She Walks in Beauty Study Guide

She Walks in Beauty by George Gordon Byron, 6th Baron Byron

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Introduction

Written in 1814, when Byron was twenty-six years old, and published in *Hebrew Melodies* in 1815, the poem of praise "She Walks in Beauty" was inspired by the poet's first sight of his young cousin by marriage, Anne Wilmot. According to literary historians, Byron's cousin wore a black gown that was brightened with spangles. This description helps the reader understand the origin of the poem, and its mixing together of images of darkness and light, but the poem itself cannot be reduced to its origins; its beauty lies in its powerful description not only of a woman's physical beauty, but also of her interior strengths. There is no mention in the poem of spangles or a gown, no images of a woman actually walking, because the poet is after something larger than mere physical description.

Author Biography

Byron was born in 1788 in London to John Byron and Catherine Go a descendant of a Scottish noble family. He was born with a clubbed foot, with which he suffered throughout his life. Byron's father had married his mother for her money, which he soon squandered and then fled to France, where he died in 1791. When Byron was a year old, he and his mother moved to Aberdeen, Scotland, and Byron spent his childhood there. Upon the death of his great uncle in 1798, Byron became the sixth Baron Byron of Rochdale and inherited the ancestral home, Newstead Abbey in Nottingham. He attended Harrow School from 1801 to 1805 and then Trinity College at Cambridge University until 1808, when he received a master's degree. Byron's first publication was a collection of poems, *Fugitive Pieces* (1807), which he himself paid to have printed, and which he revised and expanded twice within a year. When he turned twenty-one in 1809, Byron was entitled to a seat in the House of Lords, and he attended several sessions of Parliament that year. In July, however, he left England on a journey through Greece and Turkey. He recorded his experiences in poetic form in several works, most importantly in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812- 1818). He returned to England in 1811 and once again took his seat in Parliament. The publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold* in 1812 met with great acclaim, and Byron was hailed in literary circles. Around this time, he engaged in a tempestuous affair with Lady Caroline Lamb, who characterized Byron as "mad□bad□and dangerous to know." Throughout his life, Byron conducted numerous affairs and fathered several illegitimate children. One of his most notorious liaisons was with his half-sister, Augusta. Byron married Annabella Millbank in 1815, with whom he had a daughter, Augusta Ada. He was periodically abusive toward Annabella, and she left him in 1816. He never saw his wife and daughter again.

Following his separation, which had caused something of a scandal, Byron left England for Europe. In Geneva, Switzerland, he met Percy Bysshe Shelley and his wife Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, with whom he became close friends. The three stayed in a villa rented by Byron. During this time, Mary Shelley wrote her famous novel *Frankenstein,* and Byron worked on Canto III of *Childe Harold* (1816). In 1817, Byron moved on to Italy, where he worked on Canto IV, which was published the next year. For several years, Byron lived in a variety of Italian cities, engaging in a series of affairs and composing large portions of his masterpiece *Don Juan* (1819-1824) as well as other poems. In 1823, he left Italy for Greece to join a group of insurgents fighting for independence from the Turks. On April 9, 1824, after being soaked in the rain, Byron contracted a fever from which he died ten days later.

Poem Text

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.
One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear, their dwelling-place.
And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, so eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2

Readers of poetry often get confused because they stop when they reach the end of a line, even if there is no mark of punctuation there. This could be the case with this poem, which opens with an enjambed line, a line that does not end with a mark of punctuation. The word enjambment comes from the French word for leg, "jamb"; a line is enjambed when it runs over (using its "legs") to the next line without a pause. If read by itself, the first line becomes confusing because the reader can only see a dark image, almost a blank image. If "she walks in beauty, like the night," a reader might wonder how she can be seen. But the line continues: the night is a cloudless one and the stars are bright. So immediately the poem brings together its two opposing forces that will be at work, darkness and light.

Lines 3-4

These lines work well because they employ an enjambed line as well as a metrical substitution□ a momentary change in the regular meter of the poem. When poets enjamb a line and use a metrical substitution at the beginning of the next line, they are calling attention to something that is a key to a poem. Here Byron substitutes atrochaic foot (an accented syllable followed by an unaccented one) for the iambic foot at the start of the fourth line. Why? Because he is putting particular emphasis on that word "meet." He is emphasizing that the unique feature of this woman is her ability to contain opposites within her; "the best of dark and bright / meet" in her. In the same way that enjambment forces lines together, and a metrical substitution jars the reader somewhat, this woman joins together darkness and light, an unlikely pair. They "meet" in her, and perhaps nowhere else besides a starry night. It's also important to note that the joining together can be seen in her "aspect," or appearance, but also in her "eyes." A reader might think of the eyes simply as a feature of beauty, but the eyes also have been associated in literature with the soul, or the internal aspect of the person: the eyes reveal the heart.

Lines 5-6

The emphasized word "meet" is here again echoed with the initial "m" sound in "mellowed." This woman joins together what is normally kept >separate, but there is no violent yoking going on here; instead, the opposites meld together to form a mellowed, or softened, whole. By joining together the two opposing forces, she creates a "tender light," not the gaudiness of daytime, but a gentler light that even "heaven" does not bestow on the day. If a reader were to think of night in terms of irrationality and day in terms of reason□as is implied by the term enlightenment□that would not be apt for this poem. Neither night nor day seem pleasing to the speaker; only the meeting of those

two extremes in this woman pleases him. She is a composite, neither wholly held by rationality nor by irrationality.

Lines 7-10

Once again the opposites are combined here. "Shade" or darkness is combined with "day" or light, and "raven tress" or dark hair is linked with a lightened face. The speaker suggests that if the woman contained within her and in her appearance either a little bit more of darkness or a little bit more of light, she would be "half impaired." A reader might expect the speaker to say she would be totally ruined or impaired, but if things were not just in the right proportion, she'd be half impaired, but still half magnificent. A key word in this section is "grace." Although the poet is seemingly talking about appearances, in actuality he is referring to the "nameless grace" that is in her hair and face. Once again, it is something internal as well as external that is so attractive about this woman.

