Song of the Chattahoochee Study Guide

Song of the Chattahoochee by Sidney Lanier

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Introduction

Sidney Lanier composed "Song of the Chattahoochee" in November 1877 for a small paper in West Point, Georgia; nonetheless, at the time he considered it the best poem he had ever written, and critics have generally agreed that it is one of his finer efforts. Originally from Macon, Georgia, Lanier travelled much in Georgia, Maryland, Florida, and North Carolina for employment and for his health. He fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War and was eventually captured by Union troops. He spent the rest of the war in prison, where he relieved his own sufferings and those of his fellow prisoners with melodious tunes on the flute he had taught himself to play when he was younger. But unfortunately, he contracted tuberculosis, and he spent the rest of his life trying unsuccessfully to restore himself to good health. These circumstances travel, flute-playing, military discipline, and a keen awareness of his own mortality may account for the major elements of his poetry : nature, music, moral duty, and religion. Lanier was able to see much of the South's natural beauty, and he found much religious and spiritual significance in it. As a poet, he is regarded as a minor writer in American literature whose prime contribution was to lyrical or musical poetry in the tradition of the American poet Edgar Allan Poe and the English poet Alfred Tennyson. "Song of the Chattahoochee" is primarily a musical poem whose words flow very much like the river that is its speaker. The river's aim is to do its duty, answering the call of God.

Author Biography

Lanier was born in 1842 and raised in Macon, Georgia, the son of R. Sampson Lanier, a lawyer, and Mary Jane Anderson Lanier. His family enjoyed a long tradition of involvement in music and the arts, and Lanier read much of his family's extensive library before attending Oglethrope College, a local Presbyterian institution, in 1857. At school he came under the tutelage of Professor James Woodrow, a natural scientist educated at the University of Heidelberg, Germany. Woodrow encouraged his protege's interest in the German Romantic writers and fostered in Lanier an enthusiasm for nature and science that would inform his poetry and criticism. Following graduation, Lanier first wanted to earn a doctorate at Heidelberg University, but the outbreak of the Civil War obliged him to join the Macon Volunteers, a company of Confederate Army soldiers. During his service, Lanier developed tuberculosis, a condition that left him in poor health for the rest of his life.

In 1873, concerned that his life would be shortened by illness and convinced that, for aspiring writers in the South, "the whole of life had been merely not dying," Lanier resolved to move to the North and dedicate his life to music and literature. He went to Baltimore and began writing poetry that embodied some of his ideas about the relationship between music and verse. His interest in music□ Lanier played several instruments□led him to join the Peabody Orchestra as their first flutist. Lanier also wrote numerous pieces for flute. In 1876, he was commissioned to write the text for a cantata to be composed by Dudley Buck and performed at the opening of the national Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia. From 1878 to 1881, Lanier gave a series of lectures at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore on such topics as the works of William Shakespeare and the development of the English novel. Because of recurring financial problems, Lanier also wrote a travel guide to Florida and edited four books for boys. In August 1881, seeking relief from recurring attacks of tuberculosis, Lanier moved to Lynn, North Carolina, where he died later that year.

Poem Text

Out of the hills of Habersham,
Down the valleys of Hall,
I hurry amain to reach the plain,
Run the rapid and leap the fall,
Split at the rock and together again,
Accept my bed, or narrow or wide,
And flee from folly on every side
With a lover's pain to attain the plain
Far from the hills of Habersham,
Far from the valleys of Hall.

All down the hills of Habersham,
All through the valleys of Hall,
The rushes cried, *Abide, abide*,
The willful water weeds held me thrall,
The laving laurel turned my tide,
The ferns and the fondling grass said, *Stay*,
The dewberry dipped for to work delay,
And the little reeds sighed, *Abide, abide*,
Here in the hills of Habersham,
Here in the valleys of Hall.

High o'er the hills of Habersham,
Veiling the valleys of Hall,
The hickory told me manifold
Fair tales of shade, the poplar tall
Wrought me her shadowy self to hold,
The chestnut, the oak, the walnut, the pine,
Overleaning, with flickering meaning and sign,
Said, *Pass not, so cold, these manifold
Deep shades of the hills of Habersham*,
These glades in the valleys of Hall.

And oft in the hills of Habersham,
And oft in the valleys of Hall,
The white quartz shone, and the smooth
brook-stone
Did bar me of passage with friendly brawl,
And many a luminous jewel lone
□Crystals clear or a-cloud with mist,
Ruby, garnet, and amethyst□
Made lures with the lights of streaming stone
In the clefts of the hills of Habersham,

In the beds of the valleys of Hall.

But oh, not the hills of Habersham,
And oh, not the valleys of Hall
Avail: I am fain for to water the plain.
Downward the voices of Duty call□
Downward, to toil and be mixed with the main,
The dry fields burn, and the mills are to turn,
And a myriad flowers mortally yearn,
And the lordly main from beyond the plain
Calls o'er the hills of Habersham,
Calls through the valleys of Hall.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-10

The Chattahoochee River begins in the Blue Ridge Mountains of northeast Georgia, in Habersham County, and flows into Hall County (where the Buford Dam has since created Lake Lanier named for the poet). From there, it flows southwest through Atlanta to Alabama, where it turns south, forming the Georgia-Alabama border. It ends at the southwest corner of Georgia bordering Florida, in another recently created lake, Lake Seminole, having watered the East Gulf Coastal Plain. Naturally, during its course, the river includes rapids and waterfalls, and its bed narrows and widens.

Line 3

The "I" of line 3 is the river itself. Lanier uses personification to turn the poem into an allegory of a person motivated by love ("a lover's pain") to resist temptations ("flee from folly") and do his duty, which is to water the plain. Lanier thus gives the river's flow moral significance and provides a lesson for human readers. The music of the poem echoes its sense here in that "Hurry amain" can be read hurriedly. Additional music is added by the internal rhyme of "amain" with the end rhyme "plain."

Line 4

This line is a masterful example of onomatopoeia, the sound of words imitating their sense. The alliteration of the r's mimics the roughness of rapids. Also, after the word "run," a slight pause slows the line to imitate hitting a rock, and "the rapid and leap" can be read rapidly to mimic the water returning to its uninterrupted course. A short pause at "leap" imitates an actual leap as the water goes over a waterfall. Soundwise, the line leaps from an initial "l" and high pitched "e" sound in "leap" to the lower "a" sound (as in a sigh: "Aaaaah") and concluding "l" sound of "fall."

