The River Mumma Wants Out Study Guide

The River Mumma Wants Out by Lorna Goodison

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Lorna Goodison's □The River Mumma Wants Out,□ published in 2005, is, on the surface, a lighthearted poem, making fun of people who look for happiness in things that glitter. Below the surface, however, the work is a scathing criticism of a popular culture that fosters insatiable desires, change for change's sake, and a lack of responsibility or spirituality. Goodison has set her poem in her homeland, Jamaica, but the message therein applies to all people everywhere.

Goodison published □River Mumma□ at a time when she was equally established in the United States, where she was living with her husband and teaching at the University of Michigan, and in Jamaica, where she would return each summer. Having relationships with both her homeland and a new country provided her with the perspective needed to objectively evaluate each of the two cultures□and indeed, the assessment is fairly depressing. No one, the poem implies, wants to take care of the things that should matter most, such as the environment. Even the most sacred cultural icons have grown tired of living obscure lives with no monetary reward. These guardians, the reader understands, would rather □go clubbing□ with glitzy, high-profile celebrities who make large amounts of money.

Although the poem does not present an attractive picture of what this drive for needless change and the associated endless self-absorption result in, such as a polluted Kingston Harbour, the poem could be read as a prayer, a wish, or a hope. In the poem, a speaker asks, □You can't take a hint? You can't read a sign?□ These questions seem to communicate the underlying message. □Wake up and take note,□ the speaker appears to be shouting. The contention that a mythological creature □wants out□ cannot be understood as a good omen.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: Jamaican

Birthdate: 1947

Born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1947, Lorna Goodison is reputed to be one of the island nation's favorite poets. She grew up as one of nine children in a family that loved books and writing. However, after comparisons were made (while she was still in public school) between her writing and that of one of her sisters, Goodison chose to keep her poetry to herself. When she published some of her poetry in a Jamaican newspaper while she was in high school, she did so anonymously. This reluctance to identify herself with her writing continued through her studies in art school. At length, as Goodison has stated, her poetry took precedence, almost like a tyrant, over all other forms of creative expression. Although she continues to paint (including the illustrations for her collections), Goodison has found that she best articulates her life experiences through poetry.

Despite her long and loving relationship with the written word, when Goodison graduated from college, her main focus was to find a job that would pay the bills. Hoping that teaching would allow her additional time to continue writing poetry, she found positions at Jamaica College and at a local high school. During this period, Goodison began publishing her poems with her name publicly attached to them. As her reputation grew, she was offered opportunities to travel and to read her poetry in other countries. The more she shared her work, the more she realized that she could finally claim the title of poet.

Not until she reached her early thirties did Goodison see her first collection of poetry, *Tamarind Season* (1980), published. In the twenty-five years that followed, she added nine more collections of verse to her body of work, including *To Us, All Flowers Are Roses* (1995), *Traveling Mercies* (2001), and *Controlling the Silver* (2005), in which □The River Mumma Wants Out□ appears. In 1999, she received Jamaica's Musgrave Gold Medal for poetry. She also writes short stories, some of which were collected in *Fool-Fool Rose Is Leaving Labour-in-Vain Savannah* (2005). As of the early twenty-first century, Goodison spent part of each year on the north shore of Jamaica. She has been employed as a professor at various U.S. and Canadian colleges, including Radcliffe, the University of Michigan, and the University of Toronto.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

The overall theme of Goodison's poem □The River Mumma Wants Out□ is evident in the title. In Jamaican folklore, the River Mumma, or River Maiden, is similar to the mythological mermaid: half human, half fish. Traditionally, the River Mumma lives at the fountainhead of the island's large water channels, acting as protector of the water and of the creatures who live in it. The poem's title declares that the River Mumma would prefer to be absolved of her duties. Another meaning is also suggested by the title: the River Mumma may simply want to emerge from the water or rid herself of her somewhat confining physical form. Whichever of these meanings is implied, the change is in the course of happening.