Lines 11-12

Although this poem begins with the image of a woman walking, the reader should notice by now that no images are given of her legs or arms or feet; this is a head poem, confined to hair and eyes and face and cheeks and brows. The conclusion to the second stanza emphasizes this. The reader is given an insight into the "dwelling place" of the woman's thoughts, an insight into her mind. The repetition of the "s" sounds is soothing in the phrase "serenely sweet express"; because the poet is referring to her thoughts, and her thoughts are nothing but serene, readers may infer how pure her mind is.

Lines 13-18

Byron concludes the poem with three lines of physical description that lead to the final three lines of moral characterization. The soft cheeks, the winning smile, the tints in the skin eloquently express not only physical beauty, but they attest to her morality. The physical beauty, the speaker concludes, reflects days spent doing good, a mind at peace, and "a heart whose love is innocent." Whether Byron would have preferred a less innocent cousin, someone with whom he could enjoy Byronic passions, is left unspoken for the reader to decipher.

Themes

Beauty

Lord Byron's poem "She Walks in Beauty" was written in praise of a beautiful woman. History holds that he wrote it for a female cousin, Mrs. Wilmot, whom he ran into at a party in London one night when she was in mourning, wearing a black dress with glittering sequins. The poem uses images of light and darkness interacting to describe the wide spectrum of elements in a beautiful woman's personality and looks.

Unlike common love poetry, which makes the claim that its subject is filled with beauty, this poem describes its subject as being possessed by beauty. This woman does have beauty within her, but it is to such a great degree that she is actually surrounded by it, like an aura. To some extent, her positive attributes create her beauty, and so the poem makes a point of mentioning her goodness, her serenity, and her innocence, which all have a direct causal effect on her looks. There is, though, another element: the "nameless grace" that is a type of beauty bestowed by heaven, as in the common expression "she is graced by beauty." The woman described in this poem is so completely beautiful, inside and out, that Byron goes out of his way to mention all of the various possible sources, to show that he appreciates her beauty to its fullest.

The beauty described here is a result of the woman being well-rounded, to such an extent that the second stanza notes how the very slightest difference □a shade or a ray□would alter her beauty drastically, cutting it in half. While a more conventional sense of beauty might list only the woman's positive attributes, it is typical of Byron's romantic sensibilities to see beauty as a mixture of light and darkness, admitting that the sinister, mysterious darkness of night has as much to do with a woman's appeal as the positive aspects associated with light. Pure light, according to this vision, is so limited in its relation to beauty as to be "gaudy."

Harmony

In this poem, Byron balances light and dark within the personality of one beautiful woman. If any two concepts can be recognized as being mutually exclusive, it would be these; light does not exist where there is darkness, and darkness does not exist in light, even though they can exist next to one another, with darkness taking up where light ends and vice versa. In some cases, the two are thought of as struggling against one another, but in the case of a beautiful woman, as Byron explains it here, light and dark can exist together, at the same time, in harmony.

Harmony is more than different things existing together. In music, which is where the word is most often used, it refers to a special, third tone that occurs when two tones work together with each other and make a new, pleasing sound. Similarly, Byron implies in "She Walks in Beauty" that the convergence of light and dark within this woman

creates a new thing that is greater than the sum of the two. The darkness of her "raven tresses" and the lightness of her skin do not contrast with each other, they create a well-rounded whole that is great enough to hold contrasting elements.

Flesh versus Spirit

This poem raises the issue of the mind-body duality that has concerned philosophers for centuries. The most puzzling thing about this concept is the fact that the mind, or spirit, is definitely not a physical thing that anyone would ever be able to point to, but it definitely responds to changes in the body. Even today, when science can identify electrochemical reactions in the brain that seem to be direct responses to physical stimulation, there is no clear way of showing how what happens in the brain translates into the immaterial world of thoughts.

The version of the mind-body duality that Byron presents in this poem is the opposite of the one that measures neural reactions. To him, the woman's beauty originates in her thoughts, and the innocence and purity of her mind manifest themselves on her face, to create the beauty that he sees there. The third stanza states this process directly. The first three lines of this stanza catalog the parts of the woman's face that the poet finds beautiful, listing her cheek and brow, her smile, and her complexion. In the last three lines, the cause of this beauty is linked to what goes on inside of her mind. It is her goodness, her peacefulness, her love and innocence that are all "told of" in the woman's features. Because of the fact that this romantic view of love has prevailed throughout Western society, modern readers often fail to appreciate the fact that beauty does not necessarily have to be caused by purity of spirit. Byron's poem claims that the woman's virtues are the cause of her external beauty, but there is no real proof of any link between the spirit and the flesh.

Perfection

There are several places that "She Walks in Beauty" implies that it is giving an image of womanly perfection. In line 3, for instance, the poem describes how this woman's eyes contain "all that's best of dark and bright." Lines 7-8 explain that the slightest variance of light or dark would cut in half the indescribable grace that gives her the great beauty she wears. As Byron describes this woman, there is nothing that could be better about her and much that could be lost if things were not exactly as they are. All elements about her must be kept in exactly the present proportions for her beauty to remain. This is perfection.

Because the poem draws a connection between the woman's finely-balanced features and her personality, readers can assume that this woman is not only perfect in her looks, but in her personality as well. She is perfect through-and-through. It is fitting for a romantic expression of love that Byron's claims about her should be so extreme as to say that she is not just good, not great, but perfect. In poetry, the device of overstating things with great exaggeration is called hyperbole. Lovers often make such exaggerated

claims about those who are the objects of their affections, driven by the excitement of their emotions. It is typical of Byron to casually shower such praise on a woman with whom he had no direct romantic involvement at all.