Line 6

"Or narrow or wide" is an old-fashioned poetic way of saying "whether narrow or wide."

Lines 11-20

One of the major features of allegories is that the main character overcomes obstacles and temptations to achieve virtue. The first set of obstacles are literally various plants growing or trailing their branches in the river. But allegorically, they refer to the pleasures of the senses. Whatever the specific meaning of each plant (assuming meant

it to have one), the foliage are those common to the river; they do interfere with the river's duty, and they demonstrate Lanier's tendency to see spiritual meaning in nature.

Line 13

Rushes are grasses with hollow stems that grow mostly in marshy areas. Being a flute player who made his own flutes, Lanier may mean these plants and the reeds in line 18 to suggest the pleasures of music.

Line 14

The "willful water weeds" hold the river "thrall" (that is, in slavery). Weeds are traditionally reputed to be stubborn and unwanted plants, and they may be clogging the river's bed.

Line 15

The laurel is a small evergreen tree. The ancient Romans crowned victors of battles and athletic contests with its branches as a sign of honor. The temptation here may be to rest on one's laurels (that is, to be satisfied with what one has already achieved).

Line 16

Ferns are plants common to warm, moist, or swampy areas, with long triangular fronds. The grass, which is said to be "fondling," may represent sensual or carnal pleasures.

Line 17

The dewberry is a kind of blackberry and may represent the pleasures of food.

Lines 19-20

Lanier does in these two lines what he tries to do with each of the Habersham and Hall refrains; he uses alliteration, the repetition of initial consonant sounds in "Here," "Habersham," and "Hall." And he uses consonance, the repetition of other consonants such as the "l" sound in "hills," "valleys," and "Hall." And he uses assonance such as "a" sounds in "Habersham" and "valleys." Together, they create an effect called syzygy, when the poet tries to put as many similar sounds as possible into the lines without disturbing the sense with tongue twisters such as "she sells seashells by the seashore."

Lines 21-30

The next group of obstacles are trees common to the region. Georgia was and still is a major lumber producing state. The literal image here is of light and shadow among the branches, along the bank, and in the reflection of the trees on the waters (the "shadowy self" the river is "to hold"). The allegorical image is of the trees as persons distracting the speaker with imagined pleasures.

Lines 23-25

The hickory tells many ("manifold") beautiful stories about resting. The poplar invites an embrace, not of her real self, but of her image, the reflection in the water.

Lines 26-28

The other trees make other indefinite suggestions inviting the speaker not to be "so cold" but to be warm, perhaps, and friendly. "Flickering meaning and sign" may literally refer to the lights and shadows created by the trees blowing in the wind and reflecting on the surface of the river's waves.

Lines 29-30

"Shades" can be used to refer to ghosts, but here it may merely suggest the ghostly nature of tales, reflections, and images of light and shadow.

Lines 31-40

The final group of obstacles are literally minerals common to the region□quartz, rubies, garnets, and amethyst□all used as gemstones. Rubies and garnets are red, and amethyst is frequently a deep purple. Allegorically, they are temptations to be greedy and may illustrate Lanier's dislike of trade and materialism.

Line 34

"Friendly brawl" is an oxymoron since a brawl is a fight and cannot normally be said to be friendly. Lanier may mean to refer to the conflict in capitalism between the friendly manner of salespeople and their competitive aim to profit from a good trade.

Lines 35-41

The image in the last two lines to cleavage ("clefts") and "beds" may read as a euphemism for the seductive powers of wealth, with the "streaming stones" being a

necklace dangling upon a woman's breast as a "lure" to pleasure. "Lure" also suggests fishing; she may be baiting the river.

Lines 41-50

The river overcomes its obstacles and flows over Georgia's East Gulf Coastal Plain. At this point, the Chattahoochee becomes known as the Apalachicola River, flowing into the Gulf of Mexico and then into the ocean.

Line 43

"Fain" is an ambiguous word here since it can mean both "glad" and "forced."

Line 44

"Downward" can have two senses here: the voices are from above calling down, and the voices call the river to flow down, as all waters do because of gravity. The voices of the personification of Duty overcome the earlier voices of the rushes, reeds, and trees.

Lines 45-48

The waters of the river do the work of watering the fields and the flowers so that they do not burn in the hot, Georgia sun and die of thirst, and turning the waterwheels of mills. A waterwheel has paddles that make cups which fill with water, and the weight of the water pulls one side of the wheel down so that other cups at the top turn up to fill with water while cups at the bottom turn down to empty back into the river.

Lines 48-50

The last three lines indicate another calling voice, usually interpreted as that of the ocean, "the lordly main from beyond the plain," but also as God, due to the word "lordly" and because the poem is often read as an allegory of the soul's progress to reunion with the deity. The repetition of the word "calls" is a particularly effective use of onomatopoeia and repetition, since the two "calls" suggest the sound of calls echoing through the valley.

Themes

Nature

In "Song of the Chattahoochee," the Chattahoochee River in Georgia describes for readers its journey, from its headspring in Habersham county to its end in Georgia's East Gulf coastal plains, where, in Lanier's time, it fed into another river that led to the Gulf of Mexico. Lanier's style in this poem copies the rushing, shifting, gurgling motion of a true river, giving readers a little bit of the experience of following the water on its journey. He gives the river a human personality, ascribing to it human motivation. This helps to make this natural phenomenon more understandable to people who are not familiar with it and to make readers who are familiar with rivers experience the feeling of them anew.

The river is introduced as being on a mission, to water the dry fields of Georgia and to turn the water wheels that power the grain mills. Similarly, the other natural objects that the Chattahoochee passes seem to have a human motivation. They all want the river to stop, or "abide." Most of the natural objects in the poem are presented as calling for the river to stop its motion. The waterweeds hold the river, the trees command "pass not," the gemstones try to lure it to stay with them, etc. Nature, in general, is presented as favoring passive behavior over action. The river is presented here as an exception to nature, as being almost unnatural in its rush to keep on moving. This idea is supported by the fact that the river's "Duty" (which is capitalized in the poem, to show its connection to God's will) is not to aid nature, but to aid humanity in the commercial enterprises of farming and milling. The river, though natural, rushes like a human in order to fulfill its human responsibilities.

