



Ill Angels

By Dante Di Stefano

A Study Guide for Students

Synopsis

Ill Angels explores the breakdowns and joys, the rhythms and reveries, the cul-de-sacs and jubilees of early midlife.

In poems that are at once formally assured and daringly inventive, Dante Di Stefano invokes the lives of artists, musicians, and writers he admires, as his poetry ruminates on love, death, music, language, and notions of national belonging.

Fountaining through this book, you will find: Louis Armstrong, Gwendolyn Brooks, the Coen Brothers, John Coltrane, Phillip K. Dick, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Bob Dylan, Robert Frost, Guns N' Roses, Hokusai, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Kobayashi Issa, Paul Klee, Dolly Parton, Pearl Jam, Prince, Rainer Maria Rilke, Gene Rodenberry, Sonny Rollins, A Tribe Called Quest, Derek Walcott, Phillis Wheatley, William Carlos Williams, the Wu-Tang Clan, Neil Young, Liu Xiaobo, and many more.

The poems in this volume range from nightlight to midnight moon to hospital hallway and back again. Written with a commitment to the hard-fought duende and earned communion of poetry, *Ill Angels* aims at delight, wisdom, and the endless sacred consolations available to us through the written and spoken word.

About the Author

Dante Di Stefano is the author of *Love Is a Stone Endlessly in Flight* (Brighthorse Books, 2016). His poetry, essays, and reviews have appeared in *The Los Angeles Review*, *The Sewanee Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and elsewhere. He is poetry editor for the *Dialogist*. Along with María Isabel Álvarez, he co-edited *Misrepresented People: Poetic Responses to Trump's America* (NYQ Books, 2018).

Study Questions

Knowledge/Comprehension Section

1. Choose a poem from *Ill Angels* and write a two-page essay about how the poet's use of line, stanza, and form convey the content, tones, and imagery in the piece.
2. Scan the stresses in one poem. How do the rhythmic variations and patterns support the theme and content?
3. Choose three poems from *Ill Angels* and examine how they appear on the page. Do the line breaks have a pattern? How do the form and content interact?
4. Make a list of the narrative voices in the collection. Select examples of three different points of view and discuss how they are conveyed.
5. Most of the poems in *Ill Angels* are written in a kind of variable Miltonic blank verse, in which rhythms are broken against a ten syllable line. Pick a poem written in this fashion and scan the lines. What sonic patterns emerge? Why write poems in this way?
6. The author embeds rhyme and repetition within many of the poems. Examine the rhythm in two poems and discuss in a one-page essay how they reflect the content of the poems.
7. In a two-page essay, compare and contrast *Reading William Carlos Williams in My Early Twenties* and *Reading William Carlos Williams in My Late Thirties*.
8. Find the references to the moon or moonlight in five poems in the collection. What does this image represent for the poet?

Application Section

1. The Kwansaba form was invented by the East St. Louis poet, Eugene B. Redmond (an important figure in the Black Arts Movement), and is always a poem of praise. Research the structure of this type of poetry. Does Di Stefano abide by the rules of this form? Write a poem in Kwansaba form.
2. Emily Dickinson is quoted as saying, "if I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry." Did a poem in *Ill Angels* make you feel this way? Which one? What images resonated with you?
3. Write your own *High School Love Poem Come Back*.
4. Write your own *Brief Instructions for Drawing a Self-Portrait*.

Analysis Section

1. Examine *Elegy with Drowned Sailor and Endless Horizon*. Who is the narrator? Discuss how the use of tense and narrative voice affect the tone of the poem.
2. In *Stump Speech*, how does the use of second-person voice, 'you,' influence the content and tone of the poem?
3. What themes connect the series of Kwansaba poems in *Ill Angels*?
4. In the poem, *Reading a Single Line by Emily Dickinson on the Day My Father Died*, what is the significance of the epigraph, *To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee*, to the context of the poem?
5. In a two-page essay, discuss why the three poems, *Exodus*, *Sometimes When I'm Listening to Thelonious Monk*, and *American Pastoral with Warped Floorboards* are presented as prose poems. What else do they have in common? How do they differ?
6. Rearrange the line breaks of one poem. How do line breaks affect content?
7. What images does Di Stefano use to characterize his wife? What is the significance of these images?
8. Examine *Wear Black, Drink Water, Nourish a Fierce Zeal with Locusts and Wild Honey*. What is the narrative stance? What message is conveyed? How do the form and enjambed lines support the content?

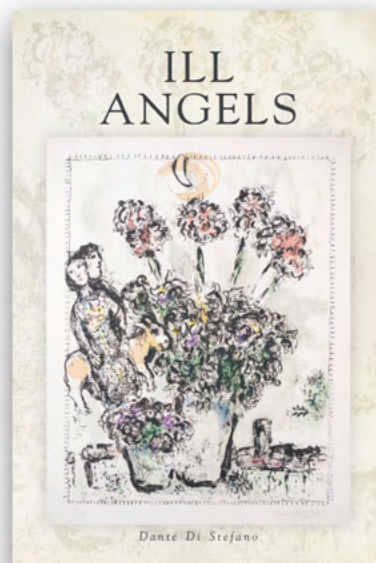
Synthesis Section

1. Examine how Di Stefano employs religious symbolism. What images recur? What is his stance on religion? Discuss in a two-page essay.

2. Write a 750-word essay about two poems in *Ill Angels* that illustrates the significance of snow or winter.
3. What does "count" mean in *The Sorrowful Mysteries*? Research the origin of the term, "sorrowful mysteries" as well as C. D. Wright's use of the phrase in *One Big Self*. What is the significance of the things the narrator tells us to count? What qualities do they share?
4. In a 500-word essay, explain how Di Stefano employs irony in *The Greening of Harriet Tubman*.

Evaluation Section

1. Angels, wings, and flight are a prominent motif in *Ill Angels*. In a one-page essay, explain their significance. Use examples from at least three poems.
2. How would you characterize the poet's relationship with his father? Choose two poems that represent this and write a 500-word essay. Use specific examples of imagery and language from the poems.
3. Look up a poem written by one poet cited in *Kwansaba Suite from Heaven of My Departed Poets* and compare and contrast it with Di Stefano's interpretation.
4. What themes connect the poems in the collection? Choose a single poem and explain in a two-page essay how the images, form, and tone encompass these themes.
5. Look at the different variations of the sonnet that thread throughout *Ill Angels*. Compare the poet's different approaches to the form. In a 500-word essay discuss the implications of using the sonnet as one of the organizing principles of this collection.



etruscan press
84 West South Street
Wilkes-Barre, PA 18766
P: 570.408.4546
www.etruscanpress.org
books@etruscanpress.org