Old Ironsides Study Guide

Old Ironsides by Oliver Wendell Holmes

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Introduction

In 1830, the U.S. Navy made plans to scrap the 44-gun frigate *Constitution,* the nation's most celebrated warship. Launched in 1797, "Old Ironsides" had earned her nickname during the War of 1812, defeating a number of fabled British vessels including the HMS *Guerierre.* Though the war as a whole ended indecisively, from it the young republic drew many symbols of its recent independence. One such symbol was "The Star Spangled Banner," written in 1814 to memorialize the shelling of FortMcHenry. Another symbol profound to many Americans was the *Constitution* itself, which represented the nation's freedom on the seas, an issue that had initially sparked the conflict with the British. When the young Holmes read a Boston newspaper account of the proposed dismantling of the *Constitution* in 1830, he penned "Old Ironsides," a sentimental poem remembered mostly for its role in saving the frigate from decommission. In the poem, Holmes offers emotional reminiscences of the ship's past glory, of her deck "red with heroes' blood" and of her "victor's tread." In the last stanza, which makes the leap to the universal theme of death, Holmes insists that the frigate's most fitting grave is "beneath the waves," that she should be given "to the god of storms" rather than suffer the ignoble fate of the scrapheap. Although the present-day reader might find the poem's patriotic tone a bit maudlin, "Old Ironsides" still provides a good example of poetry's ability to sway public sentiment: the *Constitution* was preserved in 1830 and again several times subsequently, and today students of poetry and history alike can find her docked just north of Boston, the U.S. Navy's oldest commissioned vessel.

Author Biography

Holmes was born August 29, 1809, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He graduated from Harvard in 1830, and after a year spent studying law, decided to follow his wishes and pursue a career in medicine. He went to France to study at the Ecole de Medicine in Paris, considered one of the finest medical schools of its day. Holmes returned to the United States in 1835 and the following year received his medical degree from theHarvardMedical School. On June 15, 1840 he married Amelia Jackson and established a practice in Boston. During this time he was also a prolific writer of medical essays, a researcher, a professor at Harvard, a practicing physician, and a poet.

Holmes also became a member of the intellectual elite of Boston society, a group known as the Boston Brahmins, which included Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, among others. Holmes named the new literary magazine Lowell was to edit *Atlantic Monthly,* and in the magazine's debut issue, Holmes published the first installment of the series of essays that would establish him as the dominant force in intellectual life in Boston and Cambridge: *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table.* The series was published as a book to critical and popular success in 1858 and was followed by *The Professor at the Breakfast-Table* in 1860.

Holmes's first novel, *Elsie Venner,* was published in 1861. Although initially compared favorably to Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables,* Holmes's novels failed to achieve the critical or popular success of his essays and poetry. Throughout his career, Holmes fought for the humane treatment of the insane and the criminal, arguing that, contrary to Calvinistic belief that the mentally disturbed were evil, they suffered from a medical condition. After Holmes retired from his medical practice in 1882, he continued to write until his death at his Boston home on October 7,1894.

Poem Text

Ay, tear her tattered ensign down!

Long has it waved on high,

And many an eye has danced to see

That banner in the sky;

Beneath it rung the battle shout,

And burst the cannon's roar;

The meteor of the ocean air

Shall sweep the clouds no more!

Her deck, once red with heroes' blood,

Where knelt the vanquished foe,

When winds were hurrying o'er the flood,

And waves were white below,

No more shall feel the victor's tread,

Or know the conquered knee;

The harpies of the shore shall pluck

The eagle of the sea!

O better that her shattered hulk

Should sink beneath the wave;

Her thunders shook the mighty deep,

And there should be her grave;

Nail to the mast her holy flag,

Set every threadbare sail,

And give her to the god of storms,

The lightning and the gale!

