

# *Poems Seven: New and Complete Poetry*

by Alan Dugan

Seven Stories Press

## A Reading and Discussion Guide

Prepared by Seth Landman

Master's Candidate; MFA program

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Massachusetts  
Award Winner  
2002



### **SUMMARY:**

*Poems Seven, New and Complete Poetry*, is Alan Dugan's final book. It includes all six of his previous volumes, plus thirty new poems published in 2001, two years before his death in Truro, MA. Throughout his career Dugan employed a wide range of visual styles: poems in multiple columns on one page, poems centered on the page, poems with stanzas, poems with boxes of words set apart from the rest of the poem, and many others.

Dugan's awareness of the world around him – and his ability to portray that awareness – brings a vividness to the page. The first poem of his first book, titled “This Morning Here,” is a perfect comment on the way the past bleeds into the present. It ends, “And those who never have seen blood awake/ can drink it browned/ and call the past an unrepeatable mistake/ because this circus of their present is all gravy.”

Dugan takes death very seriously in his final volume of poems. Death often comes as a loss of sex, as in “Hard-on Death,” in which “What's-his-name the quadriplegic” gets his final hard-on, surprising all the nurses in the Veterans Hospital. His final volume also finds Dugan looking back in history, but always in relation to what he is noticing about the present. He is able to meditate on what has changed and what has not. In “The Significance of Corn in American History,” he wonders why there is no monument to the Indians on Corn Hill in Truro, and decides, “For the same reason that there is no/ working laundry in Provincetown: / Cleanliness is next to godliness, / thievery is next to Americanness, / and we must not publicize/ that this country was made/ by a bunch of dirty crooks.”

In *Poems Seven*, Dugan also looks back on his own life and on his legacy as a poet. In “In Favor of a Free Public Library System” he writes, “Ask a compassionate librarian to show you the way/ to the American Poetry section where under 811D or DUG/ you'll find in my Collected Poems the palliative answer/ to your stupid questions and the answer as to why/ that liar Nietzsche wrote ‘I don't like poets: they lie.’” In “Another Cat Poem. To a Cat Person,” an account of a cat killing a mouse takes on added significance for the poet, who “always wanted to see the relation/ of blood and roses restated in some novel way.” The poet is quick to remind us, though, that it is merely written on paper. “It

is a poem made up to you, dear cat person, / to be published for love, publicity and money.” Even in being harshly truthful, Dugan is honest, aware, always noticing, and always stating these realizations in ways that are beautiful, strange, and full of meaning. This is characteristic of his entire career: honesty that, even when bitter, exudes beauty, and smacks of deep intelligence.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. How do the poems in “Poems Seven” exhibit a departure from Dugan’s earlier work? What themes are evident as he gets older?
2. Dugan employs various visual styles in his writing. The poem “Triptych” (page 56) looks quite different from a poem like “Coat of Arms” (72), or “Mockery against the Irish Censorship” (32). How do these different visual styles help to make the poems succeed? Are they essential to the poems?
3. In his later poems, Dugan seems to focus on sex. What different methods does he use to deal with this theme? How do poems like “The Esthetics of Circumcision” and “Courting Song: Attack! Attack! Attack!” fit into this theme.

### **ACTIVITIES:**

1. Look again at the poem “Coat of Arms” on page 72. If you were going to design a coat of arms in words, what would it look like? Think about creating a motto yourself and try writing a poem about that.
2. The poem, “Poem for Elliot Carter on his 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday,” is a poem about noticing someone and reflecting about who he or she is. Imagine you are walking down a street somewhere and you see someone you know, but he or she doesn’t know you are there. What might he or she be doing? How does this action reflect back on his or her life as a whole? Write a poem incorporating these or any other ideas.

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

Alan Dugan was born in 1923 in Brooklyn, New York. He grew up in Jamaica, Queens. *Poems Seven* was published in 2001 and won the National Book Award. His first book, *Poems*, published in 1961, also won the National Book Award, as well as the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize and a Pulitzer Prize. He received a Levinson Award from *Poetry Magazine* and has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation. A member of the faculty of the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, he lived in Truro. He died in September, 2003.

## HELPFUL LINKS:

For more information on Alan Dugan, look at these websites:

<http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?45442B7C000C0F010A>

Academy of American Poets website. Includes a poem and biographical information.

<http://www.npr.org/programs/atc/features/2001/nov/dugan/011115.dugan.html>

National Public Radio website. Includes a short article, and sound bites of a conversation and a poem.



The Massachusetts Book Awards are a program of the Massachusetts Center for the Book, the Commonwealth Affiliate of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress. Visit us on the web at [www.massbook.org](http://www.massbook.org).

Copyright © 2004 Massachusetts Center for the Book