The poem then begins with a question: □You can't hear?□ With these three words, the narrator captures the reader's attention in several ways. First, the narrator's addressing the reader with the second-person pronoun □you□ makes the reader a participant in the conversation of the poem. Second, in using the present tense, she invokes an immediacy, luring readers to subconsciously strain their ears, as if they might hear something even as they read. Third, she demands the active consideration of a response to the question. In the second part of the first line, Goodison provides her thematic statement: □Everything here is changing.□

In the lines that follow, the narrator employs a personification of nature to characterize the changes that are occurring. □Bullrushes,□ which are simple, unglamorous, water-loving plants, now □want / to be palms□; the mention of palms, of course, conjures romantic notions of tropical life. Palm trees stretch their long trunks up into the sky and adorn classy gardens, whereas bullrushes are more likely to be completely overlooked. The bullrushes are looking for glory, in other words□what they would imagine to be a better life. They also want to be taken to the □Kings's garden,□ which desire the narrator mocks by asking, □What king?□ No true kings are present on the island. Even the garden's name, the narrator implies, is pompous. Thus, everything would seem to want to be more important than it actually is.

Stanza 2

□The river is ostriching into the sand,□ reads the opening line of the second stanza, which might be taken in two different ways. Ostriches are known for burying their heads in sand when confronted with danger. This line could suggest that the river, which is perhaps aware that the River Mumma, its protector, wants to leave, is attempting to hide its head in the sand. The statement could also mean that the waters are drying up. Whichever interpretation is made, the river is in trouble. The next line emphasizes this trouble. □Is that not obvious? the nurse souls ask.□ The nurse souls might be secondary protectors who are aware of the dangerous changes taking place. They are,

perhaps, unable to reverse these changes without the River Mumma; they may not have any power if the River Mumma is not involved. But the nurse souls are not hiding their heads in the sand. They are fully aware and appear to be surprised that others are not equally conscious of what is happening: "You can't take a hint? You can't read a sign?" they ask.

Stanza 3

The remainder of the poem enumerates the specific things that the River Mumma wants to do rather than oversee her responsibilities. The first line of stanza 3 reads, "Mumma no longer wants to be guardian / of our waters." From the third stanza on, in fact, the narrator seems to be belittling her own culture, perhaps as a means of criticizing the culture of the world at large. She points out the commercial aspects of society and the people's needs to feed their egos. The River Mumma now "wants to be Big Mumma, / dancehall queen of the greater Caribbean." Thus, she is no longer satisfied living in her hidden places in the mountains. She wants to be noticed, glorified, and popular. She wants to go out and be entertained.

Stanza 4

In the fourth stanza, the reader is told that the River Mumma's cravings go deeper than mere entertainment and ego gratification, as she has also lost her sense of the sacred: "She no longer wants to dispense clean water / to baptize and cleanse (at least not gratis)." That is, she does not care about the health of the water and is no longer concerned with the spiritual practice of cleansing, unless she is being paid to do so. She has lost her desire to do good, to encourage and to nurture her community. She is looking out only for herself. She has retreated from lofty ideals and, like much of the culture around her, now requires some kind of material reward for services rendered. She does not even care that her lack of concern and her shirking of her responsibilities not only damages her immediate surroundings but also spreads pollution many miles beyond her home.

Stanza 5

Whereas the River Mumma used to hide in the mountain waters, she now wants to be "exposed." She wants to be famous the world over; she wants to "go clubbing with P. Diddy," an African American rapper who epitomizes the wealth and celebrity that can be attained through the world of entertainment. She wants to "experience snow," which does not exist in her homeland. In other words, she wants what she does not have, and she is willing to sacrifice everything to get it.

Stanza 6

In the last stanza, the narrator continues listing the outlandish desires of the River Mumma. She persists in wanting to seek out the worst of the commercial environment, such as by visiting the biggest and fanciest of the world's shopping malls and □spending her strong dollars.□ The use of the word □strong□ is worth noting here, as the narrator implies that strength in the commercial world takes precedence over strength in the noncommercial world. The River Mumma is convinced that strength can be obtained only through money, not through the spiritual or mythological. The stories of the past have either failed or bored her. She wants to take part in the new world, the world of money. As such, she will pay no heed to anyone seeking her wisdom or protection□unless, of course, that person has money, which is what provides her with the □insurance□ that she will remain strong.

Themes

Commercial World versus Spiritual World

The myths, or folklore, of a people are created to explain things they cannot rationally understand. According to the mythologist Joseph Campbell, spirituality is often centered on these myths. The River Mumma helped the people who believed in her to respect the water and the life that was born in the water. She may have offered these people a sense of security, as they could believe that she would always keep their water flowing and clean. To show their respect, people would bring gifts of food, music, and dance to the River Mumma. Stories about her were told to each succeeding generation, so that children would maintain the practices of respect. As Goodison's poem suggests, however, the culture is changing for the worse.