Style

The three six-line stanzas of this poem all follow the same rhyme scheme and the same metrical pattern. There are only six rhyming sounds in this eighteen-line poem because the poem rhymes *ababab, cdcdcd, efefef* . The pairing of two rhyming sounds in each stanza works well because the poem concerns itself with the two forces□darkness and light□at work in the woman's beauty, and also the two areas of her beauty□the internal and the external. The rhyming words themselves, especially in the first stanza, have importance: notice how "night" rhymes with its opposites, "light" and "bright," in the same way that this woman contains the two opposing forces in her particular type of beauty. Oftentimes poets use their poetic structures to mirror what the poem's chief concerns are. Poetic form□stanzas and meter□and content□what the poem's subject is□are almost always related.

The meter is also very regular□iambic tetrameter. This means there are four□"tetra" is Greek for four□iambs per line. An iamb means that the line is divided into units, or feet, of two syllables, and each unit has an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable. This can be clearly seen if you look closely at the construction of a particular line:

She walks / in beau / ty like / the night

This poem was included in Byron's 1815 book, *Hebrew Melodies,* which included poems written to be set to adaptations of traditional Jewish tunes. This very regular iambic line is very suitable for being set to music because of its strong rhythm.

Historical Context

Lord Byron is considered one of the most important and interesting poets of the romantic movement in England, and "She Walks in Beauty" is frequently considered one of his most powerful works. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, romanticism swept across the world, affecting the sensibilities of artists and philosophers in a number of countries. Like any social movement, it was not the result of any kind of structured effort on the parts of its adherents so much as it reflected a response to the times they lived in and the problems that they found with the work of artists that came before them.

The last half of the 1700s represented a time of great social unrest in Western society. In the United States, this era is best remembered for the American Revolution, which was fought from 1776 to 1783, leading to the adoption of the Constitution in 1789. Even more compelling to the people of Europe was the French Revolution, which lasted from 1789 to 1799. While the American Revolution freed a new colonial country from the country that ruled it, establishing a democratic government of the people, by the people, and for the people, the revolution in France overturned the government of a political structure that had existed for hundreds of years. Both revolutions reflected the same basic principles, supporting the rights of individuals to control their own fates and rejecting the previous order that gave the aristocratic ruling class the power to establish laws and levy taxes without holding its members responsible. Although the ruling monarchies were shocked by the unruliness of the American rebels and their methods of defying the existing social order, such as the Boston Tea Party, these actions paled when compared with the widespread bloody chaos that took place throughout France during the revolution there. The French government ordered massive executions to frighten the revolutionaries, and when they gained power, the revolutionaries put hundreds of members of the nobility to death at the guillotine.

These political upheavals encouraged the sense of freedom that characterized the romantic movement. Earlier generations had focused attention on using order, reason, and scientific exploration to address the world's problems. During the Age of Enlightenment, which is measured from roughly the year 1700 to the start of the French Revolution in 1789, philosophers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, and Denis Diderot published works that promoted humanity's ability for self-improvement and were influential throughout Europe and North America. This faith in the social and physical sciences was reflected in literature in greater attention to studying the styles and themes of ancient writers, so that in the early to mid-1700s neoclassicism flourished. The Enlightenment's support of reason can be said to have created a revolutionary spirit, as people around the world began questioning the qualifications of aristocrats, who had power only because their parents had power. The spirit of revolution led to the romantic movement, which shifted emphasis from rationality toward spirituality.

The romantic movement in literature developed gradually in different places, but most historians agree that it came into focus with the introduction that William Wordsworth wrote for the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads,* a book of poems that he and Samuel Taylor

Coleridge wrote. In this introduction, Wordsworth described poetry, using a much-quoted phrase, as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." This emphasis on spontaneity and feeling gave romanticism its defining characteristics: a focus on beauty, insistence on the importance of the writer's sensibilities, and an emphasis on the non-rational that eventually developed into an interest in the occult. The early English romantic poets included Wordsworth, Coleridge, and William Blake.

Lord Byron belongs to the second phase of romanticism in England, which began early in the nineteenth century. This new wave included an appreciation of history, but not the ancient history of Western civilization that was popular with the neoclassicists. As it went along, romanticism picked up an interest in folk arts and national history, giving a social context to the "powerful feelings" that Wordsworth emphasized without shackling romanticism to social tradition. The poets of this period □most notably Byron, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley□are the ones that modern students most often associate with the romantic movement. Their works are sensual and patriotic, mysterious and mournful. The stereotype of the poet as a young man, struggling feverishly with the unnamed inspiration that he is compelled to follow, consumed by love and doomed to a tragic end, is based almost entirely on the lives of Keats, Shelley, and Byron, who lived and loved heartily and all died young.

Critical Overview

Although Byron is known as one of the major poets of the Romantic period, his work has been faulted by a number of famous writers. According to the poet W. H. Auden in his book *Dyer's Hand and Other Essays,* Byron's poems need to be "read very rapidly" because if one slows down the "poetry vanishes□the feeling seems superficial, the rhyme forced, the grammar all over the place." While nineteenth-century British poet Matthew Arnold considers Byron, along with Wordsworth, "first and pre-eminent in actual performance . . . among the English poets of this century," he holds a similar opinion of Byron's technical merit. Writing in a preface to *Poetry of Byron,* Arnold states: "As a poet, he has no fine and exact sense for word and structure and rhythm; he has not the artist's nature and gifts."

