Bedtime Story Study Guide

Bedtime Story by George MacBeth

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"Bedtime Story" appears in the third section of George MacBeth's *Collected Poems: 1958-1970.* It consists of thirteen free-verse quatrains told from a narrator whose point of view is inconsistent. In the Foreword to this collection MacBeth writes that the poems in this section are "written for those who (like myself) regard themselves as children." While that may be so, MacBeth is no ordinary child. Poems such as "House for a Child," and "A Child's Garden" are grouped with poems such as "When I Am Dead" and "Fourteen Ways of Touching the Peter." Regarding oneself as a child, for MacBeth, means engaging in poetic mischief. "Bedtime Story" is a parody of bedtime stories, in that it uses the form of such a story to poke fun at the idea of happy endings and to undercut the notion that human beings are essentially good, or have generally benign intentions towards one another. One could imagine childrens' book author Maurice Sendak creating illustrations for the poem.

Speaking from a future, post-apocalyptic time, and recounting a story of the past, the poem's narrator describes an incident in the Congo between the "Mission Brigade" and its encounter with the "last man." MacBeth describes the incident in quasi-allegorical terms, implicitly criticizing the history of European colonialism and suggesting that human nature will never change: we will always trend towards self-destruction and remain blind to our own self-deception. The accidental death of the last human being parallels the deaths, both cultural and physical, of millions of Africans at the hands of colonial powers such as France and Great Britain. MacBeth seems to be saying that this has happened in the past and it will happen again. Although we put ourselves in the best possible light in the stories we tell about ourselves, the fact is that we deceive ourselves in doing so. The poem also echoes stories of the mythic wild child, that human being raised in the jungle away from the civilizing influences of society and his inevitable encounter with that society.

Author Biography

George MacBeth is a poet of trickery and wild contradictions who has made a career out of defying expectations for what constitutes "good" poetry. Born in 1932 to George MacBeth and Amelia Morton Mary Mann MacBeth in the small town of Shotts, Scotland, MacBeth was raised in Sheffield. His poetry, however, is marked with a big city, often world-weary consciousness. In 1955 he graduated from New College, Oxford with a degree in Classical Greats, and later produced shows on literature and the arts for the BBC. His poetry, however, often undermines the constraints, both thematic and stylistic, of Classical literature. Although his first collection of poems, *A Form of Words* (1954), was relatively in keeping with the conventions of mid-century British poetry, most of the poetry he published after is a macabre verse laden with black humor, which embraces various kinds of satire, parody, and often unidentifiable tones. MacBeth writes from a wide repertoire of formal poetic structures which include syllabics, acrostics, sonnets, and other kinds of given forms, to explore ideas of animal violence, cruelty, corpse loving, and other "unseemly" subjects. Critics have not always been kind to MacBeth, many of them claiming that he has been obsessed with form over content and has wasted his talents. Instead of sulking, MacBeth has appropriated such criticism, making it a part of his work. On the dust jacket of the *Collected Poems: 1958-1970,* he includes this blurb from an anonymous writer in *The Times Literary Supplement:* "Extraordinary gifts arrogantly wasted," along with others which similarly question his talent. MacBeth further emphasized his disdain for the judgments of literary critics when he edited *The Penguin Book of Sick Verse* (1963), which included sections on visions of doom, sick jokes, and subjects few other poets would touch.

MacBeth's writing can be seen as postmodern. His mixing of poetic forms, his view of verse as disposable, and his use of experience as a stylistic rather than "content-laden" element all mark him as a writer more interested in the playfulness of language rather than its capacity to represent enduring human subjects and themes. In this sense MacBeth is less of a writer, more of a sculptor of words, concerned with the materiality of language and the ways in which it can be shaped.

George MacBeth died in 1992 of a motor neuron disease.

Poem Text

Long long ago when the world was a wild place

Planted with bushes and people by apes, our

Mission Brigade was at work in the jungle

Hard by the Congo

Once, when a foraging detail was active;

Scouting for green-fly, it came on a grey man, the

Last living man, in the branch of a baobab

Stalking a monkey.

Earlier men had disposed of, for pleasure,

Creatures whose names we scarcely remember□ ;

Zebra, rhinoceros, elephants, wart-hog,

Lion, rats, deer. But

After the wars had extinguished the cities

Only the wild ones were left, half-naked

Near the Equator: and here was the last one,

Starved for a monkey.