As presented in the poem, diminishing respect for spirituality is being punctuated by the rise in commercialism. The sense of the spiritual has been corrupted by the commercial world, which emphasizes the immediate gratification of physical needs. The commercial world encourages the acquiring of wealth, often at the expense of nature and with indifference toward the spiritual. In this sense, the spiritual does not refer to the dogma of religion but rather to the idea of the spirits of the culture and of the earth. Under the influence of commercialism, as Goodison asserts through her poem, people ignore the fact that waters are being polluted. The focus is on profits and material goods. As explained by the poem's narrator, the River Mumma □no longer wants to be guardian / of our waters□; rather, she wants to be □Big Mumma.□ She no longer wants to □baptize and cleanse□; rather, she wants to □go on tour□ and to make and spend her □strong dollars.□ Money is at the heart of everything that the River Mumma now wants to do. She is completely preoccupied with what money can do for her and will pay no attention to anyone who comes to her with nothing but hope and prayers. In stressing the battle between commercialism and spirituality, the narrator sends a warning to her readers, hoping that they might thus see the signs of moral corruption and perhaps hoping that they will help reverse the trend.

Change

□Everything here is changing,□ the poem's narrator announces in the opening line, and the changes are not toward the good. Indeed, although change is inevitable, the poem asserts that things are changing too fast and in negative ways. Readers can surmise that the changes referred to are happening in Jamaica, where heavy deforestation and water and air pollution are turning what is seen by tourists as a tropical paradise into a potentially devastated piece of real estate. In fact, while tourism fuels Jamaica's economy, the costs of dependence on tourism are high. The poem suggests that lives that used to be simple, as based on ancient traditions, are being fractured. Tourism brings commercialism to the island, and rather than being satisfied with living off the land, people come to want the glitzy life that they see displayed before them in fancy

hotels. Certainly, catering to wealthy people eventually wears on the minds of the local people. Like the River Mumma, they begin to dream about being stars. They become infected by the power of money and want to center their lives on it. Change is also seen in the people's loss of love for their homeland. The people, like the River Mumma, want to move away and forget about responsibilities to the land and to the beliefs of their ancestors. All creatures, including the bullrushes, want to be transformed into something that they are not□something that they perceive as bigger and better than who they are. Change in and of itself is not bad, but as presented in this poem, when people stick their heads in the sand and fail to see the devastation around them, change is indeed bad.

Egocentricity

Another theme expressed in □River Mumma□ concerns egocentricity, or thinking of oneself over others. Self-gratification in order to feed the ego is represented in many forms, from the bullrushes wanting to be palm trees to the River Mumma wanting to be a □dancehall queen.□ In all of the newly developed desires of the River Mumma, the self is emphasized over others. Whereas she used to watch over the waters, she is no longer satisfied with staying in one location high in the mountains, rarely seen by anyone and rarely seeing anything but fish, water, and bullrushes. She has tired of thinking of others, finding little excitement for herself. She may have lost interest in her environment because the people around her have lost interest in her. Regardless of her reasons, the River Mumma's ego has become far more important than even the health of her surroundings. Unlike the river, which is hiding its head in the sand, she wants to do something for herself. She wants to be like everyone else, seeking celebrity at any cost. This state of affairs, one can surmise from the poem, could easily prove to be the downfall of the people on the island.

Lack of Compassion and Responsibility

Compassion and responsibility for the land, the people, and the culture, which were once foremost in the River Mumma's role, have been discarded, according to Goodison's poem. In seeking the material pleasures of life, the River Mumma has forsaken her environment. She □no longer wants to be guardian / of our waters,□ having grown tired of that role. She no longer has compassion for the people who come to her to be cleansed, either physically or spiritually. Life cannot exist without water, but she no longer cares. She wants to live for the moment and cast off her role of responsibility. □She does not give a damn about polluted / Kingston Harbour□ (Kingston is the capital of Jamaica). Her people, her water, and her water creatures will have to survive without her, unless, of course, they can supply her with the pleasures she now seeks. In accentuating this theme, Goodison exposes the concept at the heart of all the commercialism and egocentricity. When one is responsible and compassionate, one will take care of one's neighbors and the environment and will think beyond the immediate moment.

