The Weight of Sweetness Study Guide

The Weight of Sweetness by Li-Young Lee

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"The Weight of Sweetness" is the fourth poem in Li-Young Lee's first collection of poems, *Rose*. It follows his most-anthologized poem in the collection, "Persimmons," which, like "The Weight of Sweetness," uses fruit as a central metaphor for exploring the poet's relationship to his past. In "The Weight of Sweetness." Lee takes twenty-nine lines to meditate on the relationship between memory and loss, mourning his dead father while remembering his father's tenderness.

Many of Lee's poems are about his father, Richard K. Y. Lee, a highly accomplished man who was personal physician to the Chinese leader Mao Tse-tung before he emigrated to Indonesia to found a college. An intellectual and a deeply religious man, Richard Lee had a profound impact on his son's life, an impact that the younger Lee continues to grapple with in his poetry. "Sweetness" is used in this poem as a metaphor which encompasses "song, wisdom, sadness, and joy," and Lee suggests that loss necessarily has to include some measure of all of these.

The poem begins in the abstract, then becomes gradually more concrete as Lee develops his metaphor of sweetness, using peaches as the vehicle for his comparison. He then moves on to a childhood anecdote in which he and his father lug bags of peaches through the wind and rain. The final image is one of separation of father and son, which echoes Lee's present tense exploration of loss and memory. In searching for the meaning of sweetness, Lee is also searching for a clearer sense of his own identity in relation to his father. This search is developed in many other poems in Rose, in particular "Mneomic" and "Eating Together." "The Weight of Sweetness" itself is rarely mentioned in reviews or criticism of Lee's poetry.

Author Biography

Li-Young Lee's poetry has often been praised for its tenderness and passion. A relentless examination of his past and his emotional vulnerability characterize his poetry. Born in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 1957 to Richard K. Y. Lee and Joice Yuan Jiaying, Lee was raised among the social unrest and political turbulence of Indonesia in the late 1950s. His mother is the granddaughter of China's provisional president, Yuan Shikai, elected in 1912 during the country's transition from monarchy to republic. His Chinese father was once Mao Tsetung's personal physician, and when anti-Chinese rioting erupted in Jakarta in 1959, the elder Lee was imprisoned for nineteen months for sedition. Lee's memories and stories of this time appear in his memoir, *The Winged Seed*.

An educator and a minister as well as a physician, Lee's father instilled a love of literature in his children, reciting poems from the Tang Dynasty and reading the King James Bible to them. The figure of Richard Lee appears prominently in Lee's writing. He is a distant, almost godlike presence that the poet Lee struggles to comprehend in his descriptions and stories. Richard Lee, who became a Presbyterian minister in the United States, died in 1980 in the small Pennsylvania town in which he and the family settled.

Lee's formal education began in the United States where, after graduating from high school in Vandergrift, Pennsylvania, he attended the Universities of Pittsburgh (1975-1979) and Arizona (1979-1980); and the State University of New York at Brockport (1980-1981).

In 1986 Lee's first collection of poems, Rose, received New York University's Delmore Schwartz Memorial Poetry Award, and in 1990 he published another collection, *The City in Which I Love You,* which received the Lamont Poetry Selection of the Academy of American Poets. Among other awards, Lee has received a Ludwig Vogelstein Foundation fellowship, a writer's award from the Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation, and a fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation. Lee's poems appear frequently in anthologies of Asian- American literature, and he is widely considered one of the most talented young Asian-American writers in the United States. Poet Gerald Stern has likened Lee's poetry to that of John Keats and Rainer Maria Rilke; Lee himself has named writers such as Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Li Bai, Tu Fu, Su Tung Po, and Yang Wan Li as influences.

Poem Text

No easy thing to bear, the weight of sweetness.
Song, wisdom, sadness, joy: sweetness
equals three of any of these gravities.
See a peach bend
the branch and strain the stem until
it snaps.
Hold the peach, try the weight, sweetness
and death so round and snug
in your palm.
And, so, there is
the weight of memory:
Windblown, a rain-soaked
bough shakes, showering
the man and the boy.
They shiver in delight,
and the father lifts from his son's cheek
one green leaf
fallen like a kiss.
The good boy hugs a bag of peaches
his father has entrusted
to him.
Now he follows
his father, who carries a bagful in each arm.
See the look on the boy's face
as his father moves
faster and farther ahead, while his own steps
flag, and his arms grow weak, as he labors
under the weight of peaches.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-3

The title of the poem "The Weight of Sweetness" is a phrase readers might expect to find as a title for a surrealist poem. By using one sensory experience (gravity) to evoke another (taste), Lee creates a paradox of sorts which his poem works to resolve. The first line, a fragment, alerts us to the tone of the poem. The speaker is having a difficult time enduring sweetness, which the reader understands here as a synonym for tenderness. This line is also an understatement, as readers can infer that the weight of sweetness is no doubt almost unbearable for the speaker. The next two lines are presented as a multiple choice item one might expect to find on a college entrance test, but here the speaker provides the answer as well. Gravity is the force which both literally and metaphorically weighs things down. By saying that it takes three of the items listed to equal sweetness, Lee underscores the complex nature of sweetness.