Music

One of the aspects of Lanier's poetry that is most often mentioned is his devotion to the idea of a poem's musical nature being used to capture the natural world in words. This is very evident in "Song of the Chattahoochee." His repetition of specific phrases, rhythms, and sounds is used to connect the motion of a flowing river to the way the human mind understands the harmonies and melodies of music. Lanier was a composer who wrote music for different instruments, but in particular he worked with the flute, and it is the sound of the flute that this poem most resembles: there are individual syllables, like notes, but they flow together fluidly, just like the tone of a flute or the motion of a river.

Like a piece of music, "Song of the Chattahoochee" has a refrain that is repeated often, with only slight variation. In instrumental music, which does not use words to completely show its ideas, the use of a refrain helps to keep listeners aware of one outstanding mood, even while other thoughts are explored. Lanier uses the refrain for a similar effect here. There is no concrete, definable significance to the poem's constant reminder that

the river begins in the hills of Habersham and the valleys of Hall. The mention of these facts at the beginning and end of each stanza serves to balance the rest of the poem. This is a poem about motion, about the river's inability to remain in any one place, and Lanier uses the refrain (repetition) to bring readers back to the river's original source, even as a musical refrain might be used to take listeners back to a composition's main idea.

Quest

This poem presents the idea that the river might travel from its source to its end to reach its final goal when it finally arrives. The river knows that at the end there are dry fields, parched flowers and mills that cannot be set into motion without its powerful force. Lines 48 and 49 reveal how the Chattahoochee would know that it must go on this journey, and what lies at the end. The "lordly main," presumably the ocean, has called out to it over the miles that separated them. Lanier presents the river's journey as a quest (pursuit) to bring water to those suffering in the dry plains of the south.

Like most quests in literature, the one the river undergoes takes it through a series of obstacles that try to distract it from its goal. Some offer only mild resistance, like the rushes that gently call "abide." As the river progresses, however, and its force increases, the strength of the opposition increases too. The trees of the third stanza stand more firmly than the various soft plants that precede them in the poem, and the stones in the stanza that follows are even more resistant to the river's force. In the ordinary, everyday way of looking at things, water running over stones is a passive event, but as Lanier presents it here the river urgently needs to reach its final destination, in fulfillment of its quest.

Permanence

In addition to the two lines that, with some variation, begin and end each stanza, the one phrase that is repeated in this poem is "abide, abide." It is spoken twice in the second stanza, by the rushes and the reeds, and it is the feeling that is expressed in different words by all of the other natural pat- terns that the Chattahoochee passes. It is as if the other parts of nature, lacking human consciousness as they are, have no fonder wish than to freeze time. It is only the river that acts as an agent of change in this poem.

In the larger sense, though, the river's situation is also frozen in time because it is forever flowing from Habersham to the "main" that is mentioned in the final stanza. While any particular portion of water keeps in motion, the river as a whole retains the same shape year after year. This is an aspect of the river that is not examined in this poem, though. Lanier presents the theme of change versus permanence as being one of the river in conflict with the various aspects of the surrounding countryside, not as the different aspects of the river in conflict against each other.

Style

"Song of the Chattahoochee," as the title suggests, is a song. Lanier tries to make the sounds of words have the rhythm and tonal qualities of musical notes. Soon after completing "Song of the Chattahoochee," Lanier wrote a book on poetic theory called *The Science of English Verse* (1880). In this volume, he embraces a poetry based on time and rhythm rather than one based on accented and unaccented syllables. He scanned lines of poetry using musical notes to indicate the length of each syllable. Lanier broke up his lines into measures or bars, which he further broke down into groups of three or four notes. The musical nature of "Song of the Chattahoochee" is enhanced by the repetition of a slightly varying phrase at the beginning and end of each stanza. This phrase, or refrain, refers to the hills of Habersham and the valleys of Hall and frames the middle six lines of each stanza. These six lines describe the various natural things that the river encounters, including weeds, trees, and rocks. Lanier also uses rhyme to give the poem a musical sound. If we diagram the pattern of rhymes created by the last words in each line of the stanzas, the rhyme scheme appears as *abcbcddcab*. In addition to this intricate pattern, Lanier also employs internal rhyme, meaning that words within a single line rhyme with one another. An example of this occurs in line 3:

I hurry amain to reach the plain,

The words "amain" and "plain" create an internal rhyme, and the repeating sound is further amplified because "plain" is an end-rhyming word that will be echoed in other lines in the stanza.

Historical Context

"Song of the Chattahoochee" was published in 1877, just twelve years after the end of the Civil War. As for Sidney Lanier, who contracted tuberculosis while being held prisoner by the Union Army, the effects of the war were felt throughout the rest of his life.

Most history books explain the Civil War in terms of the differing attitudes that the two sides had regarding the enslavement of black people. It is true that the Confederacy of the South wished to continue slavery and that the Union of the North wished to abolish it, but that is just one of the relevant differences that led the two sides to violent conflict. Many Northerners opposed slavery, but even more did not care about the rights of black people, or at least did not care enough to engage in a war over the issue. Slavery was just the most visible issue to force an open conflict over the different lifestyles led in the two sections of the country.

Slavery existed in the American colonies for more than two hundred years before the war. In 1641, Massachusetts became the first colony to recognize slavery. The continent was settled with the labor of slaves brought from other countries, primarily Africa, specifically to be sold to landowners as laborers. By 1750, when Georgia, the last of the British colonies, was established, slavery was legal in all thirteen of them. After the American Revolution ended in 1783, the movement to abolish slavery gained momentum in the North, especially around Massachusetts. One noticeable reason was that the Northern states had more of an influence from the Puritans, who had left England to avoid religious persecution. Their religious heritage left a small amount of moral discourse in the way political issues were addressed. A more compelling reason why the North turned against slavery had to do with geography and basic economics. Northern states, more rocky and cold, did not have the land for huge farms that the South did. The Northern economy came to be based on factory production and small farms, neither of which benefited from unskilled slave labor.

As the country expanded west, the two sides of the slavery issue became more and more firm in their convictions. In the Northern states where slavery had been abolished, generations of white families grew up outraged at the way they saw black people being treated by slave owners. In the South, however, generations of whites grew up among the black families that they owned, and they resented Northerners for trying to butt into their way of life. As each new state was added to the United States, the question came up again about whether slavery would be permitted there or not.

The country split apart in 1860, after South Carolina seceded from the United States to protest the election of Abraham Lincoln, who opposed slavery. It was joined the following year by several other Southern states, and they combined to form the Confederate States of America. Lincoln was unwilling to let these states form a new country, leading to four years of armed conflict. Most of the battles of the Civil War were fought in the South. Before the South surrendered, the losses were heavy: not only had 134,000 Southern soldiers died (as compared to 646,000 deaths on the Northern, Union

side), but the plantations were destroyed in battle and the economic structure was decimated by the loss of slavery. It is only in recent decades that the South has become powerful again, as industries flocked to the Sun Belt to take advantage of inexpensive labor during the economic recession of the 1970s.