Style

Fantastic Metaphor

□The River Mumma Wants Out□ employs metaphors that can be considered fantastic in that they do not present plausible situations. At some points, the fantasy is mildly comedic, as with the bullrushes wanting to be palm trees. The metaphor wherein the □river is ostriching into the sand□ presents an image that is essentially impossible to imagine. However, if the poet merely stated that the water was disappearing into the sand, the meaning conveyed would be only that the river is drying up. Thus, by using the fantastic metaphor, a more complex image is provided. A sentiment of fear is attributed to the river and so also to nature, as when an ostrich inserts its head in the sand because it is afraid.

The main metaphor of this poem is that of the River Mumma. As a mythical character, the River Mumma herself can be seen as a metaphor for the spiritual essence of Jamaica. She is half human and half fish, of course, which would make her wanting to do the many things presented in the poem absurd outside the context of a fantastic metaphor. Thus, the River Mumma's desires reflect the waning spirituality of the nation's citizens, perhaps especially the youth, who would be most enamored of the idea of being □dancehall queens□ and so forth. In attributing the desires of her nation's citizens to such a revered legendary character, the tragedy of the situation is made clear.

Present Tense and Questions

In using the present tense in her poem, Goodison makes the situation feel immediate. In being told that □everything here is changing,□ the reader feels the impact of the assertion more acutely because he or she is not being told about something that happened in the past or will happen in the future. Indeed, all that the narrator relates seems to be happening as the poem is being read. In the beginning, she asks, □You can't hear?□ By including questions in the present tense, Goodison heightens the intensity of the poem further. Indeed, the narrator both addresses and challenges the reader. □You can't take a hint? You can't read a sign?□ she asks, thus questioning the reader's intelligence, insightfulness, credibility, and awareness. This makes the reader want to open his or her senses up more fully to what is happening both in the poem and in the real world. The questions end with the second stanza; Goodison perhaps felt that by this point she had engaged the reader's attention, allowing her thenceforth to share everything she wanted the reader to hear.

Enjambment

Enjambment is the continuation of a clause beyond the end of a line. In □River Mumma,□ Goodison uses enjambment in several different places. The second and third lines of the first stanza read, □The bullrushes on the river banks now want / to be palms

in the Kings's garden.□ In this example, the poet thus emphasizes the word □want,□ making the reader wait until the beginning of the third line to discover the object of this wanting. Further into the poem, Goodison uses enjambment somewhat more dramatically: at the end of the fourth stanza, she leaves the sentence open until the beginning of the fifth stanza. □She does not give a damn about polluted,□ reads the fourth stanza's last line, and only after the stanza break are the words □Kingston Harbour□ added to close the sentence. Nowhere else in the poem is a specific place mentioned. A general reference is made to the Caribbean, as the River Mumma wants to be the □dancehall queen of the greater Caribbean,□ but readers do not know, at this point, from where the River Mumma comes. Once the poet mentions Kingston Harbour, however, the poem is rooted in Jamaica. Through enjambment, here, Goodison gives Kingston Harbour special emphasis.

Historical Context

Jamaican History

Jamaica, a small, mountainous, tropical island slightly smaller than Connecticut, is located south of Cuba in the main shipping lane leading to the Panama Canal. Because of its warm, humid weather and beautiful landscape and seascape, Jamaica is a popular tourist destination. Owing to its strategic location between South America and North America, on the other hand, it is a popular transit station for drug dealers. Both of these elements, in modern times, have contributed to economic growth as well as to an increased crime rate. Jamaica is often advertised as a tropical paradise, but its history is strewn with hardship and violence.

The native Arawak were settled in what is now Jamaica around the year 700, many centuries before Christopher Columbus landed there. The Arawaks, a peaceful people, were all but wiped out by the end of the sixteenth century, owing to pressures caused by the invasion of Spanish settlers. Many were forced into labor, and among those who survived this harsh reality, many more succumbed to the diseases brought by the Europeans.

