



Barack Obama (President of the United States)

Obama as Poet



When President Obama was a 19-year-old student at Occidental College, he published two poems in the spring 1982 issue of *Feast*, the school's literary magazine. The first poem, "Pop," appears to capture a moment between the young Obama and his maternal grandfather, [Stanley Dunham](#). The bond between the two is reinforced at the end of the poem by the framing and reflective properties of Pop's glasses.

"Pop"

Sitting in his seat, a seat broad and broken
 In, sprinkled with ashes,
 Pop switches channels, takes another
 Shot of Seagrams, neat, and asks
 What to do with me, a green young man
 Who fails to consider the
 Flim and flam of the world, since
 Things have been easy for me;
 I stare hard at his face, a stare
 That deflects off his brow;
 I'm sure he's unaware of his
 Dark, watery eyes, that
 Glance in different directions,
 And his slow, unwelcome twitches,
 Fail to pass.
 I listen, nod,
 Listen, open, till I cling to his pale,
 Beige T-shirt, yelling,
 Yelling in his ears, that hang
 With heavy lobes, but he's still telling
 His joke, so I ask why
 He's so unhappy, to which he replies...
 But I don't care anymore, cause
 He took too damn long, and from
 Under my seat, I pull out the
 Mirror I've been saving; I'm laughing,
 Laughing loud, the blood rushing from his face
 To mine, as he grows small,
 A spot in my brain, something
 That may be squeezed out, like a
 Watermelon seed between
 Two fingers.
 Pop takes another shot, neat,
 Points out the same amber
 Stain on his shorts that I've got on mine, and
 Makes me smell his smell, coming
 From me; he switches channels, recites an old poem
 He wrote before his mother died,
 Stands, shouts, and asks



[President Barack Obama](#)

Courtesy of *Barack Obama: U.S.
 Senator for Illinois* Web site

For a hug, as I shink, my
Arms barely reaching around
His thick, oily neck, and his broad back; 'cause
I see my face, framed within
Pop's black-framed glasses
And know he's laughing too.

When asked to comment on the merit of "Pop," Harold Bloom, Sterling Professor of the Humanities and English at Yale University, described it as "not bad—a good enough folk poem with some pathos and humor and affection.... It is not wholly unlike Langston Hughes, who tended to imitate Carl Sandburg." [1] Obama's poetry, Bloom makes clear, is much superior to the poetry of former President Jimmy Carter (Bloom calls Carter "literally the worst poet in the United States").

President Obama's second poem, "Underground," is more exotic and obscure:

"Underground"

Under water grottos, caverns
Filled with apes
That eat figs.
Stepping on the figs
That the apes
Eat, they crunch.
The apes howl, bare
Their fangs, dance,
Tumble in the
Rushing water,
Musty, wet pelts
Glistening in the blue.

Bloom feels that "Underground" is the better of Obama's two poems, reminiscent of some of D. H. Lawrence's poetry: "I think it is about some sense of chthonic forces, just as Lawrence frequently is—some sense, not wholly articulated, of something below, trying to break through." [2]

While President Obama's poetry displays some signs of talent, by choosing politics over poetry he made, like the other poetry-writing presidents before him, the right career choice. As Bloom notes: "If I had been shown these poems by one of my undergraduates and asked, Shall I go on with it?, I would have rubbed my forehead and said, On the whole, my dear, probably not. Your future is not as a person of letters."

Although President Obama may not have written poetry since his college years, his fondness for poetry remains. Obama was seen [carrying Derek Walcott's *Collected Poems, 1948-1984*](#) shortly after his election; invited [Elizabeth Alexander to read a poem at his inauguration](#); hosted, along with First Lady Michelle Obama, a [May 12, 2009 celebration of poetry, music and the spoken word at the White House](#); noted in a 2009 interview that [he reads Urdu poetry](#); and most recently hosted [an evening of poetry](#) on May 11, 2011 featuring Elizabeth Alexander, Billy Collins, Common, Rita Dove, Kenneth Goldsmith, Alison Knowles, Aimee Mann, and Jill Scott.

Notes

1. All quotations by Harold Bloom from Rebecca Mead's "Obama, Poet," (http://www.newyorker.com/talk/2007/07/02/070702ta_talk_mead, *The New Yorker*, July 2, 2007).

2. To read other assessments of Obama's poetry, many less positive than Harold Bloom's, see "Obama's Poetry Skills Draw Scrutiny" (<http://media.www.oxyweekly.com/media/storage/paper1200/news/2007/04/04/News/Obamas.Poetry.Skills.Draw.Scrutiny-2822022.shtml>, *The Occidental Weekly*, April 4, 2007).

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