Freshman Scholarship:

A Cycle of Identity

W.D. Snodgrass’ pseudonym S.S. Gardons.
Catherine Egan

Advisor: William Lavigne
Department of English

A detailed look into what caused W.D. Snodgrass’ creation and eventual abandonment of the pseudonymous character S.S. Gardons

What would drive an acclaimed pioneering poet to publish a collection of his works under a pen name? When a writer’s work is mass produced and placed on bookshelves in stores across the country, it seems as though the writer would want his name conspicuously scrawled across the cover. This is not always the case. It is puzzling why some writers choose to withhold their names and publish their work under a pseudonym. One might reason that some writers are shy and prefer to keep their careers separate from their personal lives. But to publish only select works under a pseudonym while others bear the writer’s true identification raises questions. The subject of the work must be incriminating and of a more personal nature. Following his successful, critically acclaimed first work, Heart’s Needle, Snodgrass published under a pseudonym for his second collection of poetry, Remains. While both works were written in a similarly revealing style, something special is contained in Remains that set it apart and led Snodgrass to keep his name from appearing on the cover.

Snodgrass is best known for his confessional poetry, a form which he revolutionized. In a 1970 interview, Snodgrass spoke about what led him to write confessional poetry:

It seemed to me that this kind of very personal approach to a poem was something nobody had taken for a long time, so it seemed possible that one might be able to produce something new and different this way and something valuable. But as to whether that way of working is more valuable in itself than another way, I doubt.

Snodgrass achieved a ground breaking level of emotion in his poems written in this style. Poetry had been previously characterized by its symbolism and formal tone. With admirable talent, Snodgrass was up for this challenge to explore new ground in the world of poetry. In the same 1970 interview, Snodgrass expressed a somewhat pessimistic attitude toward writing this personal style of poetry even though he helped develop it. Snodgrass claimed tasks that one knows are possible to accomplish are not worth doing. Only those tasks that may seem impossible are fun. Also, when attempting something new that will not necessarily work, there’s no reason to feel bad if it doesn’t work. Snodgrass did not have to be concerned with failure. His first collection was critically acclaimed. Many other poets have since followed in his footsteps and his intimate approach to poetry has spread.

Snodgrass is not anxious to take credit for this quite personal style of poetry which has now become popular. He insisted it is the same approach that he has always used. When looking more closely at poets once thought to be impersonal – Eliot and Frost, his heart on his sleeve…but refrains from blowing his nose with it.”

Snodgrass is aware that revealing too much emotion is unappealing:

the personal approach leaves open the possibility of a great deal of sentimentality and foolishness, bedroom memoirs and that sort of stuff, which nobody needs.

Through this statement, it is clear that Snodgrass set out to write a poem that has a certain feel to it. He not only wants his work to be emotional, but also written in an accessible language. When writing poetry, Snodgrass claims to first write:

...a very compacted, intellectual, sad, and obviously symbolic poem with a lot of fancy language in it. But then, as I go on working on it, the poem happily becomes plainer and longer, and seems much more ‘tossed off.’ The first version

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often seems very labored and literary and intellectual. The final version, if I’m lucky, will seem very conversational, and sort of ‘thrown away.’

In its final version, his poetry take on a more casual, “tossed off,” feeling, neither over-done nor exaggerated. This balance—portraying emotion without creating a sappy poem—combined with his deliberate use of approachable language, characterizes Snodgrass’ work.

Heart’s Needle takes on a somber feeling. In a poem entitled “Returned to Frisco, 1946,” Snodgrass describes his return home after World War II. Instead of taking on the expected feeling of overwhelming joy that returning soldiers feel, the poem delivers a feeling of apprehension:

We shouldered like pigs
along the rail to try
And catch that first gray
outline of the shore
Of our first life.
A plane hung in the sky
From which a girl’s
voice sang: ‘…you’re home one More.’
For that moment, we were dulled and
shaken by fear.

Snodgrass focuses on his true emotion and not what is expected of him or what he supposes the reader would want. Because this poem was not written until years later, the validity of these emotions is questionable.

Snodgrass’s daughter, Cynthia, is the subject of much of Heart’s Needle. From the title alone, one can infer that the poems contained within the compilation are about painful events in Snodgrass’s life. The title is taken from an Irish folk tale comparing the “loss of an only daughter with a needle puncturing the heart.” Heart’s Needle contains ten poems about Cynthia, one for each season during his divorce and remarriage. These ten poems take on a reminiscent tone, recalling Cynthia’s childhood all the way back to her birth:

While nine months
filled your term, we knew
how your lungs, immersed
in the womb, miraculously grew
their useless folds till
the fierce, cold air rushed in to fill
the out like bushes thick with leaves.
You took your hour,

caught breath, and cried with
your full lung power.

