

Dr. Lemons

English 205

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Journal Entry #2

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During my reading tonight I came across the poem "A Patch of Old Snow" by Robert Frost. To date, it is my favorite out of all the poems we have read. The poem is essentially a snapshot of "a patch of old snow in the corner" that is "speckled with grime." This is an image that I saw every year at the beginning of spring, when rain would begin to wash the snow away and only a few small patches remained, speckled with dirt and gravel, holding on to dear life until a final ray of sun would melt it away. Through all of my years watching the snow melt away, I never made the pertinent connection between the image of the snow and the image of a newspaper, one which I found to be significant.

The last two lines of the poem are particularly apposite, where Robert Frost calls the patch of old snow the "news of a day I've forgotten-- / If I ever read it." Although these dirty patches of snow are common throughout many towns, few people care to notice them. Many fail to realize that these insignificant dirty patches were once part of a large snowfall that blanketed the town, one which was very significant.

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Today in class we read Howard Nemerov's "Money," a very insightful exploration of the intricacies of the buffalo nickel. The poem is written more like a lecture than a traditional poem,

the speaker of which pulls out a very simple nickel, and proceeds to examine every miniscule aspect of its icons and cryptograms, and finds a message that dishonors the American spirit rather than glorifies it.

On one side of the coin, a American Indian looks solemnly away from the word "liberty" which "appears / To be falling out of the sky T first." The American Indian does not notice the word in a seemingly fitting fashion. Ever since Europeans landed in America, American Indians have been murdered, raped, displaced, and terrorized, stripped of their liberties and forced to conform their lifestyles around those of the settlers. In the same fashion that nickels are now worthless, such has become the fate of the American Indian. Many years ago, the American Indians were thriving peoples, rich in culture and population. However, they were subsequently subjugated, and now their culture is weak, their populations low, restricted to the small lands of their reservations. It is ironic that we chose to place the American Indian on the head of our nickel as a celebration of culture, when in fact we largely destroyed the culture we celebrate.

Similarly, the opposite side of the nickel contains an image of the American buffalo. The buffalo is trapped within the confines of the coin, its eyes downcast, its tail curved inward. Like the American Indian, the European settlers slaughtered the population of American buffalo, nearly bringing the species to extinction due to their shortsightedness. However, the image of the American buffalo was also chosen to celebrate American culture.

It is especially strange to include these images on the nickel with the phrase "e pluribus unum" above the buffalo. The phrase means "for many, one" in Latin. However, it seems that the minters chose to put two things, the American Indian and the American buffalo, that we excluded from e pluribus unum on the coin.

Money is traditionally a symbol of value or worth. However, Nemerov points out that sometimes there is a deeper meaning in the design of the coin, whether wittingly or not. By pointing out miniscule intricacies that usually evade the eye, he was able to find ironies in the coin's ostensible celebration of American culture, putting what could be considered an un-American spin on American currency.

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When I read "Acquainted with the Night," my love for Robert Frost's poetry was confirmed. In high school I had never read much of Frost, although one of my friends is obsessed with him. As a result, when I first read "A Patch of Old Snow" and "The Gift Outright," that was my first exposure to the beauty of Frost's voice. I was thoroughly impressed, but "A Patch of Old Snow" is very short, and I didn't want to judge a poet based on one poem. However, "Acquainted with the Night," confirmed my suspicions.

The first thing I noticed about this poem when I read it is its rhythm and sound. There is a very regular "beat" about it, which Google informs me is *tezra rima*, which is much less difficult to write in Italian than it is in English because Italian had many words which have vowel endings. However, Frost is able to master this poetic technique, and his content does not lack as a result.

The poem is essentially a beautiful look at isolation and depression. A sense of loneliness permeates the entire poem, especially in the second, third, and fourth stanzas. Although the speaker is in a city, there is no sound or people. But the speaker is used to it, for he is "acquainted with the night." It is not the first time that the speaker has "looked down the saddest city lane" or

walked out in rain--and back in rain." Although there is no clear indication in the poem as to why the speaker is lonely or depressed, I believe it is because he was kicked out of his house by a loved one, perhaps his wife, after a quarrel. In the third and fourth stanzas, the speaker describes:

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet

When far away an interrupted cry

Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-by

This inner dialogue suggests that he was thrown out of his shelter, and as a result has to aimlessly wander the streets until he figures out where to go. He believes that the interrupted cry, which breaks the silence of the city, is his loved one calling him back home, or perhaps even saying goodbye. However, it is neither, and, dejected and heartbroken, the speaker must continue to wander the streets, ignorant to sound and time, until he finds somewhere to go. However, this is not an unusual instance for him. Being acquainted with the night, he knows that he will be taken back by that loved one, only to replay the instance on another night.

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In our discussion of anti-poetry, we read an abstract from a poem by Linda Hogan, and American Indian:

In my left pocket a Chickasaw hand

rests on the bone of my pelvis.

In my right pocket

a white hand.

This excerpt reminded me of "Money" by Howard Nemerov, who discussed the plight of the American Indian by examining a buffalo nickel. I found this imagery to be exceptional, perfectly depicting an American Indian's identity struggle to assimilate to white culture.

As a result, I attempted to find the rest of Linda Hogan's poem, and was astounded by what I found. The poem, six stanzas in length, is written with the same beautiful imagery and symbolism as the excerpt. It discusses the racism between the two groups, the American Indians and the whites, and her intense desire for amnesty. She makes the argument that property and color are just "masks for the soul," and that in our inherent nature, we are exactly the same. Although she still avoids the dangers of commingling with "the enemy," she desperately calls for peace. Although I did not find this poem to fit into the book's description of anti-poetry, I found the poem to be heartbreaking and relevant and beautiful, deserving more attention than it currently receives.