By then the Mission Brigade had encountered

Hundreds of such men: and their procedure,

History tells us, was only to feed them:

Find them and feed them,

Those were the orders. And this was the last one.

Nobody knew that he was, but he was. Mud

Caked on his flat grey flanks. He was crouched,

half-

armed with a shaved spear

Glinting beneath broad leaves. When their jaws cut

Swathes through the bark and he saw fine teeth

shine,

Round eyes roll round and forked arms waver

Huge as the rough trunks.

Over his head, he was frightened. Our workers

Marched through the Congo before he was born,

but

This was the first time perhaps that he'd seen one

Staring in hot still

Silence, he crouched there: then jumped. With a

long swing

Down from his branch, he had angled his spear too

Quickly, before they could hold him, and hurled it

Hard at the soldier

Leading the detail. How could he know Queen's

Orders were only to help him? The soldier

Winced when the tipped spear pricked him.

Unsheathing his

Sting was a reflex.

Later the Queen was informed. There were no

more

Men. An impetuous soldier had killed off,

Purely by chance, the penultimate primate.

When she was certain.

Squadrons of workers were fanned through the

Congo

Detailed to bring back the man's picked bones

to be

Sealed in the archives in amber. I'm quite sure

Nobody found them

After the most industrious search, though.

Where had the bones gone? Over the earth, dear,

Ground by the teeth of the termites, blown by the Wind,

like the dodo's.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-8:

The title of this poem itself functions as a trap for the readers' expectations. Conventionally a bedtime story might involve a tale of adventure pitting good against evil with good winning out in the end. The child listens, rapt with attention, maybe cathartically purging his or her emotions and energies along with the characters, then, exhausted, falls asleep, knowing that all is safe with the world. MacBeth's version, however satirizes the idea of bedtime stories while parodying their form. Using a standard fairytale opening, the first stanza sets the scene. We understand that the present is a tame, and by implication more civilized, place because the past is described as "wild." The Mission Brigade is a military expedition force sent to search for green-fly, which are insects, primarily aphids, which feed by sucking sap from plants. Why they are scouting for green-fly is left unstated, but it is the first clue that the speaker of the story and those of the Mission Brigade are possibly not human. The expedition is in the Congo, a central African country. The man they encounter is called "grey" possibly to emphasize his age. We also understand that he is uncivilized, at least in comparison to the Mission Brigade, because he is "stalking a monkey," most likely for food. The baobab tree is a large tree found in tropical Africa whose trunk sometimes reaches thirty feet in diameter. The tree bears hard-shelled fleshy fruit and large white flowers.

Lines 9-16:

These stanzas place the speaker firmly in some future mythical world from which our present world is described. By including relatively common animals such as deer and rats in a list with more exotic and rare animals such as lions and rhinoceros, the speaker is making a judgment about the contemporary world's separation from, even carelessness towards, nature. The "wars" can be read as mythical wars. Consider the nuclear conflagrations of *Mad Max,* or other futuristic, post-apocalyptic films and novels in which some human survivors live a kind of primitive existence cut off from those with more resources. In this case, only one of those survivors remain.

Lines 17-24:

These stanzas alert us to the speaker's view that the task of the brigade was humanitarian. The speaker's comments are informed by history. Although he knows while telling the story that the man found was the last, at the time the soldiers in the Mission Brigade did not. The description of the man crouching and with a spear underscores the man's primitive, almost animal-like nature, as does describing the man's sides as "flat grey flanks."

Lines 25-32:

The poem becomes confusing here, as the point of view changes, much as it might if this story were told in film. Now the speaker describes the encounter from the eyes of the last man, who, hiding, witnesses the soldiers cutting down trees and the "fine teeth" of the saws "shine." These descriptions might also be literal ones of the creatures of the Mission Brigade. The lines remain ambiguous. We now have a clearer sense how far in the future the speaker is, as he states that "Our workers / Marched through the Congo before he was born."