Other critics have disagreed with such negative assessments of Byron's worth. In response to the first appearance of *Hebrew Melodies,* a British critic writes in a 1815 *Augustan Review* critique that "there are traits of exquisite feeling and beauty" in the collection; the poetry itself was considered by this nameless critic to be of "superior excellence." Other critics in this century have likewise praised *Hebrew Melodies* and specifically "She Walks in Beauty." L. C. Martin admires "the generous allowance of long vowels, the variety of vowels and consonants, and the likeness within the differences effected by internal rhymes or other devices" in the poem. He suggests that Byron should be taken "with some seriousness as a technician in verse." Another critic, Frederick W. Shilstone, also applauds *Hebrew Melodies,* calling it "an important experiment in genre" that prepared the way for "more elaborate volumes like Robert Lowell's *Notebook* and John Berryman's *Dream Songs* ."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and composition at Oakton Community College and the College of Lake County. In the following essay, he examines how the concept of the Byronic hero applies to "She Walks in Beauty."

Modern appreciation of the poetry of Lord Byron is focused mainly on his works about male characters who in some ways represent the poet, or at least the person the poet liked to think he was. Like the Hemingway hero, who embodied manly ideals that biographers can show novelist Ernest Hemingway was trying to incorporate into his way of life, the Byronic hero had elements of genius, tragedy, and sex appeal that set the standard for the poet, as well as for generations of would-be misunderstood poets for years to come. There were, in fact, several Byronic heroes, from the intensely silent man of action to the sensitive *artiste* to the brash, unwavering lover, who provides the sensibilities for a poem like "She Walks in Beauty," even if he does not appear in it directly. P. L. Thorslev, in his book *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (quoted in Jump, p. 76) gives a list of basic heroic types that were popular in Byron's time:

the Child of Nature; the Gothic Villain (unregenerated, as in the novel, or remorseful, as in the drama or in [Sir Walter] Scott's romances); the accursed Wanderer; the Gloomy Egoist, meditating on ruins, death, or the vanity of life; and the Man of Feeling, suffering from a lost love, or philanthropically concerned with the suffering caused by war or oppression.

In "She Walks in Beauty," there is no particular narrator referred to, no mention of an "I" or "me" that would tell readers they are supposed to think about the person who is telling them about this beautiful woman. Still, it is rare that there is ever a poem where the persona of the speaker is not a central concern. Prose is for conveying information; when one writes poetry, the words are arranged on the page in a highly stylized fashion, and readers are bound, eventually, to question the personality that this arrangement reveals. Often, the personality of the speaker is that of the poet, but it would be a mistake to assume that this is always the case. As the list above indicates, Lord Byron projected a number of various personalities through his poetry. Readers cannot just assume that "She Walks in Beauty" is a revelation of Byron himself; instead, they have to ask just what kind of character is behind the words of this particular poem, implied but not examined, almost hidden within the attempt to throw attention onto the beautiful woman of the title.

The little that is known about how this poem came into being seems to give it some sort of basis in real life, although this simple conclusion is not as simple as it seems at first. The story of its genesis is told over and over again, with no more details than Leslie A. Marchand gave in his 1970 biography of Byron. In his summary of the festive London social scene at the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1814, when the city was overrun with returning army officers and alive with the thrill of victory, Marchand writes:

One evening [James Wedderburn] Webster dragged him against his will to a party at Lady Sitwell's, where they saw Byron's cousin, the beautiful Mrs. Wilmot, in mourning with spangles on her dress. The next day he wrote a gemlike lyric about her.

Many readers assume from this snippet of Byron's life a background context for "She Walks in Beauty." They find it to be about the chaste love of a man for his relative, or they add the element of Mrs. Wilmot's grief to her beauty and speculate on whether the magic surrounding her is in spite of or because of it. It provides a sense of the poem's speaker as a Hopeless Romantic, using the word in the modern sense, as it has come down to current times with associations that it picked up from the age of romanticism. This poem presents itself as a work of pure love and intellectual appreciation for the object of desire that Byron had no interest in pursuing as a lover.

While it is fine to know the circumstances under which a work of art first appeared, it can sometimes be a distraction. Examining this poem without considering the poet or the little that is known about his inspiration for it reveals a slightly different personality for the speaker: one still mostly hidden behind the grandeur of the woman being discussed, but one who exists nonetheless. For the sake of discussion, and for no other reason, this speaker can be referred to as "he," although there is really no strong evidence that links it to either gender once the author's identity has been removed from the equation. He appears to be sensitive, intelligent, smitten, and respectful, swept off of his feet by the sheer elegance of the lady being described. These aspects projected in the poem are all consistent with various versions of the Byronic hero. It is obvious that this speaker is meant to be admired and respected for the admiration and respect that he extends toward the beautiful woman, and it is this that qualifies him for the label of "hero."

A significant part of this hero's profile is the knowledge that he claims to have about the woman's personality. He knows, according to the poem, that she has "thoughts serenely sweet" and "a heart whose love is innocent." How would he know these things? It is a small point, but one that colors the whole message of the poem, and therefore one that gives many students their entire understanding of the spirit of romanticism.

Looking at the matter biographically, one could say that Byron was familiar with Mrs. Wilmot, that he knew her personality and chose to characterize it as such. This explanation misses the point; however, no matter how well he knew the woman (and indications are that they were not very close at all), it is impossible to know any other person's soul with the certainty that the speaker claims in this poem. The other option that is drawn from reality would be that the poem's speaker might be understood as seeing the purity of the woman's heart through the purity of her face. The poem certainly leans readers toward this interpretation at the end, when it lists several of the aspects of her face and then explains that they "tell of" the goodness of her spirit. This sort of interpretation of physical clues, of saying that a person's psyche must be a particular way to have caused her face to come out the way it has, is well within the responsibility of poetry. But "She Walks in Beauty" is inconsistent in its method of interpreting personality. Lines 10-12 have "thoughts" expressing purity and dearness on her face, which seems to explain how the face reflects personality but actually confuses the issue

by claiming that this woman has thoughts on her face. So common is the language that people use when telling about how they can "read" emotions that Byron almost gets away with putting a non-physical idea in a physical place.