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In *Western Wind*, the authors declare that "Winter," a poem by William Shakespeare, "may be the best winter poem in English." At first I found this statement to be ludicrous: just another baseless claim praising Shakespearean poetry simply because it is Shakespearean. However, after further analyzing it with the class, I found Mason's claim to be more valid than I initially expected.

Unlike most poets who romanticize about the beauty of winter, Shakespeare decided to express the darker side of winter in his poem. He describes the howling wind, the bitter cold, the frozen milk, and illness, factors that are not generally written about romantically. I liked this

because winter isn't only about building snowmen and making snow angels and sledding and Christmas and fun. It is usually bitter cold, and sometimes there isn't even any snow. Sickness is rampant. Shakespeare's poem is great because it emphasizes these overlooked features, and it is especially great when compared to Francis P. Osgood's poem "Winter Fairyland in Vermont," which is essentially a (hopefully) satirical response to Shakespeare's "Winter," in which Osgood provides an over-the-top jolly view of the winter season. Instead of describing the cold and the illness and the ice, Osgood describes large, blazing fires, a woman baking in a "flowery blouse," snow angels, popcorn, and the utter joy of wintertime. His portrayal is overtly unrealistic, and his over-the-top wintry depiction makes the poem into a joke. However, this merely highlights the excellence of Shakespeare's "Winter," which could possibly be "the best winter poem in English."

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I find Elizabeth Bishop's "The Filling Station" to be the most quintessential example of anti-poetry that we have read thus far. She manages to make the dirty, greasy business of changing oil into something beautiful. The filling station is a family business, which is proven in the second stanza:

Father wears a dirty,
oil-soaked monkey suit
that cuts him under the arms,
and several quick and saucy
and greasy sons assist him

(it's a family filling station),

all quite thoroughly dirty.

The speaker, perhaps a customer at the filling station, humorously asks whether they live in the station, which, despite the cars and grease and dirtiness, has a very homey aura. The speaker notes that the station has an extraneous plant, a taboret, and a doily. She also notes a porch, wicker furniture, and a lazy dog, all common characteristics of a home.

Although most people would simply find the filling station to be greasy and dirty, the speaker finds beauty and even homeyness in the business, something that not many poets would notice. I find this poem to be thoroughly anti-poetic, and even beautiful. Bishop makes a believer out of everyone, highlighting the physical beauty of dirt and work.

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My initial reading of Alfred Owen's "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" left me feeling a little strange. I had heard the story of Abraham many years earlier in Hebrew School, but something was different about it during this reading. Then I realized that the author had changed the ending of the story, for in this version, Abram slays his son instead of freeing him. I had difficulty deciphering a meaning out of this, especially the last two lines, in which the speaker says, "But the old man would not do so, but slew his son, / And half the seed of Europe, one by one." These are the only two lines in the poem that rhyme, denoting their significance. The last line in particular was baffling, for in the poem, Abram slays Isaac, not "half the seed of Europe." It wasn't until the context of the poem was pointed out that I truly understood what it was really about.

Wilfred Owen wrote this poem during World War I. Thus, the poem is a comparison between the ascent of Abraham to Mount Moriah and his near-sacrifice of Isaac there with the start of the Great War. The "Old Man," or Abram, represents the governments of the various European nations involved in the war. The nations felt that sacrificing their pride, represented by the "ram of pride," was too great a price to pay, and thus chose to kill their young men, represented by Isaac, to keep their nation's honor. This poem, though anti-war, places no blame on any particular nation. Rather, it condemns every nation who took part in the war. Because of each nation's pride, they are essentially killing "half the seed of Europe, one by one."

This poem struck me as interesting because I had never really seen any anti-war poetry about the Great War. As a child of two Bob Dylan-loving parents, I am very familiar with anti-Vietnam poetry. And through artists such as Conor Oberst and Kimya Dawson, I am also aware of the growing number of anti-Iraq poems. For me, it was a clear indicator that even with wars that are generally regarded as "necessary," there will always be objectors.

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Today in class we read Rod Taylor's poem "Dakota: October, 1822: Hunkpapa Warrior." The title is perplexing; it almost reads like a diary entry, and the poem speaks like one. After reading the poem on my own last night, I immediately looked up what a "Hunkpapa warrior" is, and found that the Hunkpapa are one of the seven branches of the Lakota Sioux tribe, who resided in North and South Dakota. Thus, it is very nationalistic that the speaker calls the Hunkpapa the "strongest tribe of the Sioux." Nationalism is a driving force in this poem, as is optimism. The speaker is a warrior for the Hunkpapa, probably young, and thus cannot foresee

the imminent dangers that will eventually shatter his tribe. He notes that "[b]uffalo / are plentiful, our women are beautiful. Life / is good." Although he can see his tribe's enemies from deep within the long grass, his optimism and nationalism cause him not to see the enemies as a threat. Thus, he asks the chilling question: "What bad thing can be done against us?"

The final question in the poem is haunting because of its dramatic irony. The Hunkpapa no longer freely roam the Dakotas; they live on a reservation. The buffalo that were once plentiful are now an endangered breed. The reader knows that the Native Americans were mistreated, and are still mistreated. Thus, the reader can foresee the Hunkpapa's haunting demise. They will later fight alongside Sitting Bull, who was also a Sioux, in an effort to retain their land and their rights against the United States. This poem (like many poems in *Western Wind*) focuses on the mistreatment of the Native Americans by the white settlers.