Lines 33-40:

The action in these stanzas, as in previous stanzas, is propelled forward by MacBeth's use of enjambment, a way of carrying over the syntactic unit from one line to the next. This technique allows MacBeth to couple our surprise as readers following the action with the last man's surprise at seeing the soldiers, and the soldiers at seeing and then being attacked by, the last man. The speaker uses rhetorical questions instead of direct statements to tell us that the man could not have possibly known that the soldiers' intentions were harmless, when he asks "How could he know Queen's / Orders were only to help him?" By referring to the soldiers' actions as results of the Queen's orders, MacBeth uses metonymy, Metonymy is a kind of figurative language in which the literal term for one thing is applied to another with which it is associated. Here, "Queen's orders" refers to the soldiers' actions. The last few lines of stanza ten employ understatement to say that the soldier hit by the last man's spear killed him: "Unsheathing / his / Sting was a reflex." By this we are also to understand that it was an accident.

Lines 41-48:

The last man's death is not described. Again, the transition from scene to scene is film-like. We are only told that "the Queen was informed." Blaming the soldier by calling him "impetuous," the speaker then informs us that the last man, was also "the penultimate primate." Primates are an order of animals which include monkey, apes, and man. This statement can be read two ways: the first is that the last primate is the monkey the man was stalking; the second way is to assume that the speaker and his species are a kind of trans-or post-human primate. The poem does not clear up this point but leaves it open. By having soldiers search for the remains of a human being because humans are extinct and so they can be preserved, MacBeth reverses the order of things in which human beings often hunt species into extinction, then keep a few remaining specimens in zoos or, if all specimens are dead, preserve them in a museum.

Lines 49-52:

The poem's last image is another play on the idea of extinction. In this case, MacBeth compares the extinction of human beings with that of the Dodo, a large flightless bird of the island of Mauritius, which has been extinct since the 17th century. "Dodo" is also a form of slang for a stupid person or a simpleton, both of which would fit MacBeth's characterization of human beings.

Themes

Language and Meaning

"Bedtime Story" uses the form of a folktale to tell a story about the end of humanity and to pose a moral. Folktales are short narratives usually in prose form but sometimes in verse, which have been transmitted orally from generation to generation. Their original author is unknown, if there ever were an original author, and the tale itself changes over time as it is repeated and changed little by little. Myths and fables are two common forms of folk tales; both are attempts to explain natural phenomena and human behavior. MacBeth's poem takes on the features of a folktale in how it attempts to explain the past and the disappearance of human beings from the planet. The narrator tells us that it was humanity that was responsible for the extinction of animals, whose name the narrator and his ilk (a non-human, or post-human species) can "scarcely remember." Man himself, we are told, was almost eliminated "After the wars had extinguished the cities." The transmission of the story is foregrounded when the narrator says that "History tells us." The moral of the story□that humanity was responsible for its own demise and the demise of other species and that the current species in power had done everything it could to save human beings□is underscored in how the death of the last man is described, i.e., as an accident, and in how it attempted to preserve the memory of the last man by searching for its bones. When the speaker says that "I'm quite sure / Nobody found them" we are reminded once again of the story's tenuousness, of its "storyiness," as opposed to fact or a first-person witnessing of experience.

Nature

MacBeth pits human nature against non-human Nature to emphasize (by predicting) the depths to which humanity will fall if it continues to ignore its responsibilities to the natural environment. This is most forcefully underscored by the fact that the story is told at a point in time when there are no more human beings in the world, the last one having being killed accidentally by a soldier from the Mission Brigade many years before. The theme of extinction crops up repeatedly. Not only have all human beings been destroyed, but all animals have been destroyed as well: "Zebra, rhinoceros, elephants, wart-hog, / Lion, rats, deer." The only living primates are monkeys, an appropriate animal that MacBeth uses for comic effect. Whatever species the narrator belongs to is equally guilty of wrecking havoc on nature, though seemingly unaware of it. In the seventh stanza we see these creatures destroying trees, "When their jaws cut / Swathes through the bark and ... [the last man] saw fine teeth shining." This difficult passage can be read two ways: the first is to see the description as metaphoric of the machines those in the Mission Brigade use to clear the jungle, the "Round eyes" standing for headlights, the "forked arms" for a fork lift or like machine. A second way of reading this passage is to see it as a description of the colonizing creatures themselves. After all, we know that they are not men because there is only one human being left in

the world, and he is about to be killed. The irony is that whatever post-human species the narrator belongs to exhibits a very *human* nature in his recounting of the story and his own obliviousness to the gravity of his "people's" killing off the last man and (presumably) destroying much of the jungle as well. The last stanza highlights the utter oblivion that comes with extinction. Not even the bones of the last man can be found. All that is left is the stories of them.