Snodgrass’s work is very personal and revealing, because his life’s events, such as the birth of his daughter, are the basis for his writing. Thus, the reader discovers many details about Snodgrass and his family.

Although each of Snodgrass’s collections of poetry deal with certain private events and his feelings about them, Snodgrass chose to withhold his name and published his second collection, Remains, under a pseudonym. One might ask why a confessional poet would publish just one of his collections under a pseudonym. Confessional poetry is characterized by honesty and openness, leading to the conclusion that publishing such work under a pseudonym runs counter to the inherent nature of the work. Snodgrass has published other collections before and since the publication of Remains using his real name. With this in mind, there must be something special about this collection of poetry to warrant the use of the of the pen name S.S. Gardons.

The fictitious character S.S. Gardons is quite intriguing. When Gardons was first created, little biographical information was published about Gardons. With time, S.S. Gardons became a more complex character. The notion of S.S. Gardons being the author of such a skillfully written collection of poetry became less plausible as more information became available about his background. Included in the biographical information are details assumed to be written by Snodgrass himself, suggesting that Gardons did not have the traditional education of a writer. A resident of Red Creek, Texas, Gardons:

worked as a gas station attendant,
although he took a few university classes
in Houston, and later became an owner
of a cycle shop.

The description continues to include other fanciful details and claims that Gardons was “also a musician, he played lead guitar in the well-known rock group, Chicken Gumbo.” If the object of the pseudonym was to conceal his identity, it is puzzling why Snodgrass would make this character so unbelievable. Writing poetry about such a trying time in his life, Snodgrass may have used this publication as a sort of therapy to get past these tragic events. By making Gardons so implausible, Snodgrass is further separating himself from the author of these poems and therefore the events themselves.

There is an interesting pair of poems in Remains. The poems “The Mouse” and “Viewing the Body” are linked. The “Mouse” is based on a childhood memory in which he and his sister find a mouse. It was “A dusty gray one, lying/ By the side steps.” The poem continues to discuss how they were “Afraid he might be dead.” In the end of the poem Snodgrass says the “little animal/ Plays out…Turns from its own needs, forgets its grief.” These lines foreshadow the death of his sister. The foreshadowing is made clear in the next poem “Viewing the Body,” as Snodgrass describes his sister “gray as a mouse.” As a short collection of poetry, Snodgrass clearly and easily links the poems together. The collection, Remains, gives an inclusive description of Snodgrass’s family when the individual poems are read together.

The next few poems in the collection discuss Snodgrass’s family after his sister’s death. In “Disposal,” Snodgrass describes how quickly and casually his sister’s belongings were disposed of after her death. One of her sister’s dresses was carelessly “fobbed” off on a friend. “Fourth of July” carries a reminiscent tone, recalling past years and memories when his sister was alive. Finally, “Survivors” discusses the family as it is without his sister. He claims everything is still the same without her there, or at least his parents act as though it is. From this it can be inferred that the nonchalant attitude adopted by his parents upset him. Snodgrass’s love for his sister is made apparent through these poems.

A possible reason for Snodgrass’s decision to publish Remains under a pseudonym is its intensely personal content, yet the emotions discussed in Remains are not drastically different from those first described in Heart’s Needle. Perhaps Snodgrass’s choice to publish under a pseudonym had more to do with his subject and less to do with his own emotions:

To say that the voice in Gardon’s poems is too close to the voice of the author’s other work and does not justify or necessitate a pseudonym...is to miss the whole point.
It is not the voice of the poem that needs protection, rather the subject – his family. The relationships that form the basis of Remains are too complex, emotional, and descriptive to leave open the possibility for the poems to be traced back to its subjects, at least while they are alive.