Lines 4-11

The poet's voice in these lines is directive. He is instructing readers on how to look. His use of enjambed lines, that is, lines whose syntax and meaning spills onto the next line, metaphorically embodies the very thing he describes: the bending and snapping of a peach from its branch. By using a peach to symbolize sweetness, Lee is piling up associations with the term and making it more palpable, more sensuous. Peaches, like song, wisdom, sadness, and joy, all abstractions, are also subject to the laws of gravity. By directing readers to "Hold the peach," Lee wants them to participate bodily, as well as intellectually, in the idea of sweetness his poem explores. The peach is literally sweet in taste, but because it has been snapped from its branch it is also dead. In comparing the peach in "your palm" to "the weight of memory," the speaker seeks to show how both are sweet, even though the memory may be of something or someone dead. This is the lesson that these lines offer.

Lines 12-18

Syntactically completing the sentence from the preceding stanza, these seven lines describe a moment between a boy and his father that readers understand is the speaker talking about an experience from his past. It is meant to illustrate the poet's comparison of sweetness to the weight of memory. The scene is sensuous, as father and son are showered with wet leaves from a windblown branch. The description of the father picking a leaf, "fallen like a kiss," from his son's cheek shows readers the father's love for the son. That the poet remembers this incident shows the son's love for his father.

Lines 19-29

Continuing with the anecdote about the father and the son, the poet describes the boy now as "good," meaning that he meets his father's approval. That he "hugs" the bag of peaches shows that he values that approval. The varying lengths of these lines suggest the way that memory ebbs and flows. Readers again are enjoined to "See," this time the expression on the boy's face, as if in a close up. But the poet does not describe the expression. Instead readers are left to imagine it as the boy watches his father outpace him, and his own body grows weak from the peaches. This image encapsulates Lee's central metaphor, for it yokes together the sensuous (peaches) and the abstract (the weight of memory), the past and the present, and presence (the speaker's grief) and absence (his dead father). The fact that his father has "entrusted" the peaches to his son speaks to the son's burden of responsibility, the responsibility of carrying the memory of his father's own sweetness into the future.

Themes

Identity: Search for Self

In meditating on the idea of sweetness, which for Lee means tenderness plus grief, the speaker of "The Weight of Sweetness" examines his own emotional relationship to the past and to his father, hoping that such an examination will better help him integrate the memory of his father into his own life. The capacity to integrate the past, especially loss, into one's life successfully is often the mark of someone with a strong sense of identity.

Human beings often experience a sweep of emotions after losing a loved one, from denial to anger to grief and, finally, to acceptance; but after enough time has passed these emotions frequently settle into a kind of bittersweet nostalgia in which they mourn for the loved one yet simultaneously remember the happiness shared with that person. The inability to find peace with one's losses often marks a self still searching for its own identity, for a satisfactory way of being in the world, of understanding one's personal relationship to the past. In the first eleven lines of the poem readers see the speaker struggling to intellectually understand the meaning of sweetness and the "weight of memory." After attempting to list what sweetness contains by naming a range of other emotions and emotive words that go into it, Lee settles on the image of a peach, picked from its branch, as the symbol of sweetness, the thing that will metaphorically carry the weight of Lee's bittersweet grief. The peach is simultaneously alive (it retains its color, flavor, and texture) and dead (it is no longer a part of the tree), just as memory of a loved one contains death and life.

Whereas the speaker uses meditation in the first half of the poem to understand the meaning of his feelings, he uses memory in the second half of the poem. In a fairly straightforward story, the speaker recounts a particularly tender moment with his father. In this recounting the speaker tells a story about his past in which he has been given the burden of experiencing his father's tenderness, exemplified in his father's lifting the leaf from his face. The speaker lingers over this gesture just as the boy labors under the weight of peaches, itself synonymous with the weight of sweetness. At the end of the story, which is also the end of the poem, it is unclear whether the speaker understands his own feelings any better, or how to make sense of the loss of his father any more. Readers are left with the sense that Lee will continue to tell stories about his father, and in that telling continue to grapple with how he fits into that story.

Love

"The Weight of Sweetness" explores the love between a father and his son. It is a love that continues after death, and one which needs to be understood in relation to death. Lee suggests in this poem that the person who dies lives on not only in the memory of those left behind but also in their everyday lives. Symbolically, and in effect, the son becomes the father whom the son is mourning. Death is part of a cycle from which life

begins. This idea is illustrated in the poem's last stanza, when the father "entrusts" his son with a bag of peaches. The peaches themselves signify both sweetness and responsibility, the duty a son has to follow in the footsteps of his father, carrying on his life as it were, while also forging his own. It is the difficulty of doing both at once to which this poems speaks. The "weight of sweetness" is at once a burden, a duty, and a joy for the son.