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4:

The first stanza meditates on the ship's "ensign," or the naval flag that flies upon its mast, as a symbol of the *Constitution* herself. Though not invented by Holmes, "Old Ironsides" is a metaphorical nickname—ironclad vessels did not come into use until the Civil War—and like the "tattered" flag, the ship has survived much adversity. Also like the flag ("Long has it waved on high"), the ship occupies a lofty position—not physically, of course, but in the imagination. Because of its role in history, the *Constitution* is in the national consciousness a symbol for the "higher" virtues for which the republic is thought to stand. One such virtue is freedom, and in the early days of the United States the concept of freedom was closely associated with the two wars against Britain. Thus the ship is an important symbol to the many Americans whose eyes have "danced to that banner in the sky."

Lines 5-8:

In lines 5 and 6 the flag aloft is contrasted with sounds of battle below. These sounds are conveyed through the use of alliteration, or the repetition of initial consonant sounds as in "beneath," "battle" and "burst." By using this sonic device, Holmes appeals directly to the senses, helping the reader not only to understand but to feel the contrast between the symbolically significant flag and the visceral reality of those battles that helped preserve the nation. Having done this, Holmes appeals to the reader's emotions, lamenting the passing of the symbol: the flag "shall sweep the clouds no more!"

Lines 9-16:

Again note the alliteration in lines 11 and 12. As in the first stanza, the device is used here to convey the sounds and feel of the sea: the "winds" and the "waves ... white below." But while in the first stanza the poet employs sound to enhance a philosophical contrast, in these lines the intent of both sound and image is primarily emotional. The images presented are highly romanticized—the "heroes' blood," the "vanquished knee," the "victor's tread"—and their appeal is directly to the reader's patriotic heart. Philosophy here barely invades the domain of sentimentality and only in the most simplistic way: Holmes compares a past full of glory with a future in which that glory will be "no more." Finally, the poet takes direct and emotional aim at those officials behind the proposed scrapping of the *Constitution,* calling them "harpies of the shore," (foul malevolent creatures from Greek mythology that are part women and part bird) who wish to "pluck the eagle of the sea." Since the eagle was at that time and is still a symbol of the United States, and since to "pluck" a bird is to rob it of its grandeur, the implication of lines 9 and 10 is that those who want to dismantle the *Constitution* are in fact unpatriotic. This

is intended to raise the reader's indignation as well as to give that indignation a specific target.

Lines 17-24:

In these lines the poem takes a romantic twist. Rather than suggest that "Old Ironsides" be preserved, as the reader might expect, Holmes proposes that a fitting "grave" for the ship is the sea itself, the "mighty deep" that the *Constitution's* "thunder shook." In this manner the poem takes on a more universal theme: since death is inevitable, it is better to die as one lived rather than to have life prolonged by artificial or unnatural means. This philosophy seems to have reached beyond Holmes's poetry: as a noted physician and medical essayist, he later opposed the overuse of drugs to keep patients alive and advocated letting nature run its course. In the final lines, the poem shifts to the imperative and takes on a spiritual resonance. Holmes commands the reader to "nail to the mast her holy flag" and to "give her to the god of storms." The implication is that the manner of death, like the manner in which we live life, is a combination of divine intent and free will, the former demanding faith but the latter requiring action.

Themes

Pride

For the most part, this poem evokes pride by evoking battle imagery, which is fitting because it was in battle that the *Constitution* distinguished itself. The images, even the ones that are drawn from nature, are loud and fierce: "the battle shout," "the cannon's roar," "her thunders shook," and of course "the lightning and the gale." All of this activity sets the reader's heart to racing, as it is commonly said pride does. The second stanza in particular describes the situation in terms of winners and losers: the heroes and the victor, the vanquished and the conquered. Absent here is a sense of the complex causes of the War of 1812 or the compromises that were made to secure peace, which would weaken the sense of pride by making the ship's military victories seem less necessary. The pride this poem attaches to the *Constitution* is based in reality, but it is attained by ignoring details and by heightening sensory associations.

