Swing Low Sweet Chariot Study Guide

Swing Low Sweet Chariot by Anonymous

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Introduction

"Swing Low Sweet Chariot" is an African-American spiritual, also referred to as a Negro folk song. As a folk song, it is thought to have been created by a community rather than an individual, in this case the community of African-American slaves prior to the Civil War. However, one song collector, John Wesley Work, in his book *Folk Songs of the American Negro,* reported a legend that it was composed by Hannah Shepherd of Tennessee in the mid-nineteenth century. Work recounted that she created it in a desperate moment to solace a distraught slave who had learned that she would be sold to another plantation and thus separated from her infant daughter.

Regardless of whether it originated from one composer or from a whole community, "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" was a popular song, sung throughout the South by slaves while they worked and during their occasional times of rest and prayer. The lyrics use biblical imagery and follow a slow, deep melody. They express the desire for a release from bondage and a return to home-geographically, the land of Africa, or spiritually, the peace of heaven. To this day, "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" has remained popular, performed by gospel singers throughout the world, imbuing audiences with religious spirituality.

Poem Text

Swing low sweet chariot
Comin' for to call)' me home,
Swing low sweet chariot
Comin' for to carry me home.
I looked over Jordan, an' what did I see, Comin' for to carry me home,
A band of angels comin' after me, Comin' for to carry me home.
If you get-a dere befo' I do,
Comin' for to carry me home,
Tell all my friends I'm comin' too Comin' for to carry me home.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4:

The first stanza consists of two repeated lines that introduce the main image of the poem, a chariot that descends from the sky to carry the speaker home. For some singers and listeners, the chariot may represent the path to freedom offered by organized abolitionists through the Underground Railroad. For others it could symbolize a chariot of the Lord offering transportation for the soul to heaven. This interpretation has its origin in the Bible, which contains descriptions of chariots used in war as well as to transport honored souls, such as the prophet Elijah's, to heaven. Since the chariot in this song is "sweet" it suggests a conveyance to heaven more than to battle in war. "Psalm 68" in the Bible's book of Psalms, for example, depicts God as having thousands of chariots, a sign of his power. In addition to the imagery here, this stanza uses alliteration -the "s" in "swing" and "sweet." This and all of the stanzas exhibit alliteration of the "k" sound in "comin" and "carry," two words from the repeated chorus. The chorus is meant to be sung by a group, whereas the first and third lines of each stanza are intended to be sung by an individual, the spiritual leader.

Lines 5-6:

In the second stanza, the lead voice sings about a group of angels coming from Jordan, the river that flows from the Sea of Galilee through the biblical Holy Land. According to the Bible, a group of Israelites crossed the Jordan River in their quest for the Promised Land. The Jordan is also significant because the Bible indicates that it is the river in which *John* the Baptist baptized *Jesus* Christ. And just as the Egyptian slaves had a river to cross in their journey, African slaves who escaped often did so by crossing the Ohio River to the North, where slavery was illegal.

Lines 7-8:

The word "band" suggests strength, as in the expression "to band together," meaning to join forces. "Band" also implies an unbreakable union in the image of a circular construction, a hoop-like form. Lastly, "band" calls up images of music from the definition of an ensemble of musicians. In the Bible, "angels" deliver messages for God. They assist, protect and deliver those faithful to the Lord. Altogether, this stanza (lines 5-8) evokes the idea deliverance and acceptance by the Lord, a theme taught in the Bible and one that the American slaves personalized in their desire for freedom. In addition to the imagery, this stanza, like the chorus, uses alliteration: the "m" and "n" sounds in "Jordan," "an'," "comin," "me," "home," "band," and "angels." The frequency of these sounds gives a very soothing, melodious quality to the lyrics.

Lines 9-12:

In the final stanza, the singers express an optimistic determination to reach home, the land of literal or spiritual freedom. The lead singer tells the audience that, should they be liberated first, they should tell the singer's friends that he or she will join them too. The suggestion that the singer will join his or her friends works in both the metaphorical and spiritual interpretation of the song. If the listener thinks of the song as an expression of hope for liberation from slavery, then the friends would be those slaves who have already escaped. If the song expresses the slaves' wish to enter heaven, then the friends would be those whose souls have already ascended. Wherever the destination, the song succeeds in conveying an unwavering hope that the singers will successfully join their friends. The frequency of the chorus, sung every third and last line in each stanza, has the effect of affirming this promise that the "chariot" will indeed carry its singers "home."

