

You can often gain insight into a writer's work by learning some background about the writer's life. Not all works are autobiographical, but many authors draw on their experiences and beliefs when they write. To understand the myths of flight more fully, biographical insights present another angle for understanding the particular perspective of a writer. The following strategies will help you do that.

- Making inferences about the connections between the author's life and work
- Noticing the author's subject matter and sources of inspiration
- Paying attention to repeated themes and topics
- Reading what an author says about his or her own work and what critics say



from **Collected Poems: Robert Hayden** by Arnold Rampersad

As an individual, Hayden was a man subjected virtually from the start of his life to harsh personal pressures that might easily have silenced someone less courageous. His work is further testimony to the power of the artist to find and illuminate the profoundly human in the midst of chaos, and to produce art as a bulwark against the will to inhumanity that is such an essential part of the human condition.

Robert Earl Hayden was born in Detroit, Michigan, on August 4, 1913, the son of Asa and Ruth Sheffey. His parents named him Asa Bundy Sheffey. Before he was two, however, their marriage collapsed and his mother, traveling in search of work, gave him up to a poor but respectable couple in the neighborhood, William and Sue Ellen Hayden. Although the child remained aware of the identity of his natural parents, saw them from time to time, and eventually became close once again with his mother, he grew up as a foster child of the Haydens, who renamed him and reared him as their son. He would discover only when he was forty, by accident, that they had never adopted him legally or even officially changed his name, although they had led him to believe that they had done both. His adoptive father, a laborer who sometimes had trouble finding work, was a disciplinarian and dedicated Baptist. His adoptive mother, according to the Hayden scholar Ponthella Taylor Williams, "regaled Robert with Afro-American folktales, stories of southern racial atrocities, and her own post-Civil War experiences, when she was a chambermaid on Ohio River steamers."

Response
Notes