Permanence

This poem is a lament for the battleship *U.S.S. Constitution,* which was faced with fading from public memory after being dismantled. As such, it is also a warning about the changes in values that the author perceived had made the *Constitution's* destruction possible. The ship is associated in this poem with images of strength and courage: not just the abstract sensory images like the "cannon's roar" and the waving of the tattered flag, but specifically such ideals as "the hero's blood" and "the victor's tread" and the deck "where knelt the vanquished foe." According to the poem, all of the glory that is thought of with the ship is about to be replaced by its opposite: cowardice, pettiness and weakness, represented by "the harpies of the shore." Certainly, the decision to retire the *Constitution* was a financial one; the Navy would not throw away equipment that still could be used. Holmes's point is that, while the ship's financial value may have faded, its emotional worth is permanent. Another poem might have concentrated on the ship's history as part of the ongoing growth of the country, or on the use that was to be made of the timbers when it was broken up, giving life to new ships, rather than raising the fear that all it had stood for would be obliterated once the ship itself was gone. America was a relatively new country at the time, not yet fifty years old. Not only was it necessary for Americans to grab ahold of what proud traditions they could find, but it was also easy to believe that great and heroic achievements could slip away and be lost to history if people neglected the tangible symbols of those achievements. Similar fears exist throughout history, including today, as people wonder what aspects of human nature will fade away with the rise of each new generation.

Apathy and Passivity

Holmes takes an ironic stance in this poem, stating a position with his words that is clearly the opposite of how he feels. When he says, "Ay, tear her tattered insignia down!" what he really means is that it should continue to fly, just as he suggests sinking the ship when his true desire is to save it. Using this approach, he was able to stir readers out of their apathy regarding the ship's destruction and let them see their own lack of will reflected in the his attitude. In modern, post-Freudian times, we have come to call this technique "reverse psychology": manipulating someone to agree with your position by pretending to want the opposite. In "Old Ironsides," Holmes plays off of the passivity of the general public in two ways. By claiming so fervently that the *Constitution* should not only be decommissioned but should be dumped out into the middle of the ocean, he stirs any emotions for the old ship that might still remain within people who had forgotten how much they cared. By using vibrant, thundering imagery, he raised the sense of excitement that the passive public had allowed to fade away over years of peacetime. The issue is cast as a struggle between the villainy of the land-bound harpies of the shore and the heroism that is represented by the eagle of the sea. By taking the stance that all is lost, that they might as well give in to the forces of cowardice, Holmes was able to make his audience approach the idea of saving the *Constitution* as if they had thought of it themselves.

Freedom

Because the *Constitution* was successfully used to battle the British, who had held America as a colonial subject until the War of Independence, it naturally became a powerful symbol of the nation's freedom. Oliver Wendell Holmes built upon this association by using images in the poem that suggest freedom, particularly images of flight. He draws readers' attention skyward from the very first line, with the mention of the ship's flag, "That banner in the sky." The *Constitution* is then compared to a meteor that sweeps through the clouds and to an "eagle of the sea." In the last stanza the poem favors cutting the ship loose and setting it to sink to the bottom of the ocean rather than reusing what can be salvaged of it, presenting this as a more dignified ending for something that has stood for freedom.

Style

"Old Ironsides" is written in three, eight-line stanzas, but each stanza really consists of two quatrains (four-line units of verse) consisting of alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines. This means that each first and third line has four stressed syllables, or beats, while each second and fourth line has three stressed syllables. Quatrains written in this manner are called ballad stanzas. Since ballads often address heroic and romantic themes, Holmes may have chosen this form to capture the reader's emotions.

The dominant meter of the poem is iambic, which means the poem's lines are constructed in two-syllable segments, called iambs, in which the first syllable is unstressed and the second is stressed. If we divide the iambs from one another and mark the unstressed and stressed syllables in line 6, for example, it appears like this:

Andburst / thecan / non'sroar;□

The reader will notice the emphasis on the stressed syllables. This pattern exists most regularly in the trimeter lines of the poem, lines which most often finish the thoughts begun in the tetrameter lines. This regularity serves to emphasize every other line, giving the poem a forceful as well as a musical feel.