While his previous work discussed his daughter and past marriage, Remains addressed memories surrounding his parents, the death of his sister, and additional private details:

W.D. Snodgrass, in Heart’s Needle, wrote a slightly longer sequence with the same grace and control exhibited in Remains, but Gardons touches nerves that are more exposed, probes a subject matter (parents and dead sister as opposed to wife and child) somehow deeper, more explosive, less public.\(^2\)

The incredibly personal nature of the work can be found by examining any of the poems in Remains. Perhaps the most descriptive poem is “Viewing the Body,” in which Snodgrass discusses his sister lying in her casket among “obscene red folds of satin.”\(^2\) In this poem, Snodgrass accuses the people at his sister’s funeral of never deeply caring for her until after her death:

They all say isn’t she beautiful.
She, who never wore
Lipstick of such a dress,
Never got taken out,
Was scarcely looked at, much less
Wanted or talked about.\(^2\)

“Viewing the Body” portrays his feelings of contempt and anger toward the people at the funeral, presumably his parents, for never treating his sister correctly. The condemning tone of this poem expresses Snodgrass’s disapproval and anger for his parents’ actions related to his sister’s death. These emotions may have required Snodgrass to use a pseudonym in order to protect his parents’ identity.

Another possible explanation for Snodgrass’s use of a pseudonym was the pressure from his parents. It is clear that Snodgrass’s parents never fully supported his aspirations to be a writer, but rather expected him to continue a family tradition by becoming an accountant.\(^2\) Snodgrass’s choice to study English and become a writer was a major source of conflict between him and his parents, especially during his college years. Much later, even though they still did not fully approve of his career choice, Snodgrass’s parents eventually stopped criticizing him. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1960 for his first book. Heart’s Needle. Snodgrass’s success, however, did not curb his parents harping on other aspects of his life.

Tensions between Snodgrass and his parents lie deeper than his career choice. Snodgrass disappointed his father even during childhood. He failed to pick up tennis, pool, or even chess, as his father had hoped.\(^2\) Snodgrass’s mother, however, was the biggest cause of his imperfect family relations. She was a selfish, shrewish person who never thought of anyone but herself and always created distress within the family.\(^2\) Snodgrass dedicated an entire poem to describing his mother’s detestable character. The damning poem, entitled “The Mother,” is the first in the collection:

If evil did not exist,
She would create it
To die in righteousness,
Her martyrdom
To that sweet dominion
They have bolted from.
Then, at last, she can
Think that she is hate
And is content.\(^2\)

Along with his mother’s undesirable disposition were other problems within his family. Equally frustrating to Snodgrass was the way his father dealt with his mother:

Some part of me really did despise him—for his weakness, his failure to rescue any of us from my mother’s grip, his subtle manipulations of us.\(^2\)

Snodgrass’s father failed to make any effort to ease the ill effects his wife had on their children. Instead, he had an adulterous affair, leaving his children to deal with their mother’s moodiness.\(^2\)

Although Snodgrass did not fully respect his parents, he would not have wanted them to see his description of his sister as a corpse with “eyeshadow like a whore.”\(^2\) The unflattering descriptions of his sister are accompanied by insulting descriptions of his parents. Despite his obvious contempt for his parents, Snodgrass still loved them.\(^2\) He recognized their failings and did not hesitate to write about them. Snodgrass recognized the difference between writing about his parents anonymously and revealing the intimate details of his family life. “I believe that no subject matter should be barred from poetry, but that those matters usually considered personal or private should not be broached for their own sensational sake, where they could damage people still living.”\(^3\) By publishing under a pseudonym, Snodgrass spared his parents the humiliation of public exposure:

Snodgrass even attributed the character of S.S. Gardons to his parents. “Snodgrass states that he published the collection under the pseudonymous anagram S.S. Gardons because it contains unflattering descriptions of his parents, whose overprotectiveness… prevented his shy asthmatic sister from enjoying life.”\(^4\) The meaning of such accusations is damaging to his parents’ reputation. These statements claim that Snodgrass’s parents forced their children to live a life so full of oppression that it was scarcely enjoyable. In this description, his parents are oppressive, harsh, and uncaring. Parents, however severe, still hold a special place in their children’s lives. Bearing this in mind, one can understand Snodgrass’s decision to conceal his family’s identity by using a pseudonym.

While his true identity was never a secret, few people knew or recognized that S.S. Gardons was W.D. Snodgrass. Snodgrass came forward only after his parents died, sparing them public revile. Considering that Remains was reprinted, bearing his real name shortly after his parents’ death, one can infer that the pseudonym was intended to protect his parents. But what was the motive to protect is parents? The use of a pseudonym was perhaps a measure of respect, or out of fear.\(^5\)

Catherine Egan is a sophomore pursuing her degree in English with a minor in Spanish. Her research interests lie largely in works of literature and their authors. She currently serves on the editorial staff of the “Campus Times.”