After the Civil War, Southern culture was largely nostalgic for the splendor of the days gone by, and this nostalgia or home-sickness is reflected in the tone of "Song of the Chattahoochee." To this day, the huge plantation houses built during the booming Southern economy of the early 1800s are referred to as reflecting or mirroring the "antebellum" style. The word technically refers to the period before any war, but it is most associated with the South of nearly a century and a half ago.

To Lanier's generation, the South's glory days were just a memory. Poverty replaced splendor, and those who once held political power were forced to take orders from poor, ignorant opportunists from the North, called "carpetbaggers" because they arrived in the South with cheap luggage looking for political appointments that would give them power over the defeated Confederates. In focusing on the willfulness and unstoppable force of the Chattahoochee River, Lanier focused on one of the few things that had not been destroyed by the war: nature itself. The personality that he gives the river reflects prewar Southern boldness, giving this poem special significance to his contemporaries.

In the 1950s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built a dam across the Chattahoochee near Atlanta to hold back its water and irrigate the nearby valley. The water that is held back formed a lake, which in 1957 was named Lake Sidney Lanier, in honor of the poet. Today, the lake is one of the area's most popular recreation attractions, with 30,000 surface acres of water and 540 miles of shoreline.

Critical Overview

Sidney Lanier's literary reputation rises and falls to the degree that critics value musical poetry. The criticism on "Song of the Chattahoochee" illustrates this battle of fashions. Critics at the end of the nineteenth century valued Lanier's melodious verse highly. Asserting that Lanier wrote better when he wrote unself-consciously, Edmund Clarence Stedman says that "Song of the Chattahoochee" is one of the poems that show Lanier's poetic gifts "unadulterated by meditations on rhythmical structure," and he calls it "almost as haunting as [Edgar Allan Poe's] 'Ulalume.'" Charles Kent calls the poem "one of the most musical of English poems," remarking on the frequent use of alliteration, internal rhyme, and syzygy, or the repetition of similar sounds, both consonants and vowels, throughout neighboring words. He concludes that "The effect of the whole is musical beyond description. It sings itself and yet nowhere sacrifices the thought."

Twentieth-century critics are not always so generous. When they concentrate on Lanier's imagery and technical skills, they tend to find the images and the thought unclear, and the quality of the music uneven. Lanier disappoints those who expect highly intellectual poetry. Lanier's most definitive biographer, Aubrey Harrison Starke, says that "Song of the Chattahoochee" is "far from a great poem." He points out the poem's weaknesses: too little variation in music and rhythm, some awkwardly constructed sentences, and the word "brawl" in the fourth stanza used in an unusual way. He also comments, "Nor is the apparent fact of gravitation a fitting symbol of devotion to duty and of the sacrifice of individuality in merging it in a larger individuality." Critics often wish to apologize for Lanier. Richard Webb writes that Lanier might have written better if his health were not so bad and his need for money so pressing in the devastated economy of the post-Civil War South, but he nonetheless finds Lanier's imagery unclear and his musical effects strained.

The more positive critiques of the poem concentrate on its musical and spiritual effects. Lincoln Lorenz reads the poem as an appreciation of the harmony of nature inspired by the friendly Creek Indians, who "bequeathed to the Georgia settler something of both [their] religious veneration for the forces of nature and [their] musical names for her rivers." Jay B. Hubbell says that "Song of the Chattahoochee" is one of "a handful of poems which give [Lanier] a secure place among American poets," and he ranks Lanier third in importance behind Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson in post-Civil-War, nineteenth-century American poetry.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an English instructor at two colleges in Illinois. In the following essay, he explores Lanier's poem as a sad reminder of man's dominance over nature that remains effective to this day.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Sidney Lanier was one of America's best-known poets, included in all of the standard poetry collections. Even during his lifetime, he had been a controversial choice, mocked by critics almost as much as he was admired, but he was never left out. Fashions change, however; today, only a couple of Lanier's poems are likely to be remembered or studied. "Song of the Chattahoochee" is probably his most lasting work. This would be a surprise to his harshest critics, who from its first publication found the poem to be both light in ideas and heavyhanded in its performance. But it is the poem's simple obviousness, to a large extent, that has enabled it to survive. One does not have to be a specialist in reading poetry to understand it. New readers do not need to know of Lanier's musical experience to appreciate the musicality of his words, and most will, even without explanation, catch the way that the poetic lines resemble the flow and eddy of run- ning water. "Song of the Chattahoochee" is a good poem for people to practice on as they are learning what poetry can do, but it is generally not considered important for what it has to say.

It is unlikely, though, that the poem would have endured into the twenty-first century on just the basis of its clever imitation of river sounds. The story that it tells should be given more credit than it generally receives. It has the elements of drama and suspense that keep the most compelling stories alive for generation after generation. The river keeps pushing forward, the Georgian region keeps pulling at it, and readers are left interested in seeing how this conflict will turn out. The poem has a sense of homesickness for a slower, sleepier time, a time that becomes more lost to humanity (and therefore more nostalgic) with every passing day. Both of these elements, suspense and nostalgia, add up to a pronounced struggle between the pre-industrial world and the busy world as it stands right now. As long as there is some sense of nature, visible from a car window or on the Nature Channel, this is a struggle that people will understand deep in their souls.

The misleading thing about "Song of the Chattahoochee" is that, even though the river is a natural thing, and even though Lanier's musical awareness caused him to portray its old-fashioned style, the river does not function as a thing of nature. In fact, in this poem, it functions as nature's antithesis, the social force that overcomes nature. A look at the final stanza reveals that the river's great hurry is to water the fields, turn the mills, and raise up drying flowers. Today, these are recognized as society's functions. The business that compels the Chattahoochee to race through the countryside in the poem is agribusiness and food processing. People no longer expect nature to take care of these tasks anymore.

This is not a prophetic poem that claims to foretell the future, but it is hardly likely that Sidney Lanier did not see the new world that was coming. He was a wistful, (yearning, melancholy) backwards-looking writer at a most interesting time in American history.