Historical Context

The War of 1812

This poem is about the battleship *U.S.S. Constitution,* which became a symbol of American pride when it was triumphant over the ships of the British fleet during the War of 1812. In a sense, the conclusion of the War of 1812 represented the true moment of independence from Britain for the new country, because it settled issues and lingering grievances that had been left incomplete at the end of the Revolutionary War. When that war ended in 1783, Americans distrusted the British and the British disliked the Americans, as would be expected after any violent separation. The two countries had mutual financial interests, though, especially in the West Indies of the Caribbean Sea, which were close to the United States but were still British colonies. Upper Canada was a British colony as well, and from there the British supplied Native Americans with goods and weapons with which to fight Americans on their own land. By 1793, Britain was at war again, this time with France. During this war America remained neutral, even though France had been a valued ally during the Revolution, and as a result of this neutrality and the strife in Europe the new nation was able to prosper greatly. Hostilities against Britain were cooled in 1794 by a treaty negotiated by Supreme Court Justice John Jay. Hostilities between France and England ended briefly in 1801, but when they resumed on 1803 the British were not willing to let American ships trade with France. British ships boarded American ships regularly, at gunpoint when necessary, to make sure that they were carrying no supplies that the French could use in the war. The British naval fleet was understaffed because many sailors had walked away from their military duty to prosper on American trading vessels. To get their truant sailors back, the British boarded American merchant ships and took back British sailors, even if they had become naturalized American citizens. These outrages on the seas, in addition to the hostilities along the Canadian border, led to the outbreak of war in 1812. When Britain refused to end their blockade of Europe, war broke out.

The war did not go well for America at first. A U.S. invasion of Montreal was thwarted, and the British took Detroit. The British Royal Navy blockaded the eastern seaboard, displaying naval superiority, although some individual ships, such as the Constitution, were victorious, giving Americans cause for hope. By 1814, the Americans were doing their best to hold off the British, when Napoleon's army was defeated at Waterloo, freeing more British troops to fight the American war. Washington D.C. was conquered, and many government buildings, including the White House, were burned. When peace talks began in 1814, both sides came to the negotiations with unrealistically high expectations. The Americans wanted Britain to give up the Canadian territory, while Britain wanted an independent state for Native Americans between the United States and Canadian borders. Finally, peace was achieved when both sides agreed to go back to the provisions that were agreed upon with the Treaty of Paris, which had ended the Revolutionary War in 1783.

America in 1830

Oliver Wendell Holmes was a member of upper Boston society, which was referred to as the Boston Brahmins (the word denotes the highest caste in the rigid Hindu social structure). At the time, the country had fewer than thirteen million citizens. The population was concentrated along the Eastern Seaboard, where three-fourths of the citizens lived□the area west of the Appalachian Mountains had some settlements and a few large cities, but those were considered the frontier. Progress into the wide-open heart of the country had come from the south and from New England. New Orleans, for instance, had a population of 46,000, and Cincinnati had 24,000, while Chicago, later to be the country's second largest population, was just a wilderness outpost. By comparison, the country's largest city, New York, had 200,000 citizens, and Holmes's Boston, relatively small for an established eastern city, had 60,000. Most of the country's population lived on farms, taking advantage of the fertile soil and open space available in the relatively new country, on land that they or their parents had settled.

In the election of 1828, the country favored Andrew Jackson, a populist with a reputation for being a man of the people. Jackson was one of the few heroes to emerge from the War of 1812, having won an important victory against the British in the Battle of New Orleans. Nicknamed "Old Hickory," he was the first president to come from beyond the New England states, and his election was a sign of the country's bold, strong, brave serf-image, which is evident in "Old Ironsides." Despite his image as an outsider to the political establishment, Jackson actually did little that was helpful to the common people. He increased his power as President by initiating the policy of appointing political supporters to his Cabinet and he opposed the rights that states claimed to hold independently of federal law: when South Carolina threatened to refuse to pay several federal tariffs, Jackson was prepared to send federal troops to collect the money before a new compromise measure was drawn up. In addition, Jackson was brutal with the Native Americans who stood in the way of the United States' expansion. During the War of 1812 he had wiped out the Upper Creek and had forced the Creek to give up twenty three million acres of land to the government; after the war he led raids against the Seminole; as President, he ignored a Supreme Court ruling that prohibited moving the Cherokee off of their land in Georgia. Eventually, his administration was responsible for resettling almost all of the indigenous tribes to west of the Mississippi River. Through all of this, Jackson maintained his image as a man of the people, and he easily won re-election in 1832.