Parodies imitate features of literary works or literary genres, often treating "lowlier" subjects than the work or genre they imitate. MacBeth signals a conventional bedtime story by beginning "Long long ago ...," but then launches into a story which can be read as an allegory of Britain's own colonial history. The "last man" is a type, representing the uncivilized "savage," whom European countries such as Britain and France felt they had to conquer before helping. MacBeth satirizes colonial attitudes towards its professed mission when he tells us that the Brigade's intention were only honorable□"to feed them." He similarly satirizes humanity's propensity for first hunting a species into extinction or near extinction and then preserving that species in natural history museums and zoos in the next to last stanza.

The poem itself is a narrative, related almost filmically. MacBeth shifts point of view and makes sometimes abrupt transitions in telling the story. His use of enjambment, or run-on lines, also helps propel the story forward, keeping readers interested in what happens next.

Style

A free-verse parody of a bedtime story, "Bedtime Story" is composed of thirteen quatrains of verse which allegorically satirize European attitudes to wards colonialism and humanity's relationship to the natural world.

Historical Context

In the 1950s Britain witnessed a renewed interest in poetry, particularly in people who desired to move poetry foreword, or at least away from what some poets feared it was becoming. One phenomenon which received much attention then and which has gained a place in the literary history of England is a group of writers called The Movement. Consisting of Philip Larkin, Kinglsey Amis, John Wain, Thom Gunn, D. J. Enright, Donald Davie, John Holloway, Elizabeth Jennings, Robert Conquest, and a few others, The Movement stood for writing about real people and real events and in returning British poetry to a stricter versification, away from what they perceived as the growing sloppiness of free verse and other organic forms. In addition to opposing much of what was happening in American poetry, they opposed melodrama and hysteria, which they thought much of the poetry of World War II embodied, and (largely) thought of themselves as anti-romantic. Critics sometimes labeled them as conservative in their seeming resistance to experimentation and their desire to "forget" the war. The Movement's work is showcased in Conquest's anthologies, *New Lines,* and *New Lines 2,* published in 1956 and 1963 respectively. Some of the poets mentioned, however, claim that no such group existed, that it is largely a manufactured label for the convenience of literary critics, who need to lump and categorize to make sense of so many diverse approaches to poetry. In an interview with Jhan Hochman for *The Portland Review,* Thom Gunn, for example, notes "That kind of thing [artistic groupings] is really a wonderful example of the b□s□ of literary categories. It strikes me as a more meaningless category than most, 'The Movement.'" Eight people were supposed to have been in The Movement, but everybody was writing like that. It wasn't just those eight people."

Yet another group of writers, curiously enough called The Group, which included Ted Hughes, Peter Redgrave, and MacBeth, arose in opposition to The Movement. It stood for poetic change and for experimenting with different forms and ways to present poetry, and was to a degree driven by critics as much as poets. The Group had more of an underground flavor to it, as almost anyone could secure an invitation to one of its gatherings. However, meetings took on the often stodgy tenor of workshops, during which poems were often discussed in light of practical criticism. Though MacBeth distanced himself from labels as much as possible, he often attended meetings of The Group, in large part because of its desire to renew poetry's function as an oratorical as much as a written art. MacBeth himself was an enthusiastic performer of his poetry and in general supportive of developing poetry as a performing art. MacBeth disliked The Movement, in part because of the seriousness with which its members approached poetry. In the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* Lawrence R. Ries quotes MacBeth as saying that "The Movement weren't prepared to churn out a bad poem about the most important experience of their lives. A willingness to do that seems to me the first essential of an important poet." MacBeth's own relentless stylistic playfulness and his willingness to write (and publish) many very bad poems underscore both his interest in poetry more as process than product.