The Spanish also brought African slaves to the island to work their cattle and pig farms and to raise huge crops of sugarcane. In 1654, the British invaded the poorly protected Spanish settlements and took control of the island. Before slavery was finally abolished in 1834, Jamaica was the scene of waves of bloody rebellions, as slaves occasionally organized themselves into bands that razed plantations and murdered whites. The Europeans, in turn, captured or otherwise tricked the slaves into putting down their arms; they then hung their captives or whipped them into submission. The abolition of slavery did not end the harsh conditions suffered by black people. Wage labor often relegated former slaves to deep poverty, as the wages offered were not enough to account for food and shelter. Jamaica gained independence in 1962, but this change did not end the Jamaicans' struggle against poverty.

Jamaica is ruled by a constitutional parliamentary democracy, with the British monarch acting as chief of state. Percival James Patterson became the island's first black prime minister in 1992. While the government has grown stable in modern times, the economy has not. Jamaica's financial stability is dependent on tourism, which has suffered from domestic problems, such as the rising crime rate and damage caused by hurricanes, as well as international problems, such as terrorism. The sluggish economy has exacerbated social problems, as almost 20 percent of the people live below the poverty line and 15 percent are unemployed. Drug trafficking is prevalent, as cocaine dealers launder their money in Jamaica and also use the nation as a point of transshipment between South and North America and Europe. Indeed, these factors have all marred the tourism industry and caused domestic instability. Added to this is the pollution of coastal waters by industrial waste and sewage; heavy deforestation; damage to the natural coral reefs surrounding the island; and air pollution in the capital, Kingston.

Despite these conditions, according to a 2005 report by the Central Intelligence Agency, Jamaica's economy was projected to rebound by virtue of rises in tourism.

Jamaican Folklore

Jamaican folklore, including stories that have been handed down from generation to generation through an oral tradition, involves several major characters. The River Mumma, invoked in Goodison's poem, is a dominant figure who inspires both fear and awe. The River Mumma was at one time honored with offerings of food and rituals performed at the river's edge in her name. She helped in teaching reverence for the earth. The River Mumma can also be treacherous; according to local beliefs, she does not like to be seen, and if she catches anyone looking at her, that person can expect to be cursed.

People tell stories such as those about the River Mumma to maintain a sense of history and to pass lessons from one generation to the next. Many of the stories in Jamaican folklore were recounted by slaves in attempts to keep African traditions alive. The character Anansi, or Anansy, is a trickster who originated in storytelling in West Africa, especially among the Ashanti people in Ghana. Anansi is a rebel capable of outwitting his suppressors, a theme that was used in Jamaica to empower slaves. Anansi stories encouraged the concept that freedom was worth fighting for.

P. Diddy

Goodison mentions P. Diddy in her poem as a figure of celebrity. Indeed, P. Diddy may well represent the epitome of success and glamour, with respect to both excesses and failures. Born Sean John Combs in Harlem in 1969, he used the names Diddy, Puff Daddy, and Puffy during his rise to fame. He began his career as an intern at Uptown Records and soon afterward founded his own recording label, Bad Boy. In 1993, Combs made his first recording, rapping with the Notorious B.I.G., also known as Christopher Wallace, and using the name Puff Daddy. After a series of run-ins with the law and a breakup with the performer Jennifer Lopez, Combs changed his name to P. Diddy. He later created a reality television show called *Making the Band*, started a line of men's clothing, and ran in the New York City Marathon to raise money for the education of New York children. He was once listed in *Fortune* magazine as one of the forty richest men under forty years.

Critical Overview

□The River Mumma Wants Out□ was published in Goodison's collection *Controlling the Silver* in 2005. In a review of this collection in the Caribbean arts journal *Calabash*, Michela A. Calderaro notes that previous collections placed Goodison in high standing among Caribbean poets. With *Controlling the Silver*, Goodison takes her readers □on a longer and more complex passage out of the islands and across the wide seas (and back).□ Calderaro asserts that the poet's use of language ranks among □the richest and most impressive□ of a □number of contemporary Caribbean writers.□ At the end of the review, Calderaro remarks on *Controlling the Silver*, □If we were to say that it is the finest Caribbean poetry book we've read this year, we'd be limiting its importance. It is, quite clearly, one of the finest books in contemporary world literature, a rich and satisfying feast for the mind.□