Themes

Religion

The figure of a god riding across the sky in a chariot goes back to Greek mythology, in which Apollo was said to ride the sun as a chariot over the earth during the daylight hours. It is an image of heaven's magnificence, combining the chariot, which symbolized the wealth and power enjoyed by a king, with the superhuman power of flight. The heavenly chariot can also represent trouble for mankind, as in ancient images of Zeus, king of the Greek gods, driving his chariot with one hand and hurling thunderbolts at the earth with the other. In this poem, the chariot is welcome; the speaker specifies that it is coming to carry him or her "home." Here we are shown the Christian belief that heaven is one's natural home, and that life on this earth is just a temporary displacement. This belief is always particularly strong among oppressed people, such as slaves. In the South, slaves were told by the law that this was not their home but the home of their owners-that even people born in America had no home of their own on earth. Religious belief is a natural reaction for people who are powerless to fight against their oppressors. In some ways, this is seen as a negative thing, because it keeps people from fighting for their rights, but the benefit is that it makes an intolerable situation tolerable.

Often in Negro spirituals and folklore, blacks are portrayed as God's chosen people and are thus identified with the Israelites of the Old Testament, who also were kept in slavery, watched over by God, and finally led to freedom. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt: in biblical times, the border to that land was the River Jordan, which feeds the Red Sea. According to the Bible, Moses parted the Red Sea in leading the Israelites to freedom. Spirituals were sung about such Old Testament heroes as Joshua, Noah, Solomon, and Daniel; they always related the ancient stories in some way to the suffering that the singers felt. The most obvious interpretation of this poem is that it is about God and a band of angels coming to end the speaker's worldly suffering with death and take him or her off to heaven.

Freedom

It is a matter of record that Negro slaves, who could not sing openly about the desire to escape to freedom, would disguise this theme in their songs. In this poem, the phrase "carry me home," which seems to clearly indicate a trip to the afterlife, can be read as having a double meaning. In the central stanza the band of angels is seen coming across- the River Jordan: like the Mississippi River in the United States, the Jordan ran up the middle of the Biblical world. From north of the Sea of Galilee down to the Dead Sea, towns within twenty miles of the Jordan's banks include Nazareth, Jericho, Pella and Jerusalem. The legend of Moses has him part the Red Sea, which is just a swelling of the River Jordan, in leading the Chosen People to freedom.

Northern states recognized some rights of Negroes, although they could still be sent back to the plantations they had escaped from if they were caught. It was possible to escape to Canada and live outside U.S. laws; the Underground Railroad was a network of travel modes and hiding places set up by people who sympathized with slaves and wanted to help them escape. It is therefore understandable that, while working in the fields, slaves would sing about someone coming to take them to the land of freedom. It is equally understandable that they would not want to sing openly about their desires and stir up the anger of the slave drivers. The spirit of hope in this song was less threatening to the slave owners if they could interpret it as a hope for life after death and not as a hope for escape.

Identity

This poem is not just about the death or liber ation of an individual person, but of an entire peo ple, who are referred to with the personal pronoun "I." The first indication of this is that the line "Comin' for to carry me home" is repeated, just like the repeated lines in the call-and-response structure of work songs, in which the group sings the refrain together. Also, the fact that the written form of the poem has retained the dialect of the nineteenth-century, southern Negro indicates that this piece is meant to capture the feelings of an entire culture. Finally, the last stanza's emphasis on the speaker meeting his or her friends when arriving "home" tells us that the freedom being sung of will not just be for an individual, but for everyone.

Style

As pointed out by John Wesley Work in his book *American Negro Songs and Spirituals,* AfricanAmerican songs often retain forms that originated in African tribal customs. "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" belongs to the largest group, a class of spirituals that use the African "call and response chant form." Work described it as "interesting as well as distinctive. Its feature is a melodic fragment sung repeatedly by the chorus as an answer to the challenging lines of the leader which usually change." The chorus, "Comin' for to carry me home," repeats every second and fourth line of each stanza, It was intended to be sung by a group in answer to an individual voice that sings the first and third lines of each stanza. This repetition not only provides structure for the song, it also enables the lyrics to be easily remembered. Another aid to memory exists in the rhymes that occur at the end of the first and third lines in each stanza: "chariot" with itself, "see" with "me," and "do" with "too."