Raised in the calm, solemn old South that was comfortable with centuries of tradition, he was painfully familiar with the changes brought on by the Civil War. His year as a prisoner of war left Lanier a broken man with ruined health, just as the terms of the Surrender at Appomattox left the South weak, helpless, and at the mercy of the Industrial Age.

In his 1933 biography of Lanier, Aubrey Harrison Starke pointed out that the poet was one of many who, in 1877, believed that industrialization had been the South's "undoing." The industrial craze that swept across the globe in the last half of the nineteenth century was basically a Northern concern: the South's economy was mostly agricultural. The different views eventually led to war, and the South lost, leaving no choice but to accept the new values of the victors. Industrialization meant timetables, increases in production expectations, and a fast-paced but dissatisfying lifestyle. It meant a step away from nature.

If one judged only by the last stanza, then it might be considered a bit of a stretch to claim that the Chattahoochee River represents industrialization in this poem. The opposite interpretation could also be drawn from this stanza. It could be argued that, in having the river irrigate or water the fields and power the mill, Lanier was pointing out how nature was better than industry at being able to take care of itself. This theory does not hold, though, when the rest of the poem is taken into account.

The single clearest idea imparted by "Song of the Chattahoochee" is that the river is racing past the wonders of the natural world. The verbs that Lanier uses in the first stanza alone show the river breezing along recklessly: "hurry," "run," and "flee." Critics have pointed out that Lanier chose many of his words because of their sound. It is true that the stanza has several other verbs, such as "split" and "attain," that do not show this sense of furious motion. Still, there is no denying the feeling that the river in this poem is too busy to focus on anything besides its business. Readers can speculate about what the calling "voices of Duty" in line 44 might represent, but it is clear that the river is following some kind of call. It is not self-motivated, but is instead pushed into action by some outside force. Given the changes happening in the South during Lanier's time, it does not take much of a stretch to relate this outside force to the Industrial Revolution.

The poem is able to tap into true emotion, even for modern readers, with its melancholy descriptions of the things of nature being left behind. It constantly brings up hills and valleys, calling for an open view of the natural landscape, reminding readers of nature's majesty. Between the hills and valleys, though, Lanier provides details about the river's bed that stir up a sense of loss as the river rushes by them. He builds up from the simplest (the reeds) to the most enduring (the stones). He colors his descriptions with reminders of the Bible, such as the rushes (which figure into the story of Moses) and the archaic phrase "abide," and the river's Duty to toil in the plain. And through it all, Lanier packs a tremendous amount of detail into each line, naming specific plants and trees and shrubs, causing one to have a sense of a real place.

What is surprising in a poem that speaks so lovingly about stationary objects is that it does not show faith in them to capture readers' hearts on their own. This is not a poem that asks its readers to drink in, savor, or appreciate the experience of the places to which it takes them. It is instead a poem that uses all of its mental pictures in the course of making a higher point, much as the river passes by all of these natural objects in the course of fulfilling its higher Duty.

Lanier has constructed "Song of the Chattahoochee" in the shape of a classical, five-paragraph essay, the type that teachers have beginning composition students use to present their thoughts. The introductory and concluding stanzas raise and then repeat the thematic (topic) idea that the river is rushing to fulfill its responsibility, and the three "body" stanzas that fall in between build one upon the other, each adding new evidence to make the author's point clearer. The supreme balance of using three developmental stanzas□not two or four□gives a sense of order, implying that all that is going on in nature is intentionally organized, presumably by God. Critics often examine the word choices that Lanier used, and their criticisms of him have often pointed out the fact that mimicking the sound of a flowing river, though a nice little trick, is not necessarily what a poem should be trying so hard to do. They seldom give appreciation for the control that the poet exercises over the structure of the entire piece, from the first word to the last.

It is entirely possible that Lanier was not even conscious of the parallels between "Song of the Chattahoochee" and his society's preoccupation with the start of the fast-paced Industrial Age. He may have just meant to write a nice poem about a nice river, showing it flowing because that is just what rivers do. If this is the case, then he stumbled into something that is bigger than for what he hoped. The poet's musical language gathers all of the attention in poetry classes, but it is the poem's view of nature developing the duty-bound values of a modern executive that make it something that readers can relate to, right up to the present day.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "Song of the Chattahoochee," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, De Bellis analyzes "The Song of the Chattahoochee," asserting that "the music rather than the idea controls the poem."

Lanier's guidebook, *Florida* (1876), commissioned, ironically enough, by a railroad owner who had liked "Corn," served as a transition from his earlier attitudes toward nature. Naturally the *Nation* attacked it for its "rhetorical-poetical foible of seeing 'God in everything,'" as is shown in some similes. But Lanier had begun to express a new idea in this book; nature is an "everlasting Word" which reveals God is everything. In his wild river and in his mysterious marshes, Lanier adds to the beneficence, purposiveness, and harmony of nature a sublimity, while he continues the idea dramatized in *Tiger-Lilies* of nature as guide. His travel book had guided him toward a new handling of nature, one partly heralded by "Corn" and "The Symphony" but one incorporating the idea of the regeneration of nature and man that he had sporadically used for many years.

"The Song of the Chattahoochee" is a sharp departure from "Clover" and "The Waving of the Corn" of 1876. In the blank-verse "Clover" an ox, "Course of things," grazes on clover made of the heads of Keats, Chopin, and others□a strained allegorical attack on boorish society that Lanier concludes serenely with the assertion that "The artist's market is the heart of man." In "The Waving of the Corn," the narrator desires to "Suck honey summer with unjealous bees" in a pastoral retreat from the "terrible Towns." Lanier's habitual opposition of God's nature and man's town receives nearly no development and perhaps causes the eccentric imagery. But in "The Song of the Chattahoochee" the symbolic meaning arises through onomatopoetic representation of the physical sublimity of the river. The movement of the river through the romantic landscape to the sea is the moral imperative of responsibility. But the moral is mainly implied, and the music rather than the idea controls the poem. An improvement on the sentimental piety of "seeing God in everything," Lanier found his true voice again in this poem.

Since the poem was not in the first person in the first draft, Lanier may have recognized that the poem would gain immediacy if the river narrated its own trip. In his revision, he also chose present over past tense, and he reinforced his action verbs and long prepositional phrases to give the river a swooping speed:

Out of the hills of Habersham,
Down the valleys of Hall,
I hurry amain to reach the plain,
Run the rapid and leap the fall,
Split at the rock and together again,
Accept my bed, or narrow or wide,
And flee from folly on every side
With a lover's pain to attain the plain

Far from the hills of Habersham,
Far from the valleys of Hall.

