image can be seen as a small "visual" moment in a poem that makes an abstract idea more discernible by making it physical—and while images are typically constructed out of metaphors and similes—extended metaphors are more like analogies in that they extend a comparison further out than most images can, linking large bodies of language with other large bodies of language to say something about being human that could not otherwise be said.

"Ways to Live" is constructed of four titled sections of varying stanza systems and line lengths. Each section presents an alternative way to view the weight of death-consciousness. Because many thinkers have suggested that humankind's foreknowledge of death is the most significant difference between people and animals, Stafford's argument in this poem is especially interesting. The poem's first section, entitled "India," explores the idea of reincarnation in India, celebrating, in deeply metaphorical lines, the notion that individuals might "happen" more than "once." Yet section one does not so much test or explore the idea of reincarnation as imply that people who believe in it give anyone who looks into their eyes "some faroff story / with them and you in it." In other words, Stafford implies in the first section of "Ways to Live" that believing in reincarnation is a "way to live" with the idea of death, since it eliminates the fear of death with a "soft look." This look suggests that, in Stafford's view, people who believe they will return to the earth after death as another human or animal have found a wholesome "way to live" with the idea of ending by dying. In so doing, it

suggests that belief systems—the ideas people construct for themselves in order to live in the world—are central factors in living and dying. What is interesting about this observation is that it implies that metaphor itself—certainly Stafford is using reincarnation is a metaphor for the after life in "Ways to Live"—is as central to living as it is to poetry.

The poem's second section, entitled "Having It Be Tomorrow," contains the poem's most beautiful metaphor, suggesting that an additional way to live with the idea of impending death is to be "in on [the] secret" of the notion that each new day is a certain blessing which "[holds] its lantern before it, / [and] moves over the whole earth slowly / to brighten that edge and push it westward." In this section of the poem, Stafford compares people who recognize the "beads of light" that each new day is made of to people who "shake their heads turning gray every / morning when the sun comes up." In other words, Stafford compares people who live without the fear of death with people who do. In so doing, he implies that the wisdom that is the "secret" in this section of the poem is the ability to recognize that "the welcome of children / will remain every day new" in the hearts of people who not only understand, but fully celebrate, the cycle of birth and death. Like the idea in the poem's first section that states that believing in reincarnation will help people live well by preventing the fear of only "[happening] once," this section of the poem, which states that seeing each new day as new, is also a metaphor, signifying that a certain optimistic attitude will help readers see "a new land / [coming] every time the sun goes climbing over it."

The poem's third section, entitled "Being Nice and Old," celebrates old age itself by suggesting that it is possible to be "nice and old" by remembering how "dizzying" the past was and recognizing "the light . . . on the faces of friends." This section of the poem is also ironic, since Stafford suggests that it is "nice and old" to "turn away" from "any people you don't like" and "let them drop off the edge of the world." Our culture famously celebrates youth, but in this section of "Ways to Live," Stafford implies that old age is not as bad as what might be thought. After all, old people can take pleasure in being beyond the "dizzying" past and "turn away" from people they "don't like." In this section of the poem, Stafford suggests that an additional alternative way to live with death is to be at peace in old age. It is interesting to note, too, that in "Being Nice and Old," Stafford links light, which is everywhere in the poem, with love. At the end of the poem, the speaker himself will "spread in the thin halo of night mist," while people he says he does not "like" will "fall off the edge of the world." Although Stafford does not use the terms "heaven" and "hell" anywhere in "Ways to Live," it is clear he is using these mythological terms to address himself, if subtly, to two alternative ways to live and die.

The poem's final section, because it is titled "Good Ways to Live," implies that of all the ways to live with the knowledge of impending death so far explored, a recognition of the way "the emanation of all things" "moves or / almost moves" is probably the best. In this section of the poem, "the emanation of all things" is probably death itself, and what is remarkable about the stanza is the way in which death is being celebrated as a kind of life force. Death here is actually breathing—it "moves or / almost moves" and is related to the natural world in the "clouds [that parade by, and [the] stars in their / configurations." In the poem's final image, death is so vital and so ironically full of life

that it "pulls [the speaker] slowly out through doors or windows" until he "[spreads] in the thin halo of night mist." Although the image of a dead man "[spreading] in the thin halo of night mist" is an image—certainly, readers can see the old idea of a spirit rising in this line—the whole notion of death as a kind of life force in this section of the poem is more of an extended metaphor, suggesting that death is not the might that kills life so much as a force that helps to make life *life*.