In a review in the *Weekly Gleaner*, a Jamaican newspaper, Tanya Batson-Savage considers Goodison's art as a poet, as exemplified by this collection: □Goodison's pen slips between the folk and the modern with enviable ease, making space for its own language.□ Jim Hannan, critiquing an earlier collection of Goodison's poetry in *World Literature Today*, states that her □spiritualism, rendered consistently in strongly earthy images that pay homage to the colors, sights, sounds, and textures of her native Jamaica, frequently predominates, although her political and social consciousness can always be discerned.□ Hannan adds, □Goodison distills joy and anger through compassion and justice, and through a lyrical intelligence finely observant, rigorous, spiritual, and sensuous.□ She □avoids fashionable convention,□ Hannan writes, □and creates a body of work whose clear, uncomplicated free verse, infrequent rhymes, and tactile, precise diction and rhythms perfectly match her vision, her voice, and her sense of vocation.□ In a review for *Booklist*, Patricia Monaghan describes Goodison's verse as possessing □ripe sensuousness,□ leading Monaghan to wish that Goodison wrote more often. Monaghan then adds, however, that if Goodison did publish more often, □her delicacy and immense aural power would probably dissipate.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Hart is a published writer and former teacher. In this essay, she looks beneath the surface of the characters addressed in Goodison's poem to discover implications regarding more complex layers of meaning.

Goodison's poem □The River Mumma Wants Out□ mentions three main types of characters. First is the generic □you,□ as addressed by the narrator; second is the River Mumma, a figure from Jamaican folklore; and third are the nurse souls. Who are these characters, essentially? Who might they represent? Does each represent more than one being? These questions may never be answered exactly as the poet had intended, other than by Goodison herself, but in taking the liberty to explore possibilities, readers might find the poem more enriching.

The River Mumma, with whom most of the poem is concerned, is known to come from stories handed down through the ages to try to explain the unexplainable. Such stories can also help give people a sense of security, which the River Mumma indeed offers in certain ways. She is seen as a guardian of the waters, someone who maintains the health of the rivers, which are the source of the benefits of spiritual and physical cleansing. With her half-fish, half-human body, she is able to live in both worlds□water and earth, or spiritual and physical□taking care of humans and land animals as well as the creatures of her rivers. Yet something dreadful is happening to the River Mumma; after long centuries of watching over the waters, she now □wants out.□ What could this state of affairs represent?

Indeed, if the story of the River Mumma began as a myth to explain phenomena of the natural world, what might Goodison's revision of the story signify? If the River Mumma represents the guardian of the natural world, particularly the watery environments, the source of life and spiritual cleansing, what would her □wanting out□ imply? In essence, who is the River Mumma in this new interpretation? The first image that comes to mind is decay. The reader can imagine that the River Mumma would suffer physically if she were to follow her dream of touring the world, □clubbing□ and dancing all night long. Since the River Mumma is half fish, her body needs water. Thus, in trying to follow the ways of one who is fully human, she would meet her own destruction. In addition, if Kingston Harbour has already become polluted under her watch, what would happen if she were to move away? The result could only be more decay.

Since a myth is not a fact but rather a story used to explain something, readers know that the River Mumma is not real. But the message that a myth attempts to tell *is* real. The original story of the River Mumma might have been told so that people would respect the natural resources around them. The new story has a similar foundation but is instead told as a warning. In Goodison's poem, the River Mumma could represent the conscience of the people, or perhaps their emotions. The River Mumma wants something, Goodison announces in the poem's title, and wants are the direct result of emotions. Goodison might be saying that no one is paying attention to the environment; no one cares about what is happening in the surrounding world. Where is your

conscience? she might be asking in the narrator's direct address. Why do you not notice these things? Are you so busy thinking about dancing and hanging out at the malls that you cannot see that the environment around you is dying? If Goodison could stir the people's conscience with her poem, maybe the River Mumma would no longer want out. She would be content where she is, where she belongs. Indeed, perhaps her □wants□ would be turned around. Instead of wanting superfluous objects, like those she would find in a glitzy mall, she might want to help clean and therefore save the environment□and likewise, so might readers.

