

Collected Verse Short Guide

Collected Verse by Robert Service

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Overview

The ballads and poems of Robert Service have sparked the imagination of generations of young readers. Delightful to recite aloud, many of his poems portray the colorful, dramatic adventures of life in the Yukon during the fabulous gold rush of 1898. His most famous poems create, through their enchanting rhythms and descriptions, a sort of romantic spell, giving an impression of life that is full of excitement and expectation. So vividly does Service describe "the spell of the Yukon" that many of his readers have been actually lured to experience the rugged life of the Yukon for themselves. For Service, the Yukon is a land of magic and high adventure, but it is also a harsh land that tests the courage and stamina of those who venture into it. The Yukon brings out the very best and sometimes the very worst of human nature.

Because these poems are so full of humor and vitality, many readers have been inspired by them to "laugh at life," to meet hardship with humor, and to find courage in adversity. Some of the poems describe the battles of World War I; others describe the battles of ordinary life. But throughout his poetry runs a spirit of contentment and positive thinking: "No man can be a failure if he thinks he's a success." Robert Service inspires a winning attitude toward life.

About the Author

Robert Service lived a rich, adventurous life. Born in Preston, Lancashire, England, on January 16, 1874, he spent most of his youth in Glasgow, Scotland, where he attended high school and later worked at the Commercial Bank of Scotland. As a young man, Service read voraciously and began to dream of adventure and travel. At age twenty-one, he sailed across the Atlantic Ocean to North America and traveled west to British Columbia. Like his contemporary Jack London, Service spent some time tramping up and down the West Coast of the United States. He then took a position with the Canadian Bank of Commerce. In 1904 the bank transferred him to the Yukon, where he acquired a rich vein of materials for his ballads and poems.

In 1907 Service published his first collection of poems, which included his most famous poems, "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" and "The Cremation of Sam McGee." Five years later, Service went to Europe as a correspondent for the Toronto Star to cover the Balkan War. In 1913 he married a French woman and settled in Paris, continuing to write poetry and fiction. During World War I, Service joined the American and the Canadian armies and wrote a collection of poems about the war.

In 1921, when a Hollywood producer purchased the rights to make a movie based on "The Shooting of Dan McGrew," Service moved to Hollywood. The movie was released in 1924, the first of a number of adaptations of Service's work. Financial success enabled Service to live a leisurely life and to travel widely, including two trips to the Soviet Union.

In 1945 he moved to Brittany, where he wrote his autobiography and several volumes of poems. He died in Brittany on September 11, 1958.

Setting

Service is best known for his poems of the Yukon, although many of his poems are set in bohemian Paris and the battlefields of World War I. Rumors of gold in the Klondike region brought thousands of prospectors and adventurers in 1898. But when Service arrived in the Yukon in 1904, the gold rush had largely passed and many disappointed gold seekers had already given up and returned home. Service became fascinated with those who remained and with the tales they told. Many of his Yukon ballads were inspired by these yarns. The poems reflect his appreciation for the magnificent grandeur of the Yukon landscape.

In 1913 Service settled in the Latin Quarter of Paris, observing the bohemian life of the streets. When World War I broke out, he recorded his observations in *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man*.

After the war, many American writers and artists began to settle in Paris, finding there a haven for creative activity.

Service published *Ballads of a Bohemian* in 1921. None of his European poems, however, achieved the popularity of his Yukon ballads.

Social Sensitivity

Service's poems portray a man's world where women are often discussed but seldom appear. Consequently, Service's peculiar blend of realism and idealism, seen especially in his attitude toward women, should generate some sensitive discussion. What, for example, is Service attempting to portray in "My Madonna," a poem in which a prostitute is painted to resemble Mary, the Mother of God? In another poem, "The Harpy," Service attempts a sympathetic portrait of a twenty-three-year-old prostitute who believes that, in this bitter world, women must "bear the yoke, and serve the will of man." One might ask where Service places responsibility for her situation. Other poems, such as "The Woman and the Angel," are somewhat disturbing for seeming to view women as corrupting influences.

Yet Service reflects a keen moral sensitivity. Have we indeed "outlived the old standards . . . the ancient, outworn, Puritanic tradition of Right and Wrong?"

he asks in "The Woman and the Angel."