In this stanza and throughout the poem, Lanier outdoes himself in his ability to vary the meter, match and clash tone colors, create structural effects, and link the movement of the river to his special effects. Perhaps the first thing to notice is the exceptional ease or "fluidity" with which the lines move through their four feet of mainly anapestic substitution (line 8). Yet pulling against this is the frequent trochaic substitution (lines 3, 4, 5, 9, and 10) and the successive stresses of line 7, in which even "on" takes at least a secondary stress. Facilitating this fluid movement are the use of duosyllables or polysyllables often broken by the foot stresses (of Hab/ersham), the lack of caesuras (line 6 is the exception), and the lack of hiatus (vowels or consonants the same in successive syllables: "a army"; "lone neck"). Alliteration (lines 4 and 5) and internal rhyme (line 8) also give propulsion to the lines. But it should be understood that these devices only assist the semantic meaning in the lines, for semantic meaning guides us to locate the prosodic elements which account for the speed with which we read. Because all his poetic devices help to give a kinesthetic sense of the river's movement, we could say that the river is physically represented through the onomatopoeia created by all those elements. For this reason the poem is a classic example of a perfect blending of sound and sense.

Some of the tone color is especially good. We notice how the staccato rhythm of "run the rapid" echoes the rapids themselves. A linkage between the phrases could easily have been made ("rapids"), but this would diminish the effect. The graceful but dissonant phrase "leap the fall" balances its alliterative cluster against "run the rapid." Additionally, *p* and *f* are consonantal cousins related to the *p* of "rapid." The two phrases are thus separated but subtly joined.

Lanier's rhymes show great ingenuity. The refrains that form opening and closing couplets of each stanza are naturally perfect rhymes. Lines 3 and 8 of each stanza are rhymed with the same words, and in these lines Lanier rhymes a medial word with the rhyme word in nine out of ten places in the poem. In line 8 of stanza four, there is no medial rhyme; but Lanier uses all vowels (*a-u-i-eo*), substituting variety for the expected pattern. In the second stanza for additional variety he uses three consecutive rhyme words (two of which are the same) in lines 3 and 7□the same pattern used in line 7 of the first stanza. When Lanier discards one device, he usually emphasizes another: in stanza three, for example, at the turning of the poem, he uses internal rhyme in lines 3, 6, 7, 9, and 10 (the last one is an interlinear rhyme). But in stanza four there is no internal rhyme, while in the final stanza nearly every line has internal rhyme. A comparison with the rhyme of "The Symphony" shows how Lanier's penchant for rhyme had led him into a playfulness early in the strings section which underminded his serious thoughts. But in "The Song of the Chattahoochee" the rhyme is exactly right; though the theme of the poem is serious□ the obedient response of nature to its higher commands□the eagerness and excitement of the river as it fulfills that theme are the real center of interest.

It has been observed that, although the anapestic meter gives speed and urgency to the line (perhaps because we instinctively read over unstressed syllables quickly in order to find the stresses), Lanier had also employed frequent trochaic substitutions which tended to slow the line by placing the stress early in the foot. Thus a resistance is created to the river's movement; and, as we would expect, the resistance becomes actively embodied in the imagery of the poem, as well as in other musical devices.

For in the second stanza as the idea of resistance enters the poem, Lanier uses such a line as this to slow the line with caesura, long vowels and hiatus: "And the little reeds sighed *Abide, abide*." In addition, every line in the stanza is end-stopped; it is the only stanza without any enjambment. But in the third and fifth stanzas, to increase the pace of the river's movement, Lanier uses enjambment three times. To give some idea of the circuitous route of the river in the third stanza, Lanier uses eight caesuras to fragment the line; but the sense of the stanza is still a forward movement because of the many other sound devices at work. The refrain must not be overlooked as a source of that speed and fluidity; for, once we anticipate its position in the stanza, we gain a sense of direction and "purpose." The first line of the refrain is exactly one syllable longer than the second line in each of its ten appearances, thereby giving a slightly top-heavy momentum to the first line. Twice the eighth lines of the stanza run directly into the refrain, in the first and fifth stanzas, and thus seemingly pours the river into the sea. The prepositional phrases in the final stanza beginning "Downward" carry greater weight than the lines in the same position of previous stanzas. The trochees seem to suggest not only determination but also that the journey of the river to its Lord the sea is rapidly coming to its conclusion.

By such careful handling of poetic devices as these, Lanier shows that his reputation for musical verse is so well deserved as to assure him of continued attention. And the success of this poem ought not to be minimized, for Lanier found a way to educate feelings through the music of verse in many ways more effectively than he had in "The Symphony." For one thing, he was able to insert detailed descriptions of nature, as he had in "The Symphony," but without letting the general direction of the poem become lax. He could imply the idea of the importance of feeling and of love through the river's obedient response to its Lord the sea without being excessively didactic. The poem easily admits the symbolic meaning of the soul's journey through a turbulent life toward peace or God. It is possible that the poem reflects Lanier's own growth of confidence and direction.

Source: Jack De Bellis, "The Poetry of Freedom," in *Sidney Lanier*, Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1972, pp. 97-125.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Lenhart examines the rhythmic quality of "Song of the Chattahoochee."

"Song of the Chattahoochee" has been universally accepted as one of the most unusual poems in American poetry. Most of the inherent musicality does not stem from repetitive consonants or rhyme or alliteration; it is not, in short, melodious□but it has a structure that is repetitive, impetuous, and ideally suited to the subject. Half of the wonder in Lanier's verse surely grows from the unmusical subjects of which he makes a kind of pure music. His similarity to Whitman can be noticed in the construction of prepositional phrases in "Song of the Chattahoochee," written in 1877 after his ideas on music and poetry had crystallized:

Out of the hills of Habersham,
Down the valleys of Hall . . .
In the clefts of the hills . . .
In the beds of the valleys . . .

This parallelism of pattern is borne out in the rest of the structure, where even many of the lines attain a singular balance.

The most important thing about "Song of the Chattahoochee," and the quality which differentiates it from all previous nature writing, is the poet's approach to the river itself, which approach is extremely personal, and yet altogether lacking in any ordinary descriptiveness on the poet's part. Here the verse lines become the river's voice, just as Debussy's music became the wind's voice. This is an "impression" of the river told in the flow and ebb of rhythm. The poem excels in its rhythmic freedom. While the larger foot patterns may be thought of as running dactyls, there is a constant releasing of sounds through these, followed by a springing return to the shorter leaps of trochees, interrupted at points by sluggish spondees, etc., so that the poet is obviously more interested in the movement to the two repetitious lines at the end of each stanza than he is concerned with foot patterns. He is writing in musical or (rather here) in poetic phrases□prepositional and verbal□and balanced clauses.