Critical Overview

Writing for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Lawrence Ries says of MacBeth's poetry that "The critical response to the individual publications has been mixed: angry, admiring, frustrated, laudatory." Ries further observes the difficulty reviewers and literary historians have had in placing MacBeth in an established literary category, or movement, even though he was associated to some extent with The Group, a gathering of poets who attempted to rejuvenate poetry readings and gatherings, among other endeavors. Critic M. L. Rosenthal, writing in *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War LL,* describes (in 1967) MacBeth as "a lively, witty, young poet, [though] there is nothing in his work that could in any sense be called revolutionary." Perhaps the best way to understand MacBeth's relationship to his critics is to read the blurbs he includes on the dust jacket of his books. Because he did not hold that poetry necessarily had to be great, or even good, he did not attempt to curry the favor of critics, like many of his contemporaries. Critical judgements, for MacBeth, were a farce. The list of "endorsements" on the cover of his *Collected Poems: 1958-1970* include the following and illustrate his attitude towards those who would write, either ill or well, of him: "Extraordinary gifts arrogantly wasted." (□Anonymous writer in *The Times Literary Supplement*); "His poems are pretentiously exotic, encrusted with gimmickry .... Play is an important element in poetry, but it is one which can easily be abused. The games Macbeth is playing will not engage the reader." (Robert B. Shaw, *Poetry);* "He has a seminal intelligence which is perhaps the strongest in British poetry since Auden." (Peter Porter); "He is one of the more exciting and talented of the young British poets.... MacBeth, clearly an original poet, is developing considerable intellectual range with a remarkable metrical variety and skill." *{Choice).*

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Chris Semansky's most recent collection of poems, **Blindsided,** *has been published by 26 Books of Portland, Oregon. In the following essay Semansky explores the relationship between the actual and the imaginary in MacBeth's "Bedtime Story."*

George MacBeth made a career out of offending the literary tastes of critics and establishment poets. It was not only his treatment of lowly poetic subjects such as masturbation or necrophelia, but MacBeth also was not a believer in the idea that poetry should necessarily be enduring. "Bedtime Story" is a poem that will probably not endure, yet its very title alludes to kinds of expression which do endure, namely folktales. In this sense, MacBeth plays a trick on his audience, something he did often during his career as poet, novelist and television producer. In his relentless experimentation with language and his focus on the materiality of the word, MacBeth embodies the "spirit" of postmodern play, often leading readers to a place of seeming meaning only to then spring a trap door on them. An examination of "Bedtime Story" shows how his poetry often suggests various meanings without exhausting, or sometimes even developing, them. This can be confusing, even exasperating, and requires readers not to reach too hard for definitive meanings.

The poem begins with a common refrain often used to signal fairytales and folktales. This conforms to how we expect a bedtime story to begin, and we prepare ourselves for a tale about a mythic place. That place approximates our image of the earth itself, but the time period is unclear. It could be ten thousand years ago or it could be as recent as a few hundred, or even a hundred years ago. When we are then told that the "Mission Brigade was at work in the jungle / Hard by the Congo," we think of Africa in colonial times. The first Europeans to explore Central Africa, the Portugese, established a close commercial relationship with theKongo Kingdom in the fifteenth century. By the nineteenth century, this region of the continent was broken up into tribal power centers, and in 1910 Middle Congo became part of French Equatorial Africa, which included Gabon, the Central African Republic, and Chad. Today, The Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly known as Zaire, is Africa's third-largest country, with a population estimated at 46,000,000. The country shares borders in the east with Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda; in the west with theCongo Republic; in the north with the Central African Republic and Sudan; and in the south with Angola and Zambia. We do not know the time to which the narrator refers, but the Congo itself, today as in the past, evokes an image of lushness and wild primates, of untamed nature. The country is known for its game reserves and national parks sheltering animals, such as lions, monkeys, gorillas, zebras, antelope, elephants, and other rare animals like the Bonobo apes and the Okapi antelopes. But it is not the *actual* Congo to which the speaker refers. It is a Congo of the imagination which draws on our image of the real Congo. This image is developed in the second stanza when we are now presented with a baobab tree, a lush flowering fruit tree found in tropical Africa. But what is the Mission Brigade doing scouting for green-fly, a kind of insect that eats sap from trees? And who is this "last living man"? Insects such as termites, crickets, grasshoppers, and palm grubs form a staple of the Congolese diet, but the Mission Brigade is not Congolese. When we are told that there were wars which

"extinguished the cities," we begin to reconfigure our sense of what kind of story we are being told and realize that quite possibly we are hearing the tale of someone who is not human, who somehow evolved out of human beings or from another species. After all, who is telling the tale if the "last living man" is what he is described as being?