If the reference to the River Mumma is meant to stand as an emotional appeal, then the □you□ addressed by the narrator of the poem could be precisely who it seems to be: the reader. Indeed, through this direct address, the narrator pulls any and all readers into her poem. Some of those readers would be the people of Jamaica, certainly, since the environment of that island nation is mentioned in the poem. But Jamaica is not the only place with an environment that is hurting or decaying. Although other countries may not have stories about the River Mumma, they do appear to be sticking their heads in the sand in ignorance, an act mentioned in this poem. Perhaps Goodison believes or hopes that the poem will pull their heads out. □You can't hear?□ the narrator asks of everyone who is not paying attention to environmental damage. □You can't take a hint? You can't read a sign?□ In directing these questions to the □you□ of the poem, the narrator is appealing to the intellect, as if she is trying to shake the sand out of people's eyes and ears. Do you not see what is happening around you? she asks. Be aware of your environment. Do not let your emotions, or your desires for a life of self-gratification, blind you to the consequences of those runaway desires for more and more things. Fun has its place, but in wanting too much or in desiring only to feed the ego, you might be sacrificing more than you can afford. You can live without the glitz. You cannot live without clean water. These are the appeals the narrator is making. In case the more emotional plea made through the figure of the River Mumma proves ineffective, Goodison tries to awaken the reader's intellect. Let me tell you what the River Mumma is doing, the narrator avers. Let me help you to see the danger involved in her frivolity.

So the emotional and the rational pleas have been made. Thus, what is left for the narrator to do? In fact, she might appeal to the spirit or to the soul, which is exactly what she does. The □nurse souls□ are brought forth in the second stanza, appearing quite suddenly, without introduction or explanation. They are the voices behind the questions that are asked. As such, they are the ones who are trying to awaken the readers of the poem. They are the ones making a last desperate attempt to turn things around. Without a doubt, the situation is rapidly changing for the worse. If you do not feel it and do not see or understand it, then please just trust us, the nurse souls seem to be saying. □Everything here is changing,□ the reader is told in the first line, and the nurse souls ask, □Is that not obvious?□

Apparently, nothing is obvious to those who do not care to see or hear. Things have to be pointed out. The emotional and rational elements may be too close to the surface, so the narrator digs down deeper, to the soul. If anywhere, in this spiritual realm, everyone is connected; everyone is made of the same thing. All living creatures are united. As such, the spirit of the water is connected to the spirit of the trees, and the spirit of the

trees is connected to the spirit of all human beings. All those wants and desires, all those ego concerns, and even all those rational notions are mere infants in relationship to the longevity and significance of the ancient soul. If hope can be found with respect to turning negative environmental changes into positives, it will be discovered through appeals to the soul. Possibly in an attempt to emphasize this idea, Goodison refers to spirits as nurse souls. Nurses are helpers and healers. Doctors may diagnose, operate, and prescribe pills, but the nurses are the ones who watch over patients until health is restored. The nurse souls may be acting in this way. They may be attempting to bring health back to the souls of the earth, the water, and the people who are ailing. The nurse souls are the ones who are shouting, Wake up! Look around you! See what is happening before it is too late!

And so, in a simple voice that appears to be telling a simple story about an icon that wishes to go astray, the poet makes a strong appeal to her readers. The elements of the poem seem straightforward at first. It appears to be a whimsical little poem about a character from a story, as told on a small tropical island in the Caribbean. It has nothing to do with me, readers might imagine at first. But the poem haunts them, maybe without their knowing how. Indeed, the poem turns out to be more complex than they might have thought at first, and the poet may be a lot more clever. In appealing to her readers on the three different levels of emotion, intellect, and spirit, Goodison succeeds in driving her point home. In fact, she may drill her message deep inside some readers without their even realizing it.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on □The River Mumma Wants Out,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Adaptations

The British Broadcasting Corporation, at http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/arts/natpoetday/lorna_goodison.shtml, offers an audio interview with Goodison, who talks about how she came to write poetry.

Topics for Further Study

Research the folklore of the Caribbean. What are some of the stories' main characters? Do similar characters exist in African folklore? Native American folklore? In what ways are the characters alike? Write a paper describing the various characters, the roles that they play, and the lessons that they teach. Were you told similar stories as a child? Discuss some of your personal experiences regarding folklore.

Find examples of Goodison's artwork (such as on the covers of her poetry collections). Present copies of this artwork to your class, discussing the type of art it represents. Also, compare Goodison's work to that of other artists and discuss whether her work is typical of Jamaican artists.