Many of his poems raise questions about right and wrong. Service is inclined to see good even in the most wicked of human beings. "My Friends," for example, is a parable about the costly goodness of a murderer and a thief.

Because Service sees life as precarious and death as imminent, either in the wild Yukon or on the battlefield, many of his poems ponder the value of living.

He seems to ask what makes life worthwhile. "Ant Hill" is a marvelous little metaphor that obliges the reader to "Remember . . . Hiroshima."

Those readers with a religious sensitivity may find themselves provoked by his outspoken "reluctance to repent," as expressed in "Repentance" and in other poems. In fact, Service seems at times to celebrate the dirty, seamy side of life, as in "Dirt" or "I Believe." His poem "Moderation" expresses a conviction that "women, wine and dice/ Are good in modest measure." Nevertheless, while one may object to some of the individual values and attitudes expressed in particular poems, the collected verse, taken as a whole, promotes a healthy, holistic view of human endeavor.

Literary Qualities

Because of their lyrical rhythms and balanced rhymes, Service's verses are easy to remember and recite aloud. They exhibit the qualities of an oral tradition of an earlier age, when minstrels and bards wandered about, singing songs and reciting adventures. Ballads are simply poems meant to be sung. Like most ballads, Service's tell dramatic stories of courage, romance, or heroic defeat. Above all, they seek to entertain.

Service considered himself to be more a maker of "verse" than a poet of serious art. Ballads such as Service's have often been regarded as an inferior form of poetry because of their emphasis upon meter and rhyme. Even Service himself conceded that, while his verse may not be "great literature," it was what he preferred to write. His own style of poetry, then, reflects the same sort of individualism he wrote about.

Actually, the metrical regularity of his verse is one of its greatest strengths, providing momentum and energy to the lines. Service wanted his readers to "feel" the movement of the poem; or, as he put it in "Your Poem," a poem addressed to his readers, "in its rhythm you can read/ A music of your own."

Much of this musicality comes from the internal rhymes: "The Arctic trails have their secret tales," and from the repetitive pattern of those rhymes.

Literary critic Edward Hirsch has shown how Service often uses rhymes in a particular way to highlight the conflict between certain oppositions. For example, rhyming such words as rich/ ditch, booze/Muse, or braves/graves heightens some of the thematic tensions within the poems. One of Service's artistic methods, Hirsch explains, is to present contrasts and oppositions, such as that between life in the Yukon and life at "home," or between high society and ordinary life. The competition between contrasting lifestyles is more than a thematic concern in these poems; it influences the artistic shape of the ballads themselves.

While Service does occasionally use a simile or metaphor, such as "white ice, like a winding sheet" or "greasy smoke in an inky cloak," his poems tend not to be very rich in these standard literary devices. Instead, Service relies upon such oral techniques as dialogue or monologue, colloquialisms, slang, and cliches. His poems should be heard as well as read.

Themes and Characters

Most of the themes prominent in Service's poems address particular attitudes toward life. Like Service himself, his characters are free-spirited individuals who love the open air and their independence. Service is fascinated by those individuals who seem not to "fit in" elsewhere—prospectors, gamblers, adventurers, and pioneers. Among his many themes, Service especially celebrates personal liberty and selfreliance.

The theme of personal responsibility is also prominent, however. Speaking directly in poems such as "The Quitter," or indirectly through the various examples of his characters, Service champions the virtue of tenacity, of not giving up when life seems nearly impossible.

He writes, "To fight and to fight when hope's out of sight/ Why that's the best game of them all!" Doing one's duty brings adventure as well as satisfaction, according to Service. In his most famous poem, "The Cremation of Sam McGee," much of the comic delight springs from the unexpected consequences of doggedly keeping a burdensome commitment.

While Service is not nearly so naturalistic as his contemporary Jack London (1876-1916), author of *The Call of the Wild* (1903), anyone writing about life in the Yukon must confront the theme of one's relationship to the natural environment. Service is often spellbound by the magnificent beauty and grandeur of this "land of gold."

Poems such as "Men of the High North" describe immense "kingdoms" of fierce mountains and proud rivers where men rule in triumph. The landscape serves to magnify to heroic proportions the struggles of ordinary people.

Service does not ignore the harshness and brutality of life in the wild, however.