The poem provides clues, but no answers. MacBeth plays with the idea of the last man as he plays with the idea of the Congo. The "last man" conjures images of the wild child, a type popularized in myths and movies (think of Tarzan or Truf-faut's movie, *The Wild Child),* that human being born in the wilderness and raised by animals who encounters civilized human beings and is overwhelmed by their strangeness, their otherness. The last man also suggests a boogie man, that evil, mischievous character so prevalent in "darker" bedtime stories. In this case, the man could stand for a fear of nature itself, or at least the animal part of human nature, which the tale-teller is attempting to either mock or come to terms with. Another possibility is that MacBeth is satirizing the ways in which imperialist Europeans have behaved towards Africans. Hannah Arendt says this about the psychology of white racist thought in her study *The Origins of Totalitarianism:*

What made [Africans] different from other human beings was not at all the color of their skin but the fact that they behaved like a part of nature, that they treated nature as their undisputed master, that they had not created a human world, a human reality, and that therefore nature had remained, in all its majesty, the only overwhelming reality□compared to which they appeared to be phantoms, unreal and ghostlike. They were, as it were, "natural" human beings who lacked the specifically human character, the specific human reality, so that when European men massacred them they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder.

The seventh stanza compounds our confusion as to who is doing the narrating. Now we see the brigade moving through the jungle from the point of view of the last man himself, or at least how the narrator himself thinks the last man saw the brigade, with his "shaved spear"

Glinting beneath broad leaves. When their jaws cut Swathes through the bark and he saw fine teeth

shine,

Round eyes roll round and forked arms waver Huge as the rough trunks

These lines are ambiguous at best, indeterminate at worst. On the one hand they can be metaphors for saws and other heavy equipment, but what would "forked arms ... Huge as the rough trunks" be doing above him? At this point, the description breaks down and we are left to make sense of imagery which does not seem to fit.

When the last man attacks one of the soldiers, we are told that "the tipped spear pricked him." Judging from the proximity of the man swinging down from the tree we would expect the spear to do more than simply "prick" the soldier. This provides more evidence that perhaps the narrator's "people" are not people. However, we are confused once again when the Queen is brought into the story. Because we know that MacBeth is

Scottish and lived most of his life in Britain, the first queen that comes to our mind is the Queen Mother of the United Kingdom. However, MacBeth, it seems, is merely using the Queen as a type in order to echo a certain sense of noblesse oblige that the British Empire (and Empires in general) exhibited, or at least believed it exhibited, towards its colonized subjects. In the actual, historical Congo, European masters put the Congolese people to work in plantations and mining sectors. Little or no effort was made to educate them with the exception of Catholic missionaries who sought converts. The Queen is used in this poem satirically, to suggest serf-deception on the part of the narrator and his species in their attitude towards the last man. As readers we are meant to be shocked to learn that the brigade had orders to "bring back the man's picked bones to be / Sealed in the archives in amber."

Perhaps the most confusing and enigmatic statement made in "Bedtime Story" occurs in the eleventh stanza, when the speaker says that "the penultimate primate" has been killed off. If the last man is the next-to-the-last primate, who is the last? One possible answer is the monkey he had been stalking earlier in the poem. Another answer is the species (a post-primate human?) to which the narrator belongs. In either case, we are given no further information. The poem leaves the question unresolved. As if to mock the reader's (expected) confusion, MacBeth ends the poem with an image of another actually extinct animal, the dodo, a flightless bird whose name itself has become a label of derision. The answer to the riddle of this poem's actual meaning has too been "Ground by the teeth of the termites, blown by the /Wind ....

Source: Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Adaptations

This website on mass extinction provides charts, statistics, and scientific facts to buttress claims about the dwindling numbers of species left on earth, http://www.lassp.cornell.edu/newmme/ science/extinction, html

The WorldBook provides this website which contains essays and historical background on species' extinction, past and present: http://www .worldbook.com/fun/wbla/earth/html/ed12.htm

For extensive information of Scottish history, consult the following website: http://members .tripod.com/cunninghamc/NationalHistory/Nat ScotHistory.html

Professor George Landow ofBrown University has compiled an extensive bibliography on the history of Colonial Africa: http://landow.stg .brown.edu/post/africa/histbibl.html

Frank Marshall directed the film adaptation of Michael Crichton's novel, *Congo,* in 1995. The story details an expedition into deep, dark Africa that runs into an unknown race of killer apes.