There is a jump in logic required to understand the speaker of the poem as he is presented. It is this logical jump that takes him beyond the logical, measurable, knowable world and gives him almost supernatural ability to know the woman's soul that makes this poem's speaker heroic. As an actual human being, Byron may have been incredibly sensitive to the physical characteristics of people he encountered, and he may have shown great intuition in guessing their personalities from the traits that he observed. Still, he could not have seen this deeply into the spiritual realm, to know the immeasurable aspects that they might not have even known about themselves. Though, as a hero, he could. There are many traits associated with the word "hero," and the variations on the "Byronic hero" are almost too numerous to be useful anymore, but one thing stays consistent: the word "hero" is almost always used for a person who achieves things that ordinary people cannot. The speaker of this poem knows things about the woman that he would not know if he existed in the real world. The fact that he uses this power selflessly, to shower praise on another, is what makes him "heroic" in the conventional sense of the word.

When a poet lives an interesting life, as Lord Byron did, there is a great temptation to read his work in terms of his life. This is especially true when there is at least a little bit known about the inspiration for the poem, as is the case with "She Walks in Beauty." Often, the knowledge about Byron's life is mixed with the concept of the hero that he often projected in his work, and critics will understand a piece of literature through that double filter. Because there is no semblance of the author or of a heroic character in this poem, readers too often tend to interpret it as if it came from outside of the normal range of Byron's work, instead of looking for the ways that it fits in. In fact, "She Walks in Beauty" is as interesting for the things that are not explicitly mentioned, that are only implied, as it is for the technical brilliance and passion it conveys.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "She Walks in Beauty," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Moran is a secondary school teacher of English and American literature. In this essay, he examines the ways in which Byron's poem presents its subject as aesthetically perfect and as a reminder of Byron's own lost innocence.

In Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane,* Mr. Bernstein, a one-time associate of the enigmatic title character, is interviewed by Thompson, the reporter whose quest for the meaning of Kane's final word ("Rosebud") propels the film. Bernstein suggests to Thompson that perhaps "Rosebud" refers to "some girl" from Kane's "early days," only to be told by Thompson that "'it's hardly likely . . . that Mr. Kane could have met some girl casually and then, fifty years later, on his deathbed,'" recall her during his last moments on earth. Bernstein, however, offers an example from his own life to suggest the power of a moment spent in the presence of a certain type of beauty:

A fellow will remember things you wouldn't think he'd remember. You take me. One day, back in 1896, I was crossing over to Jersey on a ferry and as we pulled out there was another ferry pulling in□and on it there was a girl waiting to get off. A white dress she had on□and she was carrying a white parasol□ and I only saw her for a second and she didn't see me at all□but I'll bet a month hasn't gone by since that I haven't thought of that girl.

What specifically fascinated Bernstein about this girl is never revealed, but if the details he offers are to be trusted, her complete innocence (suggested by her white dress and parasol) had something to do with the force of her vision on Bernstein's mind□surely he does not recall her month after month as "the one that got away," or as the fuel for licentious imaginings. The very fact that the girl was completely oblivious to the eyes of men is part of what made her so attractive; had she flirted with Bernstein or otherwise shown her approval of his adoration, the spell would have broken.

A similar phenomenon is dramatized in Byron's "She Walks in Beauty," where the title figure (Byron's cousin by marriage, Mrs. Robert John Wilmot) has no idea she is being watched so attentively or producing a reaction of such intensity. Byron is fascinated by the vision of Wilmot for reasons similar to why Bernstein was fascinated by the girl on the ferry: she is beautiful and her beauty is enriched by her innocence.

The poem presents Wilmot as a woman made beautiful by a perfect combination of opposites, the foremost being that she appears so striking while in mourning, as Wilmot was when Byron had his now famous glimpse of her. Wilmot's grace in mourning only heightens her beauty and ignites Byron's eye, rather than turning it away with the solemnity and sobriety one would expect from a woman in mourning dress. (Funerals, of course, are not thought of as breeding grounds for beauty, nor are mourning clothes worn to accentuate one's physical charms.) Her striking appearance is also the result of perfectly blended opposites: in this case, shades of light and dark. Her dress and "raven" hair are black, yet her skin and eyes are fair, so that "All that's best of dark and bright / Meet in her aspect and her eyes." These contrary attributes are ones not even

found in nature (a longtime poetic standard for beauty), for here they are "mellowed to that tender light / Which heaven to gaudy day denies." The "day" is "gaudy" because it lacks the perfect balance of light and dark that is found in Wilmot—instead, the heavens simply dump an unmeasured heap of light onto the sky and do the opposite with darkness a few hours later. The person with the loudest voice is not, of course, the greatest singer, just as the thing with the greatest amount of light is not the most beautiful. In fact, the combination of light and dark is so perfect in Wilmot that "One shade the more, one ray the less" would destroy the totality of her beauty.

Aesthetically, therefore, she is perfect—but the world is full of beautiful girls whose beauty has been painted by artists even more carefully than by Byron. What makes Wilmot so alluring is the fact that her beauty is the direct result of her purity. Her face is one shaped by a number of "thoughts serenely sweet" that reflect the "pure" and "dear" mind from which they spring; similarly, her "smiles that win" and "tints that glow" are not ones that reveal her desire to capture the hearts of leering men, but instead "tell of days in goodness spent." Just as the physical deformity of Shakespeare's Richard III is meant to suggest his twisted, vile heart, Wilmot's physical beauty is indicative of her moral perfection. Although Wilmot's angelic appearance and soul elevate her to the point where people like Byron are "below" her, she does not find her admirers bothersome: instead, she is "at peace" with her worshippers because of her "heart whose love is innocent" —jealousy, envy, and cunning are not a part of her heart and therefore do not mar her appearance.