Style

"The Weight of Sweetness" proceeds from abstract statements to concrete images. Abstractions are ideas, and are rooted in the intellect. Concrete images are things which can be seen: blue hair, spilled milk, etc. Lee begins his poems by making connections among abstractions such as wisdom, sadness, joy, gravity, and sweetness. He then uses concrete imagery such as peaches to illustrate these connections. The connections themselves are made by way of metaphor. Metaphors make comparisons between unlike things, underscoring their similarities. For example, "the weight of memory" is like the "weight / of peaches" in that they are both heavy, the former emotionally so, the latter physically. They are also both "sweet," one figuratively and one literally. Lee employs enjambment along with a mixture of short and long lines to visually suggest the ways in which memory and emotion interact, how one thing or idea reminds the speaker of something else, and so on. Enjambment is an- other word for run-on lines. In the lines "See a peach bend / the branch and strain the stem until / it snaps," the sentence spills over onto succeeding lines until the thought is complete. The use of alternating long and short lines creates a kind of stop and start rhythm for the poem, causing readers to stop and try to see what Lee is describing. The runon lines compel readers to continue reading, while the line length often slow readers down.

Historical Context

The image at the end of "The Weight of Sweetness" is the father moving away from the son, both metaphorically and literally, as the son is weighed down by a bag of peaches. Lee has always been obsessed with walking, the idea of steps and the image of feet. No doubt this stems from his family's own wanderings.

After escaping from Indonesia in 1959, the Lees journeyed through various parts of Asia, including Hong Kong, Macau, and Japan, before coming to the United States in 1964. In *The Winged Seed,* Lee describes the effect of all this travelling on his own feet and his father's: "By the time we got to America, my feet were tired. My father put down our suitcase, untied my shoes, and rubbed my feet, one at a time with such deep turns of his wrist. I heard the water in him through my soles. Since then I have listened for him in my steps, And have not found him.... My father's feet were ulcerous, as was his body, diseased. And water denied him days at a time, administered in a prison cell in Indonesia, ruined his kidneys, and changed the way he lay or sat or knelt or got up to walk the whole way down the stairs." His father's imprisonment in Indonesia was a result of Indonesian's dictator President Sukarno's campaign against ethnic Chinese. Richard Lee would speak to people as they went about their daily chores on the banks of the Solo River, and the Indonesian War Administration accused him of being a spy and charged him with sedition. Sukarno himself was ousted from power in 1967 by General Suharto, an anti-communist who assumed the Indonesian presidency in 1967 after helping to quell an uprising.

The late 1980s and early 1990s in America saw a renewed interest in men's issues, particularly issues involving fathers and sons. Poet Robert Bly helped fan this interest with articles and books such as *Iron John* (1992), which turns the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale of the wild man and his foster son into a metaphor for an archetypal initiation into manhood. Bly's central claim is that modern men suffer because their culture fails to connect boys with older male mentors. Another central text of the 1990s men's movement is Sam Keen's 1992 A *Fire in the Belly,* a guide of sorts for men helping them to analyze the myths, roles, and stereotypes of contemporary men and to conceptualize their own personal ideals of heroism and strength. In the 1970s a new male image had emerged: the sensitive male, a result, Bly claims, of the social and cultural ascendancy of women. But for society at large, at least in the West, the traditional male who confidently and often aggressively asserts his desires remains the model after which most men shape themselves. For men *and* women traditional male behavior remains the measuring stick for "true" masculinity. Bly blames the industrial revolution for disconnecting father from son, as fathers no longer initiate their sons into the "true nature" of manhood, either by cultural rights or by working alongside them. Boys are now raised by women, who cannot provide a model for male behavior. All men are victims in Bly's view, even (and especially) those who believe they are not.

Critical Overview

The collection in which "The Weight of Sweetness" appears, *Rose,* received New York University's Delmore Schwartz Memorial Poetry Award, and reviews of the collection were favorable. In the foreword poet Gerald Stern writes, "What characterizes Lee's poetry is a certain humility, a kind of cunning, a love of plain speech, a search for wisdom and understanding—but more like a sad than desperate search—a willingness to let the sublime enter his field of concentration and take over, a devotion to language, a belief in its holiness, a pursuit of certain Chinese ideas."

About Lee's father, the subject of "The Weight of Sweetness" and many of Lee's poems, Stern says "This is not a quaint and literary father-figure he is writing and thinking about. It is a real father, an extraordinary and heroic figure.... What makes him work as a mythical figure in Lee's poems is that it is a real human being, however converted in Lee's mind, that Lee is searching for."

Writing in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Ruth Hsu says of Rose that "Lee's writing often displays this capacity to call up and interweave, always from the simplest objects, painful or happy memories, musings about his father or the past, and to make the association of object and profound yearnings seem natural." The "musings about his father" dominate the book. In fact, the father is the magnet around which all of Lee's other memories coalesce.