Critical Overview

"Old Ironsides" was first published in 1836 in *Poems.* The volume, Holmes's first, earned the young poet a reputation as a humorist, but critics also noticed what several termed the "manly sentiment" of his more serious poems. "He knows how to be sentimental without silliness, and vigorous without violence," an anonymous reviewer commented in *The Yale Literary Magazine* in 1837. The reviewer notes that Holmes avoids the "sin" of clever writers: "a disposition to run as near to mawkishness as possible without falling into it." On the contrary, the reviewer gently accuses Holmes of failing to exploit the more serious side of his vision. If anything, the reviewer suggests, "there is too little sentimentality; and we could wish he had allowed himself more latitude where he shows himself most capable." Another anonymous critic, writing in a 1837 volume of *The North American Review,* remarks upon the "easy and natural flow" of Holmes's lyrics. Discussing "Old Ironsides," the critic says that "the strain upon the plan by the Navy Department for breaking up the Frigate *Constitution,* an unhappy suggestion of some one who was probably more familiar with national shipyards than national feelings, will rank among the best martial songs of England."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

David Kelly is an instructor of literature and writing at several community colleges in Illinois, as well as a fiction writer and playwright. Here, he examines the unique qualities of "Old Ironsides" and why the poem cannot be judged by ordinary poetic standards.

Given that there does not seem to be anything tricky or complex about Oliver Wendell Holmes's love poem to an old battle ship, it hardly makes sense that "Old Ironsides" has lasted as long as it has in the standard corpus of American literary classics. However, the poem (as well as the ship that is its focus) has proven to be indestructible. This is unique. It upsets all expectations of how things generally go. It isn't a very good poem by conventional measures, nor is the ship useful, and yet both have stayed with us, capturing the imaginations of new audiences year after year. We are left to reconsider what it is that a poem should do, what a war vessel is good for, and why these two have been able to survive nearly two centuries when anything similar has long since passed from anyone's concern.

When Holmes wrote this poem, the *Constitution* was old, not necessarily ready to be taken out of commission but being considered for it, along with most of the navy's other ships. It may well have been of more use to the country's defense for the timbers that would have been salvaged from it (no, it did not actually have iron sides). If it had any further use as a fighting vessel, its days were certainly numbered, having had a good long run for a wooden battleship and having taken on its share of enemy fire and navigation accidents. The Naval board that planned to decommission the *Constitution* certainly had no idea that any sort of controversy would arise from it. Every tool becomes obsolete eventually.

Historical preservation was not then and still is not a prominent trait of the American psyche. In this country we are resistant to giving too much attention to an object's historical significance, and are usually willing to consider the ways that preservation is not economically viable. Venerable buildings that serve for a time as a source of civic pride are often demolished, even in spite of opposing protests. New buildings are raised on the sites of old ones□this is close to the heart of the American way of thought. It is not necessarily the way in older countries, where history has taught the benefits of being aware of cultural heritage and buildings have survived, often refurbished when necessary, for a century or two or more. America's history is short, and was even more so during Holmes's childhood, and this country's strength is economic, not cultural. Leaving things the way they are impedes economic growth. There is no shame in this: The American character, based on the almost endless resources available for most of our history, has had a tradition of renewal, not reflection. And yet, even with these prevalent attitudes, the country has insisted on keeping the *Constitution,* now docked in Boston, even though it is more than a hundred and fifty years past its expiration date.

At the risk of sounding callous about a national treasure, one of the things that favors keeping the *Constitution* around is that it is relatively inexpensive. The ship has only been used for ceremonial purposes for the past hundred and fifty years, and has only

been out on the open ocean once since the 1880s. It has been supported by private donations, such as the admission charge for boarding it or the fees for renting it for corporate functions, or the "Pennies" campaign in the 1920s that collected nearly $31,000 from schoolchildren around the nation for the ship's upkeep. Under a 1954 law, the Secretary of the Navy is authorized to use public funds to maintain the *Constitution* in her original condition, but not for active service. Still, the nation is not in need of the ship's raw materials, and the space that it takes to keep a boat dockside is minimal, and it can be moved to a less expensive place if necessary. Compared to the cost of maintaining a landmark building, which becomes a greater liability if the property it rests on increases in value, the cost to the Navy of keeping this ship are hardly noticeable.