Had "She Walks in Beauty" been written by a different poet, the analysis here would most likely be finished. However, the identity of the author complicates matters because of what the world has learned about his mind and passions. Byron was widely described as mad, bad and dangerous to know—an apt description, for Byron stood in his own time (and certainly stands today) as the embodiment of rebellion and dismissal of conventional moral codes—so much so that the term "Byronic hero" has been coined to describe a moody, dark figure without roots or respect for those values held dear by his contemporaries. Byron's promiscuity has been well documented and endlessly discussed by himself and others: his sleeping with his half sister, bisexuality, and (by his own count) over two hundred affairs may shock a reader, but also make "She Walks in Beauty" more moving and complex.

Consider the speaker, then, not only as one who is particularly sensitive to beauty but as Byron, the licentious literary legend. Why would a man so consumed by his own insatiable sexual appetites pause to ponder such a woman? The answer lies in the attraction of the impure for the pure. Now the combinations of light and dark take on added meaning: she possesses a "heart whose love is innocent" but he sees her walking "like the night"— that is, like a woman *of* the night. Her black mourning dress now takes on a significance that she cannot understand (because of her "thoughts serenely sweet") but that he, as one who has lost the capacity or inclination for such "sweet" thoughts, finds alluring. The very fact that the innocent Wilmot could not begin to fathom a mind that would connect the darkness of mourning clothes with the dark thoughts of sexuality makes her all the more rare and alluring to Byron. Unlike Vladimir Nabokov's heroine Lolita, who is quite aware of her own desirability yet teases men with

a pretense of innocence, Wilmot is (at least in Byron's eyes) genuinely innocent and this innocence is what sparks Byron's attraction, fuels his fascination, and elicits his worship.

To appreciate such innocence, the speaker must therefore acknowledge that he has lost this same quality in himself□which Byron did in a number of letters and poems. Abandoning oneself to hedonistic impulses may be liberating or exhilarating, but "She Walks in Beauty" suggests the price of such liberation through its tone of longing and implicit regret for the speaker's own immoral ways. He has been removed forever from the Wilmots of the world. She walks in beauty while he slouches in corruption.

The poem's iambic tetrameter is a meter commonly found in hymns and associated with "sincerity" and "simplicity" (consider Marlow's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," for example), as opposed to iambic pentameter, which is usually used to depict more complex emotions (consider the blank verse of Shakespeare or Milton). Byron's choice of meter reflects his yearning for the simplicity embodied in Wilmot but absent in himself.

Here, the wistful longing of the bad for the good carries with it the sweetness of lyric verse, a sweetness that both praises the observed while condemning the observer.

In his book *Byron and the Spoiler's Art,* Paul West remarks that "Byron's only sincerity seems to be toward emotions he has lost and tries to recapture." Read in this light, "She Walks in Beauty" is both a catalog of aesthetic wonders as well as a psychological study of a person who weeps for the innocence he knows he has lost, and who therefore seeks relief from the pain of such knowledge in his public affirmation of the desirability of purity. His meditation on "A heart whose love is innocent" serves as a means by which a reader can examine his or her own heart and ponder the degree to which it is as innocent as Wilmot's, fouled like Byron's, or somewhere in between.

Source: Daniel Moran, Critical Essay on "She Walks in Beauty," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Kukathas is a freelance writer and editor. In this essay, she argues that Byron's poem is more complex than previous critics have allowed and that it is a poem not only about a beautiful woman but about the power of art to render worldly things immortal.

"She Walks in Beauty" is counted among the best known of Byron's lyrics, and is the most famous of the verses published in his 1815 volume, *Hebrew Melodies* . While critics have admired the poem for its gracefulness, lyricism, and masterful use of internal rhyme□William Dick, for example, writing in *Byron and His Poetry,* calls it a work of "peculiar sweetness and beauty"; in his essay "George Gordon, Lord Byron," Northrop Frye remarks on the work's "caressing rhythm"; and Thomas L. Ashton in *Byron's Hebrew Melodies* points out that it is the "most enjoyed" of all the verses in that early volume□commentators have generally regarded it as a pleasing "mood" piece of no particular intellectual interest. Frye, writing about Byron's lyrical poetry in general, claims that it "contains nothing that 'modern' critics look for: no texture, no ambiguities, no intellectualized ironies, no intensity, no vividness of phrasing, the words and images being vague to the point of abstraction." The poetic emotion in Byron's lyrics, according to Frye, is made out of "worn," "ordinary" language, and he singles out "She Walks in Beauty" for its "flat conventional diction" whose strength lies in its musicality and not its language or ideas. Herbert Read, in *Byron,* offers a similar criticism of the poem, claiming that Byron uses words that are apt to express his thoughts but which lack "originality of . . . application . . . or collocation" and hence do not produce "an essentially somatic thrill of appreciation." Read points out that the poem's references to "cloudless climes" and "starry skies" are obvious clichés, and concludes from this that Byron "was not in the fundamental sense poetic," and certainly not on a par with other "major" English poets.

While it is easy on the one hand to see why these critics regard the poem as they do□it is, after all, a work much of whose charm lies in its simplicity of diction, gentle musical rhythms, and singularity of concern as its offers lavish praise of a beautiful woman□on the other hand, they do not do justice to the subtle complexity of the piece. They overlook the fact that, with his straightforward hymn of adulation to a beautiful woman, Byron might be saying much more□for example, about the nature of art, reality, and immortality□ than at first would be suspected. The critics ignore, too, that the poem manifests the impulse, common among romantic writers, to avoid didacticism, or overt instructional intent, and to communicate human concerns not in the language of reason but of feeling. It is not that the poem does not convey subtle and complex ideas, but rather this is done not in intellectual terms but by calling upon the emotional responses of the reader. Thus it seems unfair and incorrect to regard Byron as "unpoetic" because of the simplicity of expression used in these verses. Although the poem is certainly set forth in the words of plain speech, it can be argued that what Byron does in "She Walks in Beauty" is present in simple, immediate form a wealth of ideas that could not be done justice to in more ambiguous, intellectualized, intense, or vivid language.

