

Billy Collins

In 2001 a new poet laureate was crowned and a new voice; the voice of a poetic everyman was heard by many for the first time. That voice belonged to Billy Collins. Collins was born into a working-class Bronx couple, and grew up in a typical middle-class neighborhood where he went to church on Sundays and listened to jazz music in his free time. This middle-class background and sensibilities are reflected in his poetic style and themes, and in his desire to bring poetry back into the American main stream by making it more accessible to the average reader.

Billy Collins was born March 22, 1941 in Queens, New York. He was born into a middle class family. His parents were of Irish descent, and had deep roots in the Irish Catholic religion (Press). Both of his parents held steady jobs; his father was an insurance broker, and his mother was a nurse. During Billy Collins' years up until middle school, he had received a below average education, attending a public school in the Bronx. However, his father became very successful and rather wealthy. Billy and his family then moved to Westchester County, a wealthy New York suburb, where he attended a prestigious private school. After high school, Billy attended Holy Cross College where he received his bachelors degree, then went on to get his Ph.D. in Romantic poetry at the University of California at Riverside. Billy began his Career in poetry as a writer for "Rolling Stones" magazine, selling his poems for thirty-five dollars each (Billy Collins). In 1970, after his job in "Rolling Stones", he got a position teaching poetry at Lehman College, located in the Bronx, where he is still teaching. Along with his teaching career, he served as the forty-first poet

Laureate of the U.S from 2001-2003, and has published a number of books of poetry. They include Poker face (1977), Video Poems (1980), The Apple That Astonished Paris (1988), Questions About Angles (1991), The Art of Drowning (1995), Picnic, Lighting (1998), Sailing Alone Around the Room (2002), The After Life, and Nine Horses. In 1997 Billy Collins married Diane Olbright, who he had met while attending the University of California at Riverside. When they married she was the host of ABC's "Wide World of Sports", she is currently an architect.

Many things have had a large influence on Collins' poetry. Religious faith has a particularly large impact. Billy grew up in a highly religious Irish Catholic family, and was taught how to live a good Christian life. Collins, however, is not as deeply religious as his parents, but still continues to be Catholic for the sake of continuity, and respect toward his parents (Press). Many of Collins' poems center around the ideas of religion; in fact, his book "The Afterlife" is dedicated solely to religious themes. Jazz has also influenced Billy Collins' poetry. He grew up listening to jazz, and many of his poems are about his love for this music (Mazin). The works of other poets have also influenced Collins' writing. Although he certainly has his own unique style of writing, the influence of Elizabethan metaphysical poetry is evident. Collins particularly admires the works of George Herbert and John Donne (Billy Collins). George Herbert uses homely and everyday images in his poetry as does Collins. He also, as Lawrence Lipnok states in Norton's Anthology of English Literature, uses religious themes such as the importance of faith. Unlike Collins, however, George Herbert strictly follows traditional poetic forms (Lipnok 1180). Collins on the other hand uses free verse and follows no structural form in his poetry. Religious themes are also seen in John Donne's work, who was a Roman

Catholic as is Collins. Donne too uses imagery drawn from daily life and employs a less formal and more colloquial style of writing (Lipnok 1255). Their work differs in that Donne's poetry is very intellectually difficult, while Collins' is easily understood and very accessible to the average person.

Throughout his life, Billy Collins has written many poems and many very successful poetry books. His first book, Poker Face, was written in 1977 followed by Video Poems written in 1980. Both of these books were quite successful, putting Billy on the map as a commendable poet (Mazin). During the beginning of his career he experimented with many different styles of poetry. In fact, his first poems were emotionally deep and lacking humor. It was not until his mid forties that he developed the unique style of poetry for which he is now so well known (Press). Collins has had no one major success but rather all of his books have come together to make him very successful, each with their own contribution to his popularity. His first books, for example, were not as successful as his more recent ones, if it weren't for them, he would have never made a name for himself thus his more recent books would not have been close to as successful as they were (Mazin). Through out his career, Collins has achieved many awards and honors. Arguably his most outstanding achievement was being crowned the forty-first Poet Laureate of the US, a very prestigious and honorable position that only the most skillful of poets can achieve. He has also received a variety of other awards including the Oscar Blumenthal Prize, the Bess Hokin Prize, and the Levinson Prize. He was also named Best American Poet in 1992 and 1993, and has been given a fellowship from the New York Foundation for the arts. Along with being praised by awards, Collins is also highly respected and admired by his contemporaries as an

excellent and highly skilled poet. Collins' poetry has had great impacts on others; his new and unique style of humorous and accessible poetry has inspired many other poets to adapt this style. As well as having impacts on other poets, he also has had a very large impact on the society. Collins has made one of his major goals as a poet to make poetry more accessible to the normal person. One way he is fulfilling this goal is through a program he has developed called Project 180 (Billy Collins). This project is aimed at raising the popularity and interest of poetry among middle and high school students. This program consists of a list of 180 poems that would be of interest and appeal to the students, as well as a guide to show the teachers how to teach poetry in a way that is fun yet effective.

One of my favorite poems is Another Reason why I don't Keep a Gun in the House. The poem begins with the author sitting in his house, he can hear his neighbors dog barking on and on in the background. The dog is a nuisance to the narrator very much, so he closes all the windows and turns on a Beethoven symphony. Despite blasting the music, he can still hear the dog's constant barks. While lying down he begins to put the dogs barking into the music, he imagines that the dogs barking is actually written into the music, then he paints a picture of the orchestra in his mind, and pictures the dog as one of the musicians. This poem shows Collins' accessibility to the average reader. Every middle-class suburbanite has at one time or another been annoyed by a barking dog. It is a very simple poem that anyone could understand. It also shows Collins' good humor and general benevolent take on life.

Another interesting poem by Collins is "On Turning Ten". The poem is about the thoughts of a little boy on his tenth birthday. He thinks about how he has to grow up now

that he has become ten. He realizes that he has to leave behind the world of make-believe and deal with more of life's difficult realities. This poem is on its surface quite easy to understand and appreciate. We have all shared the experience of growing up and putting aside childish things, but as is often the case with Collins' poetry, there is a deeper level of meaning that a more thoughtful reading reveals. Collins is also talking about our mortality and the inevitability of death:

...I used to believe
there was nothing under my skin but light
If you cut me I could shine.
But now when I fall...I bleed.

Billy Collins, "On Turning Ten"

Another good poem by Billy Collins is "Nightclub". In this poem, Collins is listening to a jazz song on the familiar romantic theme of beauty, foolishness, and love. He imagines he is in a jazz club watching all the "beautiful fools gathered around little tables." He plays in his mind with the relationship between beauty and foolishness as a jazz musician would play variations on a theme of music. He comes to the conclusion that we are all fools for not seeing our own beauty. This poem shows Collins' love of music and familiarity with jazz. It can also be appreciated on two different levels. You can enjoy the dreamy description of a jazz club, but also the deeper discussion on the topic of beauty.

Despite his upbringing in a middle class home, and his poor education as a child, Collins has become a very well known and highly respected poet, whose middle class backgrounds have had a large influence on his poetry, as well as his goal to make poetry

more accessible to the average reader. Collins has had a very successful career, publishing several poetry books and being the Poet Laureate of the U.S. from 2001-2003. Collins has a very unique style of poetry that has appeal to both the average person, being both easy to read and humorous to the normal person, and the more sophisticated reader by having a deeper more complex meanings.