In the poem's final section, Stafford is borrowing from Carl Jung's idea of the collective unconscious, which puts forward the idea that people do not die but join all others who have died before in an ethereal community of spirit. Yet because Stafford is a poet and not a psychologist-philosopher, he is able to make that idea, which is abstract, concrete with nouns. Here, the collective unconscious becomes a "thin halo of night mist." In other sections of the poem, Stafford uses metaphor and image in much the same way, suggesting that the peacefulness that comes with a belief in reincarnation might produce "a soft look," or that people who understand "the secret" of the blessing of each new day will be able to see the "day" itself "holding its lantern before it."

"Ways to Live" uses both image and extended metaphor to express alternative methods for living with the idea of impending death because metaphor is the only way, as Frost says, that humans *can think*. When Frost states that the "height of all thinking" is the ability "to say matter in terms of spirit and spirit in terms of matter," he is saying that all language is metaphorical. When it is said that a child's hair is like the sunshine, it is a simile being used to make a visual picture so that readers can approximate what the child's hair looks like. But when William Stafford says that living with the idea that people are going to die ought to be conducted "the way they do it in India," *or by* being "in on [the secret] . . . of the "day" with "its lantern," *or by* rejecting the "dizzying" past and seeing "light" "on the faces of friends," *or by* letting death "pull [us] / slowly out through doors or windows," something even more magnificent is happening. In "Ways to Live," Stafford is advising people on how they might approach the most profound and universal of human mysteries from the position of his advanced old age and wisdom. If this is not "the height of all thinking" that leads to what might be called the height of all feeling, nothing is.

Source: Adrian Blevins, Critical Essay on "Ways to Live," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Pool is a published poet and a high school English teacher. In this essay, Pool approaches Stafford's poem in relation to the poet's meditations on life in the face of his impending death.

William Stafford wrote "Ways to Live" from July 19 to July 21, 1993, just over a month before his death at the end of August. An exponent of plain speech in poetry, Stafford avoids verbal gymnastics, cultivating his perception and his stance toward his subject and audience instead of polishing his lines with meter and rhyme and all the paraphernalia of formal structure. John Kennedy, writing in *The Antioch Review*, says that, "Stafford's is not a poetry of gimmicks or confessional sensationalism. He minimized the importance of technique and spoke of his poetry as a result of receptivity, not design." Some poets and critics dismissed Stafford because he wrote too much and published too much. Others admire him for his unadorned simplicity of expression. "Ways to Live" is a very plain-spoken poem about four different approaches to life, and, given Stafford's age and health at the time of its composition, about methods to deal with death by reminding oneself of the powers and gifts that life brings.

This poem takes on its own organic design, a four-fold path to practical wisdom. His poem is divided into four parts, each of which is a calm meditation on life and death. Faced with the end of his own life, Stafford writes about the things that are good in life, not in a grandiose, self-gratifying way, not claiming that he has grasped all of life's mysteries, nor is he in any sense regretful or tearful about his impending death. This poem tries to grip the truths of life by pulling forth simple images that suggest rather than lecture. The poet seeks the moral truth in a world of things; he does not attempt to dazzle, nor to preach loudly. Rather, he gives his readers multiple perspectives, with no pretense of comprehensiveness or intellectual rigor, but he offers them for what one may make of them. His poem is characteristically restrained, understated, and plain. He quietly celebrates lessons he has learned in his life, and he shows them to his reader, all without anxiety.

The first section of his poem is subtitled "India." He ponders the Hindu acceptance of reincarnation and introduces a bit of deliberate awkwardness in the first lines: "In India in their lives they happen / again and again." The expression "in their lives" seems redundant, but as the poem develops, readers see that "in their lives" is a guiding motif throughout all of the four parts. Everything that happens in this poem happens in somebody's life. Their lives are what encompasses all experiences; "they happen" only within that wholeness of being that is a human life. Stafford liberally uses second person, giving the poem an immediacy as well as a universality, "when you're wrong, it's too late / to go back□ you've done it forever." This "you" is neither him, nor is it a specific address to a reader; instead, it is a colloquial way of making a general statement about the human condition while maintaining an intimacy of expression. Naomi Shihab Nye has said, in the preface to Stafford's posthumous collection *The Way It Is: New & Selected Poems*, "Rarely has a voice felt so intimate and so collective at once." There is an informality about "you," that is very appropriate to this poem.