Topics for Further Study

Compare MacBeth's narrator in "Bedtime Story" with Craig Raine's in "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home." Discuss the similarities and differences and explain what they can tell us about human nature and being "other."

Write your own bedtime story in the form of a folktale or fairytale about a pressing social topic.

Re-write MacBeth's poem from the point of view of the last man.

Compare and Contrast

1962: Scotland-born Sean Connery appears in the first James Bond film, Dr. No.

1995: Scotland's film and tourist industries receive a boost when *Braveheart,* Mel Gibson's film about William Wallace, wins five Oscars and makes the world aware, again, of Scotland's history.

Today: Ireland-born Pierce Brosnan now plays James Bond.

1950: Scottish Nationalists steal the "Stone of Destiny" from Westminster Abbey. This was Scotland's Coronation Stone, taken by the English in 1296. By tradition all British Monarchs have to be crowned while sitting on it. It was eventually recovered from Arbroath Abbey.

1996: The Stone of Destiny is finally returned to Scotland permanently, 700 years after it was stolen by Edward I.

1997: Scottish people voted yes for "Devolution" for Scotland, by a 75 percent majority. This would give Scotland it's own parliament, not tied to English parliamentary systems, for the first time in several centuries.

1958: The most prominent political party of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Movement National Congolais (MNC), was founded in 1958 by Patrice Lumumba, a third-class clerk in the district revenue office of the postal service. Before that, another Congolese political party

existed but only brought people together along ethnic lines.

1960-65: Political turmoil engulfs the Democratic Republic of Congo. Lumumba is assassinated by forces loyal to Colonel Mobutu Sese Seko, who eventually takes over the government in 1965.

1971: Seko renames the country the Republic of Zaire and asks Zairean citizens to change their names to African names.

1997: Seko is overthrown by Laurent Kabila and Rwandan-backed rebels, who literally "rename" the country the Democratic Republic of Congo.

205 million B.C.: At this time, many species of amphibians and reptiles became extinct. The extinction set the stage for the rise of the dinosaurs, which for a time became the world's dominant animals.

65 million B.C.: The last living dinosaur species vanished from the Earth. Many other terrestrial species and many marine species also became extinct during this time. The extinctions led to the rise of mammals and marked the beginning of the Cenozoic Era, in which we live today.

Today: Ecologists estimate that we have lost hundreds of thousands of species in the past 50 years. The experts predict that if present trends continue, we are likely to lose one-half of all living species within the next century.

What Do I Read Next?

Hannah Arendt's 1968 study, *Imperialism: Part Two of the Origins of Totalitarianism,* provides a provocative exploration into the cultural and political underpinnings of Fascist ideologies.

MacBeth's *Collected Poems: 1958-1970,* published in 1972 provides a rewarding look at MacBeth's genius as well as his silliness. This book is entertaining and provocative.

Further Study

Acheson, James, and Romana Huk, eds., *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism,* State University of New York Press, 1996.

Devoted to close readings of poets and their contexts from various postmodern perspectives, this book offers a wide-ranging look at the work of feminists and "post feminist" poets, working class poets, and poets of diverse cultural backgrounds, as well as provocative re-readings of such well-established and influential figures as Donald Davie, Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill, and Craig Raine.

Gregson, Ian, *Contemporary British Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement,* New York: St. Martins Press, 1997.

Gregorson examines how postmodern ideas such as intentionality, ideology, and indeterminacy have shaped contemporary British poetry. This is a sometimes rewarding, sometimes frustrating study.

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Arendt, Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968.

Hochman, Jhan, "An Interview with Thom Gunn," *Portland Review,* Vol. 28, No. 2, 1982, pp. 21-78.

MacBeth, George, ,4 *Child of the War,* J. Cape, 1987.

MacBeth, George, *Collected Poems: 1958-1970,* New York: Atheneum, 1972.

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Ries, Lawrence R., *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Volume 40: *Poets of Great Britain and Ireland Since 1960,* edited by Vincent B. Sherry Jr., Detroit: Gale Research, 1985, pp. 327-337.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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