Reviewing the book for *Prairie Schooner,* Roger Mitchell writes: "I don't think Lee set out to write a book about the loss of his father ... but the dead father enters almost all of these poems like a half-bidden ghost. So close is the father that Lee asks at the end of 'Ash, Snow, or Moonlight, "Is this my father's house or mine?"' Mitchell identifies tenderness as the primary feature of Lee's poetry, saying, "Lee has committed himself to tenderness the way other poets have committed themselves to reality, the imagination, nature, or some other enveloping generalization."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

A widely published poet, fiction writer, and critic, Semansky teaches literature and writing at Portland Community College. In the following essay Semansky examines the idea of "sweetness" in Li-Young Lee's poem "The Weight of Sweetness."

Much of Lee's poetry concerns his father, a powerful, if enigmatic, presence in Lee's life. A physician, founder of an Indonesian university, and Presbyterian minister, Richard K. Y. Lee died in 1980, and Lee's two poetry collections, *Rose* (1986) *and The City in Which I Love You,* (1990) and his prose memoir, *The Winged Seed* (1995), can be read both as elegies for his father and ongoing attempts to fully integrate his father into the story of his life. Lee's poem from *Rose,* "The Weight of Sweetness," captures the tone of the son's complex feelings about his father's loss. Into the idea of sweetness, Lee injects the bittersweetness of nostalgia. His poem is a recipe for the lingering grief he still feels.

Lee begins the poem with a rather banal statement: "No easy thing to bear, the weight of sweetness." The strangeness in this statement is the way in which sweetness, which could mean either tenderness or a kind of taste, is described in terms of its weight. In the next lines, however, readers learn that Lee is being metaphoric:

Song, wisdom, sadness, joy: sweetness
equals three of any of these gravities.

Sweetness, for Lee, is an emotionally complex and powerful idea, as it contains a range of ingredients we don't normally think about when we think about sweetness. Lee's continued description of these abstract ingredients in terms of weight, or gravity, is difficult, but possible to comprehend. Song, conventionally associated with celebration, can have gravity if it is a lament or dirge. The weight of wisdom might be the responsibility to act or that such knowledge brings with it. Sadness is the easiest of these terms to understand in terms of weight, as feelings of sadness are often associated with slowness and heaviness. How is joy a gravity, though? This last term is confusing, but then the speaker does say that "sweetness / equals [only] three of any of these gravities."

These first lines are reflective. They ask readers to think, rather than feel, to participate in ruminating about abstractions with the writer. The next stanza develops this thinking using imagery:

See a peach bend
the branch and strain the stem until
it snaps.
Hold the peach, try the weight, sweetness
and death so round and snug
in your palm.

And, so, there is
the weight of memory:

The images are a tool for the speaker, allowing him to *show* readers his thoughts rather than tell them. Showing rather than telling has more emotional impact because images are more connected to our bodies than are abstract ideas. When readers can see, feel, or hear something being described, their emotions are set to work and they become more involved with the text. The voice is instructive, as if providing directions on the process of making something. A ripe peach falling from its branch is like "the weight of memory." Both are sweet, both are heavy. The speaker encourages readers to "try the weight" just as recipe directions might encourage one to "taste" or "sample." The "your" here, however, is as much another part of the speaker, an imagined self, as it is the reader. This is made more apparent in the next stanza when the speaker provides an illustration of "the weight of memory" in terms of an anecdote.

Windblown, a rain-soaked
bough shakes, showering
the man and the boy.
They shiver in delight,
and the father lifts from his son's cheek
one green leaf
fallen like a kiss.

Memories are often stirred by the senses. Smells, taste, touch, sounds, sights often unlock memories of events buried deep in our minds. This poem has a similar trajectory, as it moves from the image, the sensation of holding a peach and imagining its sweetness, to how it, though ripe, is off the branch and dead. In this case, the memory itself is also a sensual one. This detail is important for the poem because the line between the past and the present is so fluid, past events evoking the present just as the present evokes the past. The oscillation between the two creates a kind of static moment, embodied in an image, which stands for the weight of sweetness itself. Lee finishes his anecdote:

The good boy lugs a bag of peaches
his father has entrusted
to him.
Now he follows
his father, who carries a bagful in each arm.
See the look on the boy's face
as his father moves
farther and farther ahead, while his own steps
flag, and his arms grow weak, as he labors
under the weight
of peaches.

The transmission of peaches from father to son underscores the bond between the two. If we understand peaches as a symbolic image for sweetness, and sweetness as

embodying song, wisdom, sadness, and joy, we can read the gesture as one of the father passing on instructions for how to live, how to be in the world, to his son, who eagerly accepts them. Readers are instructed once again to "See," meaning to imagine the look on the face of a boy who is scurrying, unsuccessfully, to catch up to his father. We can imagine the look of awe and reverence on the boy's face as his father recedes into the distance. In this case the father is moving into the future, towards death, as the boy is weighed down by all he has been given by his father.