Both his alliterative patterns and the use he made of equal time units rather than foot patterns are everywhere noticeable. The important concern of the poet was with the rush and flow of the river, and his effort was expended to keep the stanza in a fluid shape, with occasional little springing phrases to push the metrical pattern down the page. His use of parallel structure, alliteration, and logical syllabic groupings can be seen in this stanza as well as any other:

I *hurry amain* to *reach the plain*,
Run the rapid and *leap the fall*,
Split at the rock and *together again*,
Accept my bed, or narrow or wide,

And flee from folly on every side
With a lover's pain to *attend the plain*
Far from the hills of Habersham,
Far down the valleys of Hall.

The series of verb phrases culminating in "and flee," move the poem downward to the completion of that stanza. The alliterative devices in "run the rapid and leap the fall," and "flee from folly" are only the apparent links in the stanza; not quite so obviously alliterative is "hurry amain" and "reach the plain," and "lover's pain," "narrow or wide," etc. The rhyming device, suspending a return to "fall" until the last word in the stanza, moves through a pattern inverted from -am, -all, -ain, to -ain, -am, -all. This pattern of rhyme inversion works in every stanza. Lanier was fond of varying rhythms from iambs:

The rushes cried *Abide, abide*,
The willful waterweeds held me thrall

to dactyls. Note also his consciousness of a choral element in nature.

Another device used here is that of making the first stanza the voice of the Chattahoochee, and the second and third the voices, successively, of the rushes and reeds, and the various "overleaning" trees. The fourth strophe introduces not only colors and gem-like minerals, but spondaic rhythms which lengthen the line and widely space the em- phases; these really slow down the flow of the movement and impede, just as the sense of the poem signifies:

The white quartz shone, and the smooth
brook-stone
Did bar me of passage with friendly brawl,
And many a luminous jewel lone
Crystals clear or a-cloud with mist,
Ruby, garnet and amethyst
Made lures with lights of streaming stone
In the clefts of the hills of Habersham,
In the beds of the valleys of Hall.

The imagery here is sharply cut, clear, sparkling. Then the final strophe occurs with the voice of the Chattahoochee saying that all depends upon the call of the lordly "main." Here all of the lines point in the direction of the verb "calls" and fall from "downward" and "and":

But oh, not the hills of Habersham,
And oh, not the valleys of Hall
Avail: I am fain for to water the plain.
Downward the voices of Duty call
Downward, to toil and be mixed with the main,
The dry fields burn, and the mills are to turn,
And a myriad flowers mortally yearn,

And the lordly main from beyond the plain
Calls o'er the hills of Habersham,
Calls through the valleys of Hall.

All the rhythms are alternately bound and released, caught, and sprung free. Parallelisms, short internal rhymes, and a certain ebbing and flowing from the initial line repetitions are caught in successive and alternate rhyme endings. The poem is, of course, a slight one, lacking many of the graver overtones so often found in Lanier's work. But it is a little art-work, not simple, delighted in for its tiny and perfectly wrought mosaic rhyme scheme.

Source: Charmenz S. Lenhart, "Sidney Lanier," in *Musical Influence on American Poetry*, University of Georgia Press, 1956, pp. 210-92.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay excerpt, Starke speculates on the date of composition of "The Song of the Chattahoochee," and points out numerous "defects in the poem."

One other poem by Lanier may have been written in 1877, "The Song of the Chattahoochee," a poem so successful in onomatopoeia that it early caught the popular fancy and has become perhaps the best known of all Lanier's poems. In the 1884 volume of collected poems Mrs. Lanier gives the date of composition as 1877, and in the table of contents notes the original publication as "*Scott's Magazine*, 1877." But *Scott's Magazine* had ceased existence in 1869. Inasmuch as the poem was printed in the *Independent* for December 20, 1883, exactly as given in the collected poems, one might guess that the poem had not been published during Lanier's lifetime, and that the date of composition may well have been 1877. However, at least one poem, "A Song of Eternity in Time," was twice published by Lanier himself in only slightly different versions, in 1870 and again in 1881; so posthumous publication in the *Independent* is no proof of original publication. Furthermore, F. V. N. Painter gives in his little volume, *Poets of the South*, published in 1903, a version of "The Song of the Chattahoochee" that differs from the 1883 *Independent* version. The first stanza is not written in the first person, so that the poem is not, therefore, the song of the Chattahoochee but a description of the river with a transcript of its song. Painter states in a note: "This poem was first published in *Scott's Magazine*, Atlanta, Georgia, from which it is here taken. It at once became popular, and was copied in many newspapers throughout the South. It was subsequently revised . . . "

But a careful search of files of *Scott's Magazine* has so far failed to reveal any version of "The Song of the Chattahoochee" or any poem by Lanier (or ascribable to Lanier) except those discussed in an earlier chapter. Unfortunately there is absolutely no reference to the poem in any of Lanier's published correspondence or in any of the unpublished letters available, and all those who have written on Lanier except Painter (whose book, it should be noted, preceded the appearance of Professor Mims's official biography by two years) have accepted 1877 as the date of composition. It probably is the date of the revised version, and Lanier probably revised it for inclusion in one of the several volumes of poetry he was preparing for publication as the time of his death. This version shows a change from the third person to the first in the first stanza, a change in four lines of the fourth, and a few verbal changes elsewhere. The changes are with two exceptions improvements, but they are not drastic. The poem in the early version is essentially the same as the poem in the later version.

It is, surely, the most popular of all Lanier's poems but, as is so often the case, popularity is no sign of excellence, and "The Song of the Chattahoochee" is far from being a great poem. Still, like Tennyson's "Brook," with which it must inevitably be compared, it deserves a recognition greater than that accorded it by frequent inclusion in grammar school readers. Any child can hear in it the music of the water, but the child who has heard this too often, may fail later to note the varied meter of the poem, the use of short vowels, liquid consonants, alliteration, internal rhyme, and skillful repetition

by means of which the music is recorded. Nor does early familiarity with the poem make for intelligent appreciation of its central idea, the river's swift answer to the call of duty.