Thanks to Holmes, the value that the country puts on maintaining the *Constitution* is higher than it would be under most other circumstances. This was a young country in 1830, with no Taj Mahal, no Parthenon, no sphinx to remind Americans of their national identity. The nation's sense of serf was still developing. The defining characteristics were that America had fought its way free from the British twice, in the Revolution and in the War of 1812, and that it still had the "wilderness" of the land beyond the Mississippi to grow into. War and trailblazing and the conquering of indigenous people were ragged pursuits: it seems natural, from our perspective of this distance in time, that a symbol of military strength would strike the public's imagination as a good national emblem. Judging by the way that the general population responded to Holmes's poem "Old Ironsides"□it sped from local publication to newspapers across the country to privately-printed leaflets in little more than a week□it would seem that Americans were ready for a symbol of their country's greatness. Holmes's masterstroke was the fact that the *Constitution* captured the sense of independence from Europe so thoroughly.

The poem's success as a popular piece is therefore understandable□it was perfectly placed in time, coming along just when it was needed, earning the sort of widespread recognition that thousands of new ventures strive for every day, although the secret recipe only seems to come together for those who are not trying. As the story goes, Holmes, who was twenty-one at the time he wrote "Old Ironsides," did not think of himself as a serious artist, just a dabbler in clever verse, as were all well-bred college students of the time. He dashed the poem off the very afternoon that he heard the Navy was considering retiring the *Constitution,* and it was published in the Boston paper the next day. Though it is rare, it is believable that one could spontaneously capture the public mood in one quick burst of sincerity, that one young man could, with a little bit of skill but mostly with luck, channel the Zeitgeist of the time. What this story does not account for, though, is artistic integrity. It would be almost impossible to believe that the poem could have survived this long without it, though; if its only virtue were its timeliness, it would have been left behind decades ago, irrelevant as yesterday's news.

The poetic imagery Holmes used was certainly sound: "tattered ensign"; "meteor of the ocean air"; "the conquered knee"□he did a good, though not overwhelming, job of turning his ideas into tangible objects that readers could appreciate with their senses, and in that way created a more gripping experience than would have been yielded by simply tossing around high-minded ideas. The ironic stance, too, is very well-handled, very appropriate for his purpose. It somehow manages to help readers take the prose

seriously, dampening the more feverish excesses. It is in the poem's rhythm and rhyme, though, where students of poetry generally part ways with the general public. The structure should be appropriate to the function, and this either is or isn't, depending on what you think the poem's function is intended to be.

If this is supposed to be a serious expression of the poet's rage and concern, then the tightness of the metered verse and the rigidity of the rhyme scheme trivializes that. It is difficult to reconcile heartfelt expression with slavish devotion to structure. Assuming that one's deepest personal feelings are specific and individualized, then writing about feelings within an unyielding pattern is like using a kit from the store marked "Individuality" to show what makes you unique. If, on the other hand, we think his goal was to write a poem for mass appeal, to bring the widest possible audience to his "cause" of rescuing the *Constitution* from demolition, then certainly a formulaic structure would be most fitting. When dealing with great numbers of people with different backgrounds and expectations, it would be best to use one innocuous, standardized form so as not to distract them from the message. The vast public is not trained in understanding poetic form and is most interested in content, so the best thing about the pattern Holmes uses is that one hardly has to think of it.

It is difficult to say that this is art. It is certainly hugely successful, stirring pride across different subcultures and generations, and in that respect we can call it an artistic performance. What's lacking is the personal element that we associate with artistic expression. The emotions in this poem probably are the ones that Oliver Wendell Holmes was feeling on that afternoon in 1830 when he sat down and wrote out "Old Ironsides," but they are the simple emotions of a young man angry at government incompetence. It would be a little pretentious to say that angry young men cannot create art from their emotions but we can at least wish for some careful display of the details, not just broad strokes of anger and patriotism. Still, the combination of the poem with the ship itself has proven to create a synergy of American pride that is greater than either of the two could separately, making a sort of performance art that goes beyond the media of either ship-building or poetry. We cannot judge the "Old Ironsides" phenomenon by any known standards because there has never been anything quite like it.