Find statistics concerning Jamaica's economic and environmental status. Compare details, such as the cost of housing and the cost of food, to the same costs in your local economy. Specifically, find details regarding literacy, per capita income, death and birth rates, inflation, pollution, deforestation, and the effects of tourism on the general population. In other words, provide an in-depth report on the island, as if you were an investigative reporter or as if your family were planning on living there. Present the report to your class.

Pretend to be Goodison and paint a picture, in Goodison's style, of what you think the River Mumma would look like. You can use her natural setting by a river as a background or imagine what she would look like, say, as a □dancehall queen.□

What Do I Read Next?

Donna Hemans's *River Woman* (2002) tells a story about a young mother who waits at the riverside for her own mother to return to her as promised. She does not notice that her own child has wandered into the water until it is too late, and she then has to face some of her worst fears as the women in her village accuse her of drowning her child on purpose.

From Behind the Counter: Poems from a Rural Jamaican Experience (1999) offers readers another view of life in traditional Jamaica. The poet is Easton Lee, a man who grew up holding a pivotal position in his small village: he was the clerk of his father's grocery shop. Lee has a mixed ethnic background, with substantial Chinese ancestry.

Kwame Dawes edited a collection of interviews with Caribbean poets, including Goodison, called *Talk Yuh Talk: Interviews with Anglophone Caribbean Poets*, published in 2000. Poetry is also included in this collection, covering a wide range of topics and styles, with multiple generations of writers represented. Some of the poems are highly influenced by Caribbean music, while others follow the more classical form of English poetry. The interviews reveal the major themes of the poets' writings.

One of Goodison's more popular collections is *To Us, All Flowers Are Roses* (1995). In this collection, her sixth, Goodison focuses on the culture and the people of Jamaica. One prominent theme is a plea for the revision of history, to be told anew by the poor people, who could thus relate their struggles for survival and freedom.

For an overview of Caribbean poetry, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry* (1998) is a good place to start. This collection features verse written in English by Caribbean poets from the 1920s through the 1980s. The poetry explores the effects of both colonization and decolonization on the region's people and culture.

In the first half of her 1999 collection *Turn Thanks*, Goodison explores familiar territory, writing about her family. In the second half, she offers a view of her life in North America.

Further Study

Adams, L. Emilie, and Llewelyn Dada Adams, *Understanding Jamaican Patois: An Introduction to Afro-Jamaican Grammar*, LMH Publishers, 1991.

A unique language has formed in Jamaica, combining English and African lexicons. With the popularity of reggae, Jamaican patois has come to be heard all over the world. This book helps people living outside Jamaica understand some of the popular phrases.

Jekyll, Walter, *Jamaican Song and Story: Annancy Stories, Digging Sings, Ring Tunes, and Dancing Tunes*, Dover Publications, 2005.

This books provides an overview of some of Jamaica's mythology through stories and songs. Extensive notes and explanations are provided, giving the reader a full understanding of the stories' significance.

Mack, Douglas R. A., *From Babylon to Rastafari: Origin and History of the Rastafarian Movement*, Frontline Distribution International, 1999.

Much of the poetry of Jamaica is captured in the nation's popular music, much of which expresses the beliefs of the Rastafarian movement. This book was written by a member of that movement, which represents the ongoing struggle for total freedom.

Monteith, Kathleen, and Glen Richards, eds., *Jamaica in Slavery and Freedom: History, Heritage, and Culture*, University of West Indies Press, 2002.

This text offers a comprehensive overview of the history of Jamaica, from the Arawak to Marcus Garvey to contemporary culture.

Stolzoff, Norman C., *Wake the Town and Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*, Duke University Press, 2000.

Stolzoff has written a comprehensive study of Jamaican music, addressing its production, its star performers, and its influence on the people. Further, Stolzoff carefully delineates the music's political and cultural influences. Much of Jamaica's poetry is presented through song; within this poetry, the voices of rebellion can still be heard.

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Batson-Savage, Tanya, "A Sunday Morning Serving of Poetry," in the *Weekly Gleaner*, North American ed., October 6-12, 2005, p. 14.

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Hannan, Jim, Review of *Guinea Woman: New and Selected Poems*, in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 76, No. 2, Spring 2002, pp.130-31.

Monaghan, Patricia, Review of *Turn Thanks*, in *Booklist*, Vol. 95, June 1, 1999, p. 1774.

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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