The poem, as is well known, was written by Byron after seeing for the first time his cousin, the beautiful Mrs. John Wilmot, at a party. She appeared in a black mourning gown decorated with spangles. The verses, written by Byron the next day, describe and praise a beautiful woman, shrouded in the beauty of the starry night, in idealized, other-worldly terms. It is not just her physical beauty that is exalted, but her "nameless grace," or inner beauty, that is glorified. In the poem, she is associated immediately with a more exotic locale than England, a place of "cloudless climes." The most intense image in the poem is that of light, but it is a different sort of light than is normally associated with heavenly beauty; it is muted or "tender," not the light of "gaudy day," but a light that is fused with darkness. Byron overturns the reader's expectations by associating beauty with darkness rather than light and also by showing how light and darkness merge to create a perfect harmony. The woman's dark hair "lightens o'er her face," and the poet suggests that if she contained within her more darkness or more light, she would be "half impaired," or less than perfect as she is now. She also exudes a nameless grace or indescribable inner loveliness that matches her exterior perfection.

At first reading, it might seem that the poem *is* merely a beautiful tribute to a lovely woman, a poem that is perhaps exceptional because of the interesting use of the images of darkness and light, the harmony of inner and outer beauty, and the rhythmic musicality of the lines, but which does not offer much else of intellectual interest. But, upon closer examination and especially when considered in the context of the volume of verses in which it first appeared, another interpretation suggests itself that shows the poem to be far richer and subtler than most critics have allowed.

Byron certainly thought of the work as significant in some way, as he requested of the songwriter Isaac Nathan, who composed the musical accompaniment for the verses in the *Hebrew Melodies,* that it be the opening poem in any edition of the volume. The *Hebrew Melodies* were not a project that Byron conceived of himself, but the poet was asked by his friend Douglas Kinnaird to collaborate on a volume of verses set to "ancient" Jewish melodies that Nathan would arrange for contemporary performance. "She Walks in Beauty" was actually written in the summer of 1814, some months before Byron was commissioned to write the pieces for Nathan's volume, and its subject matter is certainly not biblical in any way. But, for some reason, Byron considered the poem to be a fitting overture to the volume of poems. One possible reason for this, suggested by Frederick W. Shilstone in *Byron and the Myth of Tradition,* is that Byron considered the *Hebrew Melodies* to be more than simply a work about the history of the Jews, but also about the mystical power of music and, ultimately, of art. The poems in that volume, according to Shilstone, are very different, some treating biblical and other purely secular themes, but what they have in common is a concern with earthly life, immortality, and art□especially how poetry takes the materials of the real and physical world and renders them immortal.

If Byron considered "She Walks in Beauty" to be so central to the *Hebrew Melodies* that he insisted it be the lead poem in every edition of the work, it seems reasonable to suppose that he thought it embodied many of that volume's most important ideas. And, if Shilstone is correct and a concern with the power of art is at the heart of the work, this suggests an interpretation that in describing the idealized "she" of the poem, Byron was

not merely honoring a beautiful woman but also offering a hymn of praise to a personification of art, and of poetry in particular. That is, Byron, in praising and describing the lovely Mrs. Wilmot, is also praising and describing what he thinks of as the power of art and poetry. This is certainly supported by the text itself if art (or poetry) is thought of as being something that is not only bright and illuminating but also dark and mysterious. Poetry is not only beautiful for what it shows but for what it hides, as it casts light on certain ideas but also leaves some things up to the imagination of the reader. Poetry too can be thought of as having the internal and external beauty that is mentioned in the poem as well as a perfect balance of what is revealed (light) and what is concealed (darkness) to convey meaning. It has a "nameless grace" that would be impaired if the combination of illumination and concealment of ideas were different than it is. All art has an inner quality that cannot be described and that would be impaired if the artist were to have made any part of it differently. If art and poetry are seen in this way, they clearly fit in with and may be seen as being personified by the beautiful woman of Byron's poem.

In his description of Mrs. Wilmot, Byron takes a character from real life and, with his words, elevates her until she becomes immortal. He describes her in terms that are not of this world, declaring that "all that's best" of dark and bright meet in her person, that she displays a perfect balance of darkness and light, that her mind is pure and at peace, and that her heart is innocent. This, then, is the power that poetry has, as it takes something from the earthly world and renders it immortal. A mortal woman is described in the words of the poet and is elevated to a divine status. In the same breath, Byron uses the poem in which the woman is immortalized by poetry to offer his own hymn to poetry.

According to this reading of "She Walks in Beauty," most critics have been too dismissive of the lyric as being one-dimensional when it can be seen to have considerable depth of meaning. Some might complain that the reading presented here is not plausible, and that to see the poem as being a praise of poetry itself is not suggested by the simple language and thoughts presented in it. However, if it is remembered that one of the goals of the romantic poets was to convey ideas not only through rational means but by conveying feelings and moods, offering insights into the world of nature and art through the most simple aspects of human experience, it seems entirely possible that with his straightforward, plainly written poem, Byron was calling upon the emotional response and imagination of the reader to see beyond the description of other-worldly beauty and recognize the force that renders such things immortal. Indeed it is by using the simplest of words and ideas, unhindered by intellectualized concerns, that the poet can convey such pure emotion and invite the reader to move beyond the overt description of the poem and recognize its other possibilities.

Source: Uma Kukathas, Critical Essay on "She Walks in Beauty," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

Learning Corp. of America has a video, released in 1971, entitled *Romanticism: The Revolt of Spirit* . It is a part of their "Shaping of the Western World" series, and examines the breadth of romanticism in music, art, and literature.