In the foreword to *Rose,* Gerald Stern argues that what makes Lee's father work as a mythical figure in his poems is that he is also a flesh-andblood human being. "If the father does become mythical," Stern says, "it is partly because of his dramatic, even tragic, life, and it is partly because Lee touches powerful emotional psychic layers in his search." But Lee himself admits to an impulse towards the mythic when he composes. In an interview with Tod Marshall, Lee says this about poetry: "Poetry comes out of a need to somehow—in language—connect with universe mind, and somehow when I read poetry—and maybe all poetry is quest, a poetry of longing—when I read poetry, I feel I'm in the presence of universe mind; that is, a mind I would describe as a 360-degree seeing; it is manifold in consciousness, so that a line of poetry says one thing, but it also says many other things. That manifold quality of intention and consciousness: that feels to me like universe. So that's why I read poetry, and that's why I write it, to hear that voice, which is the voice of the universe."

This "voice of the universe," then, as heard in "The Weight of Sweetness," is a voice which urges readers to experience loss not merely as the diminution of their own world but as a phenomenon that expands their world as well, in the song that comes from celebrating the dead, the wisdom that comes from knowing how to sing that song, and the sadness that comes when the song ends, which it always does. Lee's poem about his father is universal because everyone has experienced loss and everyone has memories of that loss. Indeed loss, for Lee, is at the center of the universe. In an interview with Tod Marshall, Lee says, asserting that the invisible should be more important to poets than the visible: "I can't help but live with this constant feeling, this knowledge, that everything we're seeing is fading away. So where is ground? What is materiality? I can't assume the material world." Readers can "see" the fading image of the father walking ahead of the son in "The Weight of Sweetness" in these words. Lee considers the *mind* the ground upon which all humans walk. And for Lee, whose poems are laced with images of feet and walking, walking implies time. But it is an Eastern concept of time for Lee, one which turns the past and the future on their respective heads. About time, Lee states in the interview: "in the West we usually think of the future as lying ahead of us and we walk forward into it, leaving the past behind. But it's probably the other way around for an eastern mind. The Chinese word for the day after tomorrow is *hou,* meaning behind, and the word denoting the day before yesterday is actually chien, meaning in front of. So, you see ... that to a Chinese mind, tomorrow, the future, is behind me, while the past lies in front of me. Therefore, we go backing up into the future, into the unknown, the what's-about-to-be, and everything that lies before our eyes is past, over already." The final image of "The Weight of Sweetness" illustrates this idea. For the speaker, the future is also behind him, in the image of his father, whom he runs toward, even as his father moves ahead into death.

Source: Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Kraus's book of poems, **Generation,** *was published by Alice James Books in 1997; individual poems have appeared in* **The Georgia Review, Tri-Quarterly,** *and elsewhere. She teaches creative writing, literature, and other courses at Queens College, CUNY (Flushing, NY). In this essay, Kraus suggests that "The Weight of Sweetness" relies on a tone of restraint and unusual narrative development to render emotional complexity.*

"The Weight of Sweetness" is from Lee's *Rose,* an elegaic book largely about an Asian-American son's relationship with his father and loss of that father. The power of "The Weight of Sweetness" lies in its formal grace: the poem's control of pacing and careful development allow its delicate treatment of a father-son relationship to emerge fully and without sentimentality. The poet structures this poem, surprisingly, by moving from the abstract to the concrete—"surprisingly" because so many contemporary poems move the way a fable does, from the concrete narrative or image to the abstract meaning that can be extracted from it.

"No easy thing to bear, the weight of sweetness," is an unexpected and provocative thought, because we tend to think of things in dichotomies, such as pleasure / pain or joy / sadness. Sweetness, surely, is relief from the bitter pains of life. It should surely be light to carry; it should be one of the rewards of the great American Dream. But, in "The Weight of Sweetness," Lee invites us into complexity and to see from an unexpected perspective where even the sweetness of life is a weight that must be carried. Sweetness here has its own *gravitas,* and as an active ingredient in the well-lived life, it conveys a solemnity we more commonly associate with the archetypal themes of poets—love, death, pain, renewal, or lack of renewal. Oddly enough, we can more easily accept that pain should have a role in life's fullness, since pain is a challenge we have to rise to, is the shock that can sometimes create wisdom or effect change. And the "sweetness" of the poem is a weighty burden—a peach, a sack of peaches, a fallen leaf that must be "lift[ed]" as though it were massive, a tender gesture that might seem fleeting but accrues great significance for the poet. Once Lee says that sweetness too, is heavy, ponderous, and a burden to carry, it seems obvious, and we believe we knew it all along.