Stafford relates the traditional Indian view toward death without explicit comment, but he suggests that the Indians have developed an understanding of death that allows them to "have that soft look when you / pass, the way they do it in India." Here, readers see Stafford's unsentimental gentleness. In asserting the eternal recurrence of life, the people of India seem to have found one of the "Ways to Live" the poet contemplates in his last month. To "pass" is merely to move on, to go with the roll of the eternal wheel or to participate in the passing of time. The word "pass" is also, of course, a euphemism for "die," an expression chosen for its mild effect. The tone of the whole poem continues this placid mood.

"Having It Be Tomorrow" is the subtitle of the second section. The poet personifies the day, which "holds its lantern before it," bringing light and life to the entire planet. Stafford evokes the timeless pastoral imagery of shepherds lighting fires, "beads of light that extend miles of horizon." Although the stanza is independent, the connections with the previous one linger, and these shepherds seem to inhabit the uplands of the Himalayas and other exotic peaks. Here, Stafford expresses the long panoramic vista, the immemorial play of light upon the land, painted with unornamented, plain language, and he moves from the largeness of his timeless vision to the intimate particular secret that brings laughter to anyone who shares it. Stafford says that there is a "secret" that allows the world to be seen as new each and every day, keeping "you," presumably the poet, young at heart. Others get gray, but those who know the secret of the sunrise, the possibilities of creation that occur with absolute regularity, every day of one's life, maintain a childlike understanding of the world. Stafford spent a long career developing his distinctive method of composition, writing early in the morning, every morning, letting himself respond to whatever ideas or images moved him that morning, seizing on the newness and freshness each day brings, keeping his imagery and his vision fresh. The morning is the time of his greatest creativity, when the world is young and all is possible. Stafford does not proclaim this secret loudly; he quietly acclaims it as yet another way to live, but readers glimpse his pattern. These ways to live are all good ways, are all approaches to life that enrich human existence.

In the third section of the poem, "Being Nice and Old," the poet describes old people looking back on their lives, "all of that which was so dizzying when it happened" as he constructs a tableau of oldsters who are reminiscing and evaluating their lives, looking at their friends as though they are the light itself. Then in the last five lines of the short stanza, Stafford introduces a metaphorical comparison of lives with a book. It is possible to handle people "you" do not like by developing the ability to "turn / the page a little more and wait," or indeed, to let go of unwanted people by letting them "drop off the edge of the world." The old, Stafford is saying, may at the end of their lives gain a clarity and judgment on their own lives, turning to friendship or, conversely, having the wisdom to ignore persons who do not deserve the attention and vexation that might afflict the young. There is a nice ambiguity in this subtitle, as though the poet wants to be both "nice" in the sense of being kind and honest, and "nice and old" as in having attained, and gained, an important perspective through age and time and reflection. At seventynine, William Stafford, honored and elderly poet, commends this judicious conservation of friendship and its corollary, the abandonment of troublesome people, as one of his several ways to live.

Finally, in the last section, "Good Ways to Live," Stafford reaches out to the mysterious life force that animates the living and gently transforms the dead. With splendid, calm, confident understatement, the poet says that, "The room you have / in the world is ready to change." In all the parts of this poem, Stafford avoids despair, lament, or any sense of loss, despite clearly mulling over his own, and "your" own mortality. Elemental images, trees, grass, winds, clouds, and birds are all in changes. There is a soul, in ancient Greek a *pneuma* or breath of life, within all things. Here, Stafford invokes a pantheistic universe, in which at the center of the earth, as opposed to some celestial realm, is the living, breathing, inspiring "emanation of all things." Pantheism holds that God, or the consciousness of the world, is not separate or transcendent from the world, but is intimately bound up, immanent, in all the things that make up the world. In this view, God is made up of the things and beings of the world. Consistent images of breath, mist, and clouds create a sense of the respiration of all things, the constant condensation and evaporation of life itself, all in a cyclic process that alludes to the cycles of the first and second parts of the poem, the Hindu cycle of *samsara*, of birth and death and rebirth, and of the diurnal cycle of daylight and the constant newness of the world. When "you spread in the thin halo of night mist" life has shuffled off the mortal coil and reformed itself as an attenuated plume of something□ Stafford cannot be precise□that is part of life and beyond life. All these four observations he has chosen to link into one poem because all of them are life-affirming, quietly revealed ways that human beings can come to terms, without sentimentality, cynicism, or sorrow, with their own limited, finite, and yet sacred sense of self.