Both "The Cremation of Sam McGee" and "The Ballad of Blasphemous Bill," although primarily humorous tales, attempt to portray the intensity of the arctic cold. "The Law of the Yukon" makes it plain that only the most rugged and courageous stand a chance of survival in this forsaken, mountainous vastness. But Service, more than Jack London, values the silence and the solitude of the landscape: "I am the land that listens, I am the land that broods."

The Yukon is a wilderness where individuals can dream, reflect, and acquire a vision. Three poems in particular develop this theme—"The Land of Beyond," "The Spell of the Yukon," and "The Three Voices."

Finding contentment with one's life emerges quite naturally as another significant theme. Sometimes Service explores this theme by contrasting the joys of an "ordinary" life with the anxieties of a "successful" life. In both "The Joy of Being Poor" and "Sentimental Shark," for example, a careworn millionaire, oppressed by the boredom of society and the worries of investments, reminisces about the freedom and the



happiness once allowed him by poverty. Many of Service's characters are of the type celebrated in "Nature Man" and "Ordinary Man," whose wants are few, whose debts are none, yet who own the whole outdoors. "Brother Jim," "Grandad," and "Dark Pine" present additional expressions of the joy of living simply.

Success, Service suggests in "Making Good," is merely a matter of attitude, not of accomplishment. And the best attitude one can have (as articulated in his poems "Laughter" and "Contentment") is to take each day as it comes, not too seriously.

Sam McGee, Blasphemous Bill, and Dan McGrew remain Service's most popular characters. All three face inevitable death (another pervasive theme), but the chief appeal of Sam McGee and Blasphemous Bill comes from the macabre jokes they perpetrate upon their companions (and also upon the listener to the tales). These characters are, though, mere caricatures of rugged individuals who maintain some degree of equanimity even while finding the hardship of frontier life greater than their own personal strength and capacities. Dan McGrew is a figure who resolves his personal hardship in stock western fashion. In fact, the implied narrator of most of these poems (Service's persona) is himself a "type" of western folk character—the storyteller who spins tales and marvelous yarns around the campfire. (See, for example, the beginning of "The Ballad of One-Eyed Mike.")

Sketched broadly and boldly, these characters have become, along with the folk hero Paul Bunyan and others, part of the American popular cultural imagination.



Topics for Discussion

1. Describe "the spell of the Yukon" and the sort of person who is gripped by its power.

2. What qualities does Service seem to admire in the men who do not "fit in"?

Are they qualities you also admire?

3. Explain "the law of the Yukon" and how one must live with it.

4. Compare Service's ballads with his war poems. Do they differ in tone and in attitude toward life? Describe his attitude toward death and dying.

5. "The Cremation of Sam McGee" and "The Ballad of Blaspheinous Bill" are both poems about dealing with corpses.

What makes such a grisly subject so humorous?

6. What is a ballad? Why are Service's ballads so appealing and delightful to hear?

7. What about the bohemian life of Paris seems to fascinate Service? (See "The Absinthe Drinkers" and "The Bohemian" for examples.)

8. How does the story of "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" compare with a typical television western?

9. What important role does the music play in "The Shooting of Dan McGrew"?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Service grew up in England and Scotland. Check out from your library *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, edited by Francis James Child.

Which ones would you guess Service may have read while growing up? Do you see any similarities between these ballads and his own?

2. On a map of the Yukon, locate Whitehorse, Dawson City, and the Klondike River. What significance did these places have in the settlement of the Yukon? (Consult an encyclopedia for information.)

3. Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) was a talented English poet who died at the age of twenty-five in World War I. Compare some of his war poems with Service's war poems.

4. Attempt to rewrite "The Cremation of Sam McGee" or "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" as a short story. What might be gained through such a revision?

What would be lost?

5. Jack London was writing about the Yukon and Alaska at about the same time Service began his Yukon ballads.

Read some of London's fiction (such as *The Call of the Wild* or "To Build a Fire") and compare the attitudes of London and Service toward the arctic wilderness.

6. Study the ballads of such recent singers as Bob Dylan or Joan Baez. How are they similar to the ballads of Service?

How are they different? What distinguishes a ballad from other types of lyrics? Are any ballads being written today?

7. Sigurd Olsen, a popular American nature writer, expressed his appreciation of Service in an essay called "The Spell of the Yukon." (See his entry under "For Further Reference.") Read his essay, then write a personal essay of your own, expressing your response to Service's poems. Attempt to show the impression they make upon your own imagination.

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