Lee's poem is powerful in part because it knits these philosophical considerations with personal narrative. The first turn of the poem is simple and direct: from the abstraction, sweetness, comes the illustration, the peach. Indeed, throughout *Rose,* Lee likes to illustrate his thoughts with simple objects of conventional beauty—the persimmon, blossoms, irises, hair. His twist is to show the conventional image of beauty revealing an unconventional thought process. The peach, replete with sweetness, snaps the stem, causing fracture, separation, pain, bruising: "Hold ... / death so round and snug / in your palm." How, Lee suggests, could sweetness be any less than the other mysteries of life, double-edged, as destructive and dangerous as it is pleasurable?

Indeed, when the poem then turns from peaches in general ("See a peach bend") to a specific memory involving peaches (the poet-speaker and his father) we see that sweetness and pain are inextricable and require each other. Some biographical information about the poet and his father may help illuminate the relationship that the poem allows us to glimpse. Lee's father was, for a time, personal physician to Mao Tse-tung; when in Indonesia, where Lee was born, he taught medicine, Shakespeare, and philosophy at the university level until jailed by then-President Sukarno for his "Western leanings." The poet views his father as "a man of huge intellectual and artistic talents." He was, as the poet reports, a kind man and a gentle one, but perhaps someone hard to emulate, someone so kind the need to please him was so much stronger. He also was strict and stern, and demanded that his children succeed by the terms he set for them: that they learn seven languages, for example. Li-Young Lee has said, in an interview with the journalist Bill Moyers, he feels that "Nothing I do is going to be good enough for him." And yet, the poet confesses, he still finds himself trying to please the father.

Thus, the gesture that the father in the poem makes, of taking the errant peach leaf from the son's cheek, is tender and protective, yet has an underside that the poem's last stanza explores. Notice that Lee does not have the father or the son speak, nor does he describe a facial expression, and it is by this, perhaps, that he maintains a personal yet impersonal touch. As the poem prepares for the final turn, the boy is "the good boy": the article "the" implies that someone (possibly the father, possibly the wistful speaker) has referred to him this way. And we are given the poem's key word: "entrusted." The son in the poem holds the weight of the peaches that the father has entrusted to him—the legacy a child holds which will one day be all that exists of the parent. The pain of the sweetness of the relationship, like the pain of the peach severed from the branch, is that the father will inevitably recede from this son, do what the son will. Thus the poem points to mortality. It also may be pointing to an individual relationship where the son feels he will never live up to the father's high expectations of him: "his own steps / flag, and his arms grow weak." Does the father recede because he is more capable (in the poem, he carries twice the burden of peaches that the speaker carries)—characterized by Lee as having "huge ... talents" and therefore admired by the poet? Or does he recede because time pulls him away, as it simultaneously holds fast to the son, dragging at his feet and keeping him, emotionally, fixed in this scene?

The poem leaves these questions unresolved; perhaps they are not resolvable for the poet, as they are not resolvable for many of us. We are now invited to "See the look on the boy's face," but of course the invitation is really to invent the disappointment, despair, longing, whatever that look will be for us, and so the poet cleverly invites us in to the place of the son, deprived of the thing most longed for, lost, and at the same time still possessed.

Without resorting to clichés, Lee places sweetness—perhaps he means human joy—in the cycle of life. If the peach is to come into existence and be sweet, it must also fall from the bough and create rupture and pain. The very act of loving parents means accepting the inevitable pain of their loss when they die. The act of loving a parent may also entail acknowledging one's own differences from that parent, and setting them

aside. The poet-critic Roger Mitchell has said that Lee's poems in *Rose* are characterized by their "commit[ment] to tenderness"; Mitchell suggests that the poems are narrowed in scope by the poet's will to be tender. However, a close reading of "The Weight of Sweetness" suggests, rather, the largeness of Lee's scope. Here is a poet who deftly and delicately shows us how fleeting and even provisional tenderness is. America has given us many descriptions of the dysfunctional family, as is only right as we work to examine, assess, and heal our wounds. Lee reminds us that sweet relationships deserve as close attention.

Source: Sharon Kraus, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Moore teaches writing at Long Island University in Brooklyn, New York, and is a poet whose work appears in anthologies and literary journals. In this essay, she examines Lee's use of imagery and narrative as he explores memory in "The Weight of Sweetness."

"The Weight of Sweetness" is a poem about a son and his father. It is a poem about a particular memory, and also the idea of memory. The principal words are sent out and then return, bringing new meaning with them—sweetness, weight, peaches, father and son. The peaches symbolize sweetness—the taste of the fruit and the semi-sweet memory the speaker has of picking peaches with his father. Weight is seriousness, gravity, a force of attraction. There is the weight of memory itself, the specific memory of the father, and the weight of the father himself—all seen in a peach:

Hold the peach, try the weight, sweetness
and death so round and snug
in your palm.