Historical Context

"Swing Low Sweet Chariot" is a spiritual song in the style developed by American Negro slaves during the nineteenth century. Although there is no one particular author associated with these lyrics, the style is clearly recognizable, and all of the individual elements that we can see in this poem are easy to trace back to slave experiences. First is the repetition of the refrain on every even-numbered line. This pattern goes back to work songs which were sung by slaves since their arrival in America, with written records going back to the 1600s. The purpose for this call-and-response pattern was to allow the group to participate by singing the refrain while a solo singer could add various lines to compliment the basic thought. Slaves were encouraged to sing while working, because singing kept them moving in a regular pattern, and this made their work progress tirelessly without interruption—like clockwork. The connection between motion and music was itself a cultural tradition well-established in the slaves' native Africa. Several scholars, including the well-known poet, novelist, and historian James Weldon Johnson, have traced the spiritual's roots back to the African *ring-shout,* a traditional practice during which the participants would dance in a circle for hours, closing the ring as exhausted members dropped out and clapping and stamping in rhythm.

While spirituals owe their basic structure to the work songs of slaves, they owe at least as much to Christian hymns. Starting in the eighteenth century, a concerted effort was made to convert slaves to Christianity, and Biblical themes began showing up in songs that were about the slaves' social condition. One famous source in particular was a collection of hymns compiled by Dr. Isaac Watts and published in 1707. This hymnal was familiar to Negroes in the North, who worshipped in separate churches from whites and who would, therefore, have had the opportunity to alter the words to fit their own experiences. In the South, blacks became familiar with the hymns that had been handed down from European roots through religious services at outdoor, traveling camp meetings, which were also segregated from white gatherings. Throughout the 1800s, more and more songs combining Christian themes with the work song call-and-response structure appeared. Unlike traditional white hymns, which tended to emphasize moral themes such as good and evil, right and wrong, the Negro spirituals focused on the aspect of Christianity that promised salvation from suffering. The Old Testament of the Bible offered slaves a direct reference to a time when God's chosen people were slaves, while the New Testament focused upon the humanitarian principles of Jesus, expressed in the Sermon on the Mount as "The last shall be first, and the first shall be last." There is, in fact, some dispute among scholars about whether the optimism expressed in "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" is a hope for salvation in the afterlife or anticipation of leaving slavery and escaping to the North. The mention of angels might indicate that the poem intends "home" to mean heaven, but former slaves, included noted author Frederick Douglass, have noted that slaves could not openly mention hopes about freedom, so they hid their hope, even though everybody recognized the hidden meaning when they sang these songs.

The musical structure that developed from African chants to work songs to spirituals went on to evolve into blues, jazz, and rock-and-roll. Spirituals became known to white

audiences in the late 1870s, when George L. White took nine singers from Fisk University in Nashville on a singing tour to raise money. Fisk was the nation's first black university. The tour was an unprecedented success, making the name of the Fisk Jubilee Singers an important name in the development of American music. The melody of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" is known throughout the world and has been incorporated into Anton Dvorak's "New World Symphony," played by a flute in the first movement; similarly, the lyrics are treasured as one of the earliest examples of American folk art.

Critical Overview

In his *Black Song,* John Lovell, Jr., discusses all aspects of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." He considers its origins, structure, interpretations, poetic techniques, recordings, performances, and literary and artistic uses. He refers to studies of African sources for the spiritual, citing a Bantu song, 'The Story of Tangalimlibo," and an unnamed Rhodesian song that uses the same refrain and response. Lovell also addresses the theory that one person composed "Swing Low Sweet Chariot"; he quotes the famous scholar H. L. Mencken, who has theorized that probably one poet composed "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." Mencken believes the poet "was one of the greatest poets we have ever produced, and he came so near being our greatest musician that I hesitate to look for a match for him."