A video called *The Bad Lord Byron* examines the poet's life through a mock trial. This 1949 feature film was released on videocassette in 1994 by Hollywood Select Video. It stars Dennis Price, Mai Zitterling, and Wilfred Hyde-White.

Byron: Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know is a documentary based on the poet's correspondences with his publisher. It was released on videocassette in 1993 by Films for the Humanities and Sciences.

Monterrey Home Video's 1993 title *The Glorious Romantics: A Poetic Return to the Regency* has actors playing Byron, Keats, Shelley, and others. It is part of the Public Broadcasting System's "Anyone for Tennyson?" series.

"She Walks in Beauty" is included with other love poems on a compact disc from Naxos Audiobooks called *A Lover's Gift from Him to Her,* released in 1999.

HarperCollins Audio Books released an unabridged selection of *Lord Byron's Poetry* on audiocassette in 1999, read by Linus Roache.

Frederick Davidson reads Byron's poetry on *Lord Byron: Selected Poems,* a two-cassette package released by Blackstone Audio Books in 1992.

"She Walks in Beauty" is one of the love poems included on the Capitol Records compact disc *Beauty and the Beast: Of Love and Hope* . Based on the television program of the same name, it was released in 1989.

Dove Audio has a number of famous actors reading on a 1997 cassette entitled *The Poetry of the Romantics* . It includes works by Keats, Byron, Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Blake.

Topics for Further Study

Can a person's spiritual goodness make them physically beautiful? Give examples of qualities you feel would make a person beautiful and explain why.

Try to draw a picture of what you imagine the woman in this poem to be like, taking care to include what details Lord Byron gives about her, but also giving your own interpretation of her beauty.

This poem is written in a very common metric scheme, iambic tetrameter. Try to find a contemporary song that you like that fits this meter and sing this poem to that music.

Find pictures of a male and female from the early nineteenth century. How have standards of beauty changed from Byron's time to our own?

In his lifetime, Byron was notorious for his love affairs and for flaunting the conventions of society in the name of art. Read some biographical material about him, then write a paper comparing him to someone who is in the news today.

Compare and Contrast

1815: The world's political powers are in a state of change. The French army of Napoleon Bonaparte is defeated by the British at Waterloo, ending his dominance of Europe, while the British army is defeated in the Battle of New Orleans, establishing America's control of the continent.

Today: The major military powers seldom come into direct conflict with each other, although they do take sides in the conflicts of smaller nations.

1815: A woman in mourning for a dead relative is expected to wear black for at least a year and to stay out of public social situations for at least that long.

Today: Social conventions for how a person should express her or his grief have less stringent rules.

1815: A London banker is able to get news of Napoleon's defeat days before the newspapers have the information because he has associates send the report by carrier pigeon.

Today: Cell phones and e-mail transmit information around the globe instantly.

1815: Sources of artificial light are gas lanterns (in the wealthier homes) and candles.

Today: Most homes and streets are lit with electrical light.

What Do I Read Next?

Oxford World's Classics has an affordable, scholarly paperback edition of Byron's poetry published under the title *Lord Byron: The Major Works* (2000).

Byron's friend Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote an essay that captured the artistic theory of that whole age of romantic poets. Entitled "A Defence of Poetry," the essay examines the various functions of reason and imagination in the poet's work. It was originally published in 1821 and is reprinted at http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/rp/criticism/shell_il.html (last accessed August, 2001).

Harvard University Press has collected the poet's most important personal writings in the 1984 collection *Lord Byron: Selected Letters and Journals,* edited by Leslie A. Marchand.

One of the most influential recent books about romanticism is by influential critic Northrop Frye, whose short 1968 book *A Study of English Romanticism* gives an excellent quick background to the cultural movement that is almost always mentioned along with Keats's name.

Fact and fiction are mixed together in Tom Holland's imaginative 1998 novel *Lord of the Dead: The Secret History of Byron* . Lord Byron is presented as a vampire.

Further Study

Bernbaum, Ernest, *Guide through the Romantic Movement,* The Ronald Press Co., 1949.

Bernbaum's work includes many minor figures from the Age of Romanticism, giving readers a better sense of the time than they might have gotten from just reading the standard synopses of the age.

Bostetter, Edward E., *The Romantic Ventriloquists: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, and Byron,* University of Washington Press, 1963.

The tone of this study is a little dry, but Bosetter captures the important details of Byron's life.

Christensen, Jerome, *Lord Byron's Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society,* Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

Christensen presents a study of the poet's career using modern marketing theory.

Levine, Alice, "Byron and the Romantic Composer," in *Lord Byron and His Contemporaries,* edited by Charles E. Robinson, University of Delaware Press, 1982, pp. 178-203.

Since this poem was originally published with others that were to be put to music, Levine's detailed search for musical inspirations and derivations is entirely relevant.

Rutherford, Andrew, *Byron: A Critical Study,* Stanford University Press, 1961.

Rutherford looks at Byron's life and works simultaneously as a career, breaking it into two at the year 1817. Much of this complex work gives background that readers of this poem might find too detailed.

Wain, John, "The Search for Identity," in *Byron,* edited by Paul West, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963, pp. 157-70.

The author examines the poet's persona and the underlying psychology of his most famous works.

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Read, Herbert, *Byron,* The British Council, 1951, p. 24.

Review of "Hebrew Melodies," in *Augustan Review,* Volume 1, July, 1815, reprinted in *The Romantics Reviewed, Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers: Byron and Regency Society Poets,* edited by Donald H. Reiman, Garland Publishing, 1972, pp. 57-60.

Shilstone, Frederick W., *Byron and the Myth of Tradition,* University of Nebraska Press, 1988.

West, Paul, *Byron and the Spoiler's Art,* Lumen Books, 1992, p. 23.

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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.

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