It seems that the speaker, as a grown man, picks a peach and holds it in his hand, which reminds him of an outing he took with his father when he was a child. Holding the peach, he remembers that day, but he also feels the weight of the peach on his palm, as if he is weighing the fruit to see how heavy it is. To weigh also means to evaluate, to consider, to measure. He may be weighing the memory along with the peach. Is it good? Is it bad? It is more complicated than either good or bad: "No easy thing to bear, the weight of sweetness."

What is sweetness, according to Lee in this poem? Choose three from this list: "Song, wisdom, sadness, joy." These are the elements that make memory sweet, but it is not an unalloyed sweetness. There is sadness in each grouping, whether with song, wisdom, or joy. Take away sadness and there is still wisdom, which must include sadness in this context. What wisdom does the speaker have? He knows that the peach represents not only something sweet, but death. He has, after all, just pulled the peach from its stem.

The speaker pulls the peach from its stem, and knows that he has grown up and left his father. But what he remembers is his father leaving him behind. They are picking peaches, and the father gives the son a bag of peaches to carry home. The "father has entrusted" the bag to the boy; it seems a sacred trust to be allowed to carry the sweet fruit. The father, being powerful, "carries a bagful in each arm." Even with only one bag, the boy is unable to keep up. He gets tired, "his arms grow weak," and he cannot live up to his father's expectations. Meanwhile, the father, without looking back, "moves / faster and farther ahead." When the speaker says that the child "labors / under the weight / of peaches," he refers not only to the heaviness of the bag but to the weight of wanting to please his father, who is both loving and demanding.

The speaker pulls the peach from its stem, and remembers a tender moment with his father. They are picking peaches together, and they "shiver with delight" in the wind, the tree leaves shaking rain drops onto them. Father and son love each other; the "father lifts from his son's cheek / one green leaf / fallen like a kiss." They are together, just the two of them, fulfilling a task for the family.

The speaker pulls a peach from its stem and holds it, weighing its meaning. His father has died and left him behind. The memories are sweet, containing both sadness and joy, wisdom and song.

Lee directs the image of peaches to lead to both the memory and its meaning. As the critic Zhou Xiaojing writes in *Melus Review,* the poet often uses a technique in which he "relies on a central image as the organizing principle for both the subject matter and structure of the poem." In "The Weight of Sweetness," this central image is the peach, which guides the speaker to not only remember the event but to consider its meaning. Xiaojing goes on to discuss Lee's strategy of incorporating "narrative as the material for meditation ... and the shifting point of departure for transition or development within the poem." Thus, the peach inspires the narrative of the childhood memory, which inspires the speaker's meditation on his father and on the idea of memory, with its measure of sweetness and sadness. The images and the narrative are woven together throughout the poem, though the poet does not bring the reader to a conclusion or solution. The remembered story has no definite ending; it is primarily a memory of a feeling.

Lee is certainly an American poet. The discussion of self and family and the free verse structure are common in contemporary American poetry. However, like many Americans, Lee possesses a bi-cultural view of living in the world. He gained knowledge of his Chinese heritage from his family, though he has lived most of his life in the United States. His father, who was a doctor and a scholar, taught him Chinese classical poems and read to him from the Bible. It would be a mistake to identify Lee with only one side of his background, as Xiaojing explains, since it is a "misconception that a pure and fixed Chinese culture has been inherited and maintained by Chinese immigrants and their descendants in America." However, as poet and teacher Gerald Stern writes in the foreword to *Rose,* in which "Weight of Sweetness" appears, Lee's poetry is characterized by "a pursuit of certain Chinese ideas, or Chinese memories, without any self-conscious ethnocentricity."

Lee draws on his Chinese lineage in "Weight of Sweetness," whether deliberately or not. For example, his images are often complementary, showing two sides of the same characteristic, rather than the traditional Western oppositional approach. In his description of the peach—"sweetness / and death so round and snug / in your palm"—he could be explaining the nature of Yin and Yang, a Chinese philosophical idea. The term Yin originally meant the northern, or shaded, slope of a mountain; Yang referred to the sunny southern slope. Yin and Yang correspond to soft and hard, negative and positive, passive and active, but they are considered complementary parts of a whole, not opposites. Thus, when Lee views the peach as both "sweetness and death," he is not being contradictory but expressing a view of the balance of nature that comes from ancient Chinese thought.

This view extends throughout the poem. The memory brings both joy and sadness; the poem is both song, indicating lightheartedness, and something of gravity, or seriousness. Likewise, the relationship of the father and son is neither purely amicable nor adversarial. It has given the son both delight and sorrow, which are complementary aspects of love. In the Yin and Yang of the speaker's memory of his father, both happiness and sadness exist in harmony.