But defects in the poem are numerous. The rhythm is monotonous; the music is not varied enough; the style is not always transparent, for some of the sentences are awkwardly constructed and some of the words□such as "brawl," in the fourth stanza□are used in an unfamiliar way; and the thought is not always clear; what, for instance, does the river mean in saying "I . . . flee from folly on every side"? Nor is the apparent fact of gravitation a fitting symbol of devotion to duty and of the sacrifice of individuality in merging it in a larger individuality. Still, without "The Song of the Chattahoochee" American literature would be the poorer, and the American literary landscape the less pleasing.

Source: Aubrey Harrison Starke, "Ephemerae," in *Sidney Lanier: A Biographical and Critical Study*, University of Carolina Press, 1933, pp. 290-93.

Adaptations

Lanier's serious involvement in musical composition can be examined in his musical scores, published under the title *The Sidney Lanier Collection: Music for Solo Flute and Flute with Piano Accompaniment Composed by the American Flutist and Poet*. This work, with an introduction by Paula Robison and poems by Lanier between the scores, was published by Universal Edition in 1997.

Southern Film Lab Inc. is the distributor for a 16 mm film by the University of Georgia called *Sidney Lanier: Poet of the Marshes*, produced in 1983.

Lanier, along with Henry Timrod and Paul Hamilton Hayne, is included on Pacifica Tape Library's 1975 cassette called *Southern Poets*.

The poet's flute compositions are featured on a 1996 compact disc entitled *By the Old Pine Tree*, from Arabesque Records of New York.

Lanier's poem "The Marshes of Glynn" is included on the Harper Audio 2-cassette collection called *Great American Poetry: 3 Centuries of Classics*.

The condition of the Chattahoochee River is monitored today by the Upper Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, a non-profit organization. Their web page, found at http://www.ucriverkeeper .org (last accessed August, 2001), keeps people aware of the river's condition and new legislative actions that might affect it.

The full text of the 1884 edition of *The Poems of Sidney Lanier*, edited by his wife, is available online at http://docsouth.unc.edu/lanier/menu.html (last accessed August, 2001) on a page sponsored by the "Documenting the American South" project at the University of South Carolina.

Topics for Further Study

Two poetic techniques used frequently in this poem are alliteration□the repetition of the first sound in words, such as "flee from folly" and "laving laurel"□and internal rhyme, which places rhyming words inside of lines instead of at the end, as in "pain" and "plain" in line 8 or "sighed" and "abide" in line 18. Write a few stanzas, speaking from the point of view of some natural phenomenon, emphasizing these two techniques.

Choose a street or highway that passes near where you live and write a description of its journey from the road's perspective.

Investigate the history of modern irrigation methods that have taken over the responsibilities the Chattahoochee claims for itself in this poem.

Walt Whitman wrote around the same time as Lanier, but his poems about the American landscape were more free-flowing, less stylized. Read some of Whitman's poetry and explain which poet you prefer and why.

Report on the condition of the Chattahoochee River today and what Lanier would think of efforts to conserve it.

Compare and Contrast

1877: The Chattahoochee River flows freely across the northern part of Georgia.

Today: A dam constructed near Atlanta in the 1950s has created Lake Sidney Lanier, a popular spot for boaters and fishers.

1877: The South's agrarian tradition is changing as traditional plantation owners cannot afford to keep their farms any longer, and Northern industries move in.

Today: The South's economy has grown tremendously since the 1870s as high-tech industries have left the North to open manufacturing plants in the Sun Belt.

1877: Individual mills for grinding grain into meal can operate on the power of a water wheel, turned by a flowing river.

Today: The explosion of consumer electronics at the end of the twentieth century has made it difficult for the world's producers of petroleum, coal, nuclear, and hydroelectric energy to keep up with demand.

1877: People in rural areas like Georgia's Appalachian Mountains live in relative seclusion from the rest of the world.

Today: More than ninety-three percent of U.S. households have at least one telephone, and approximately ninety-nine percent of U.S. households have televisions.

1877: After the Civil War (1861-1865) drains the country's population, measures are taken to encourage immigrants to move from Europe to America.

Today: Because of limited resources, immigration laws are becoming increasingly strict.

What Do I Read Next?

Some academic libraries still have available copies of Lanier's influential collection of theoretical essays, *The Science of English Verse*, which was first published in by Scribners 1880.

This poem is included on the collection *The Poems of Sidney Lanier*, most recently reprinted by the University of Georgia Press in 1999.

The musical nature of Lanier's poetry reminds some readers of the works of Edgar Allan Poe. "Annabel Lee" and "The Bells" are two of Poe's poems that rely on sound in a way similar to "Song of the Chattahoochee."

Lanier's poetry reminds readers of the mournful work of Walt Whitman, one of America's greatest poets, who wrote at about the same time. Whitman's finest work is in his collection *Leaves of Grass*, first published in 1855.

The twentieth-century poet Karl Shapiro admired Lanier's poetic theory and noted how his theories continue to be appropriate and have influence. Interested readers can read Shapiro's poetry in *Collected Poems, 1940-1978*, and read his own theories of poetry in *The Poetry Wreck: Selected Essays, 1950-1970*.

Further Study

Coughlin, Robert D., *A Storybook Site: The Early History and Construction of the Buford Dam*, Russell & Russell, Inc., 1933.

This self-published book tells the history of the dam that now backs the Chattahoochee into Lake Sidney Lanier, with many pictures of how the river looked before the dam was built.

Debellis, Jack, *Sidney Lanier: Poet of the Marshes*, University of Georgia Press, 1991.

This newer biography of the poet takes into account his reduced reputation as a serious poet and looks at him as an interesting regional writer.

Lanier, Sidney, *Music and Poetry: Essays upon Some Aspects and Inter-Relations of the Two Arts*, AMS Press, Inc., 1977.

This collection of Lanier's essays, currently out of print, makes interesting reading, but is by no means necessary for understanding his poetry.

Mims, Edwin, *Sidney Lanier*, Kennikat Press, Inc., 1968.

First published in 1905, Mims's book is considered to be the standard in Lanier studies. It suffers from not knowing how the poet's reputation stood up throughout the twentieth century, and modern readers might find Mims's language a little hard to follow.

Starke, Aubrey Harrison, *Sidney Lanier: A Biographical and Critical Study*, Robert D. Coughlin, 1998.

Although this book is one of the most thorough studies of Lanier ever done and despite the title and the author's stated intention to emphasize the critical aspect, the work passes by many of Lanier's works without much commentary on them.

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BOOKRAGS

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Project Editor
David Galens

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Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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:

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535