Source: David Kelly, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Adaptations

Spoken Arts has produced an audiocassette entitled *Anthology of 19th Century American Poets* (1989).

Imperial Productions has produced an audio-cassette entitled *Oliver Wendell Holmes* (1965).

Caedmon has produced a record album entitled *Three Hundred Years of Great American Poetry, from Anne Bradstreet through Stephen Crane* (1962).

Encyclopedia Britannica Films has produced a 16mm film entitled *Oliver Wendell Holmes* (1950).

Encyclopedia Britannica Films has produced a filmstrip entitled *American Authors* (1958).

Topics for Further Study

Think of an object that you are familiar with and try to write a poem about its history. Mention the people who have used it, the events it has been part of, and its significance in society.

Click on to the *Constitution's,* web site at www.ussconstitution.navy.mil and find some event in the ship's history that interests you. Then report on that event and on other things that were going on in the United States at the same time.

What happens to ships that are decommissioned today? Make a chart showing which ships go where, and where their various components go when they are scrapped.

Why does the speaker think this ship would be better off sinking? Point to specific images from the poem that support his idea that destruction is better than decommissioning for a warship.

Compare and Contrast

1830: The *U.S.S. Constitution* is mentioned in a newspaper article as one being considered for decommission, having served the for over thirty years.

Today: The *Constitution* has been preserved for the last 170 years, thanks to Holmes's poem, and is on view at the Boston Navy Yard.

1830: At the site of FortDearborn, on the shore ofLake Michigan, the town of Chicago is planned.

Today: Chicago has three million people and is the country's third largest city. It was the second largest from the end of the nineteenth century until the 1990 census, when Los Angeles overtook it.

1830: The trip from Boston to New York takes thirty-six hours by steamboat and stage.

Today: The trip from Boston to New York takes less than an hour-and-a-half by airplane, but travel time to and from major metropolitan airports can double or triple that time.

1830: Illustrator John James Audubon publishes the first edition of his book of paintings, *Birds of America.*

Today: The organization named in honor of John James Audubon, The Audubon Society, is one of the preeminent conservation societies in America.

1830: President Andrew Jackson signs the Indian Removal Act, authorizing the general displacement of Indian populations to the west of the Mississippi River.

Today: Most Americans now find Jackson's anti-Indian policies a source of national shame, although these policies were popular in their day.

1830: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is founded by twenty-six-year-old Joseph Smith. Smith explains that the *Book of Mormon,* which is the basis of the church, has been written on golden tablets buried near where he lives in Palmyra, NY, and been translated for him by an angel named Moroni.

Today: With almost five million members, the Mormon church is among the most influential in America.

What Do I Read Next?

Around the World in Old Ironsides: The Voyage of U.S.S. Constitution, 1844-1846 is an illustrate and meticulously researched book published by the Norfolk County Historical Society, in 1993, to commemorate the voyage.

The authoritative source for all of Holmes's poetry is *The Complete Poetical Works of Oliver Wendell Holmes,* published in a hardcover edition by Cambridge Press in 1992.

Holmes was at least as well-known for his essays as his poetry. Soon after "Old Ironsides" catapulted him to fame, he wrote two columns for *New England Magazine* called "The Autocrat at the Breakfast Table." He used that title for his regular column in *The Atlantic* twenty-five years later. The light-hearted columns collected in the book *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table* (originally published in 1858) represent some of his best writing.

One of the most notable biographies of the poet is Eleanor M. Tilton's *Amiable Autocrat: A Biography of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes,* published by Schuman in 1947.

Further Study

Hickey, Donald R. *The War of 1812: A Short History.*

Chicago: University ofIllinois Press, 1995.

For students who are interested in the circumstances surrounding the *Constitution's* claim to fame, this brief book packs in a clear and concise overview.

Horsman, Reginald. *The Causes of the War of 1812.*

Philadelphia: University ofPennsylvania Press, 1962. Horsman's analysis of the age sets aside many myths and explains the true circumstances under which the *Constitution* earned its fame.

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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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