In the introduction of *Li Po and Tu Fu,* a collection of poems by two eighth-century Chinese poets, Arthur Cooper discusses aspects of Yin and Yang as they relate to poetry. Any healthy living being (and this includes rocks, earth, and sky as well as living things) "is made up of both elements harmoniously balanced, even though one of them may in some way be in the lead." It does not follow, therefore, that the Yin and Yang must be of equal amounts to create harmony in a person or thing. Some poets are more identified with Yin; these tend to write more intuitively, less directly. Yang-identified poets, on the other hand, are considered more pro-active and intellectual. While these divisions are speculative only, Lee seems likely to be classified with the Yin poets, because of his indirect way of expressing his purpose. Naturally, though, even a Yin poet contains Yang as well.

Stephen Mitchell, in his translation of the *Tao te Ching,* a fifth-century B.C. book of Chinese philosophy, explains that the contradictions that appear in the uniting of Yin and Yang are "paradoxical on the surface only." A follower of the philosophy of *Tao te Ching,* or Tao, would see the power in "non-doing" as opposed to doing something. That is, he or she would not feel the necessity of reconciling the surface differences of what may appear to be a contradictory situation. Thus Lee, in writing about his memory of his father, accepts both the "delight" and the regret that remembering entails.

Lee weaves his imagery and narrative together with his intuitive understanding based on Chinese thought. His approach makes it possible for him to tell a story without an ending, and to meditate on the subject and object of memory at the same time. He thinks of his father, and he thinks of the act of memory. Both thoughts carry the burden of sadness as well as the pleasure of remembering something happy. In Lee's world view, these contrasting images are not impossible to reconcile, but are the complex, essential—and beautiful—elements of existence.

Source: Katrinka Moore, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Adaptations

Lee appears with Bill Moyers in the Public Broadcasting System series *The Power of the Word*.

W. W. Norton has a website from which you can listen to Lee read his poem "Persimmons": http://www.wwnorton.com/sounds/lee.ram

Topics for Further Study

Compare and contrast Lee's use of the peach as a metaphor in "The Weight of Sweetness" with his use of the persimmon in "Persimmons," also found in *Rose.*

Write a short essay about someone you love whom you have lost, then write a poem about that same person. What did you leave out of the poem that you included in the essay? Which piece is more truthful to your emotions?

How is the father character in "The Weight of Sweetness" mythical and how is he real? Write descriptions of one of your parents as a mythical figure and as a real person, then explain the difference between the two.

Compare and Contrast

1945: Sukarno, with Mohammad Hatta, proclaims independence from the Netherlands for Indonesia on August 17, two days after the Japanese surrender.

1953: President Dwight Eisenhower draws the attention of U.S. politicians to Indonesia. In a speech to a governors' conference, he says that Washington should continue to foot the bill for the French war in Indochina because "if we lost all that, how would the free world hold the rich empire of Indonesia?"

1958: A CIA pilot, Allen Lawrence Pope, is shot down over Sumatra while flying with an Indonesian right-wing rebel force.

1959-1965: The United States pumps $64 million in military aid to the right-wing Indonesian generals.

1963: Sukarno proclaims himself president for life.

1975: The Indonesian military government invades East Timor—with the blessing of U.S. President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger—and tries to crush the liberation movement there.

Today: Twenty years and 200,000 deaths later, the struggle in East Timor continues.

1967: 45-year-old Suharto, an army commander and anti-communist, wrests power from President Sukarno, who is put under house arrest. Suharto promptly orders a purge of leftist sympathizers and communists, mostly ethnic Chinese. Some 500,000 Indonesians are killed.

1998: President Suharto resigns after the collapse of Indonesia's economy and massive popular protests and riots.

What Do I Read Next?

Lee's collection *Rose,* published in 1986, includes "The Weight of Sweetness." These poems, many of which explore the poet's relationship to his father, are full of nostalgia and tenderness. Of particular interest are the poems "Eating Alone," "Persimmons," and "Always a Rose."

In his interview with Tod Marshall in the *Kenyon Review's* Winter 2000 issue, Lee discusses his family background and the challenges he faced learning English.

Further Study

Baumli, Francis, ed., *Men Freeing Men: Exploding the Myth of the Traditional Male,* New Atlantis Press, 1991.

This collection of short essays explores a variety of men's social roles, paying particular attention to how men negotiate gendered behavior and social expectations of maleness.

Lee, Li-Young, *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance,* Simon & Schuster, 1995.

Part prose poem, part memoir, *The Winged Seed* presents memories of Lee's family in Indonesia in a dreamy, poetic prose. Readers feels as if they're seeing Lee's descriptions as if through gauze.

Miller, Matt, "Poetry: Asian-American Li-Young Lee Lights Up His Family's Murky Past," in *Far Eastern Economic Review,* May 30, 1996. pp. 34-37.

American poet Li-Young Lee's work addresses his family's past and the challenges he faced in learning English. He was born in Indonesia, but his family was forced to leave because of a crackdown on ethnic Chinese. He is uncertain about the history of his father and his family, and this uncertainty colors his work.

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Wong, Sau-Ling Cynthia, *Reading Asian-American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance,* Princeton University Press, 1993.

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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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