Source: Frank Pool, Critical Essay on "Ways to Live," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

Magnolia Films of San Anselmo, California, released a video entitled *William Stafford and Robert Bly* (1994), which documents the friendship between the two poets.

An audiocassette of *Willliam Stafford's Last Reading* is available from Bancroft Poetry Archive Sound Recordings. It was taped at the Portland Poetry Festival in Oregon on August 13, 1993, just weeks before the poet's death.

William Stafford is among several poets who participated in making *What Good Is Poetry?*, a l6 mm film released by Mill Mountain Films of Spokane, Washington, in 1979.

Topics for Further Study

Suppose William Stafford were limited to having only three sections to this poem. Decide which section he could most easily give up and explain why.

Interview several people who are over the age of seventy and ask what they think of the people whom they did not like in their youth. Discuss your findings with others in your class.

Stafford refers to the Hindu belief in reincarnation. Explore the Internet and find at least three sites by people who claim to have been reincarnated and then explain whether you think their stories are true or not.

Find another poem that is written in numbered sections like this one is and write an essay explaining why you think poets sometimes choose this technique.

To symbolize the lights created by people, Stafford refers to shepherds preparing their breakfasts. Make a list of other professions that require people to be at work before dawn and chart what times their lights would come on.

What Do I Read Next?

"Ways to Live" is included along with other poems that Stafford produced in the last months of his life in *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems*, published posthumously by Graywolf Press in 1998.

Stafford was well known in poetry circles by the time his first book was published, but it was his second book *Traveling through the Dark* (1962) that attracted attention and established him as an important American author. Most of the poems from this volume have been reprinted in other collections, but it does help to experience them the way the original readers did.

Judith Kitchen is a preeminent Stafford scholar, who has published several books about the poet. Her most recent study of Stafford's poetry is *Writing the Word: Understanding William Stafford*, published in 1999 by Oregon State University Press.

In addition to being a poet, Stafford wrote some of the most bright and readable books about the art of writing poetry that are available. His *You Must Revise Your Life*, a tutorial on writing and teaching, is a staple of creative writing classes; it was published by University of Michigan Press in 1986.

Stafford's book *Writing the Australian Crawl: Views on the Writer's Vocation* is another book of essays that is instructive about the writing business and about the poet's views. It was edited by Donald Hall, himself a major American poet, and published by University of Michigan Press in 1976.

In 1983, Godine Press published *Segues: A Correspondence in Poetry*. It is the record of a series of letters sent back and forth between Stafford and another poet, Marvin Bell, providing readers with a lively look at the creative process as poems are practically developed as quickly as they can be read.

Further Study

Andrews, Tom, ed., *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things*, University of Michigan Press, 1993.

Several contemporary poets, including Margaret Atwood, Richard Hugo, Linda Pastan, and Charles Simic, contributed essays to this generally positive collection about Stafford's career.

Capps, Donald, *The Poet's Gift: Toward the Renewal of Pastoral Care*, Westminster/John Knox Press,1993.

This analysis from a theological perspective looks at poetry from Stafford and Denise Levertov to make the case for spirituality in modern literature.

Carpenter, David A., *William Stafford*, Boise State University Press, 1986.

At just over fifty pages, this brief survey of the poet's life up to that time was part of the university's "Western Writers" series.

Marshall, Gary Thomas, *William Stafford: A Writer Writing*, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 1990.

Marshall's Ph.D. dissertation analyzing Stafford's career is available on the Internet and also on microfilm from Southern Illinois University.

Pinsker, Sanford, *Three Pacific Northwest Poets: William Stafford, Richard Hugo, and David Wagoner*, Twayne, 1987.

Pinsker examines Stafford as a regional poet, with other poets from his area of the country providing critical contrast.

Stafford, William, "The End of a Golden String," in *Written in Water, Written in Stone: Twenty Years of "Poets on Poetry,"* University of Michigan Press, 1996, pp. 235-42.

Stafford's essay, just one of dozens in this book written by contemporary poets, traces the seeds of inspiration, finding them in real life rather than in poetic sources.

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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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