Many authorities have analyzed the meaning of the "chariot" and the word "home" in this spiritual. On a metaphoric level, "chariot" may stand for the Underground Railroad-a network of transportation and safe houses that assisted slaves in their escape from Southern plantations-while "home" would be a destination in the North, away from slavery. Lovell commented that Harriet Tubman, one of the leaders of the Underground Railroad, was nicknamed "Old Chariot." Earl Conrad wrote, "When the enslaved black sang, 'I looked over Jordan and what did I see, Coming for to carry me home,' it was over the Mason-Dixon line that he was looking; the band of angels was Harriet or another conductor coming for him, and 'home' was a haven in the free states of Canada."

Another popular reading of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" casts it as an appeal by the slaves to be returned to Africa, possibly Liberia, an African country founded in 1822 as a home for freed African-American slaves. Musicologist Miles Mark Fisher offered one of the most original interpretations for the chariot, explaining that "a chariot was a French sledlike vehicle used to transport tobacco in the Carolinas Slaves wanted a char

iot to swing out of the skies from Africa low enough for their souls to mount and to be carried many miles from North America."

Lovell prefers the spiritual interpretation of the song, calling it a "spiritual classic." He admitted, "Of course, the slave could be referring to the Underground Railroad which had taken to glory (free land) many of his friends and fellow workers. Assume he is not. This is one of a family of songs in which a great golden vehicle, powered and directed by God, manned by angels, comes down from heaven through the skies to pick up and elevate a particular individual."

Howard Thurman also strongly supports the spiritual interpretation. He discusses the religious experiences of the slaves, pointing out that in the absence of hope for liberation from slavery, they found comfort in the promise of "release in death" and expressed that comfort in songs such as "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." Maude Cuney-Hare supports the religious reading of the spiritual in her discussion of its origin. She refers to the legend that an old black woman in Tennessee created the song to comfort a female

slave being parted from her child. The old woman said she sang from the "Lord's scroll" taken off His "chariot." Whatever interpretation is chosen, the listener can hardly help but be moved by the quiet hope expressed in this lasting song.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

B. J. Bolden is an Assistant Professor of English at Chicago State University, Chicago, IL. She is the managing editor of Warpland: A Journal of Black Literature and Ideas *at Chicago State University and the author of* Urban Rage in Bronzeville: Social Commentary in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, 1945-1960. *In the following essay, Bolden provides an overview of the themes and form of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" and explores the spiritual's relation to African music.*

The Negro spiritual is a religious folk song of African-American slave origin. In terms of formal classification, as Dr. Alain Locke noted in his essay "The Negro Spirituals," they belong to a larger class of four song types that were common in the rural south during slavery: ritual prayer songs or spirituals; the free and spirited evangelical "shouts," or camp-meeting songs; the more secular work and labor songs; and the folk ballad. The Negro spiritual may be likened to the folk ballad in its graphic narrative method and the strongly marked rhythm that is often apparent in the singing, clapping, and swaying of the participants. The spiritual is known for its enduring quality and beauty as well as the overwhelming emotional component that is visible in the epic intensity and the profound tragedy of the songs. In his essay "Of the Sorrow Songs," W. E. B. Du Bois commented that in the Negro spiritual, the "soul of the black slave spoke to men" and that "by fateful chance the Negro folksong-the rhythmic cry of the slave-stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born on this side of the seas." The assessments of Locke and Du Bois concerning the universal appeal of the Negro spirituals were confirmed by the worldwide acclaim and financial success of the Fisk Jubilee Singers whose artistic renditions of the spirituals, from 1871-1875, netted them $150,000 to build Fisk University.

Yet even in the face of the broad acceptance of the Negro spiritual, the question of origin continues to be the subject of critical scrutiny by folklorists, musicologists, and historians. In his well known poem "0 Black and Unknown Bards," James Weldon Johnson asks: "Heart of what slave poured out such melody / As "Steal away to Jesus," "Roll, Jordan, Ron," and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot?" In *The Book of American Negro Spirituals,* Johnson answers his own question: "The Spirituals are purely and solely the creation of the American Negro The Negro brought with him from Africa his native musical instinct and talent." Contemporary discussions revolve around the issue of the extent to which the spirituals reflect patterns of African retentions versus the extent to which they reflect a mere refashioning of southern white thematic and stylistic devices. The answer is twofold: the Negro spiritual contains visible elements of the rhythms and chants of its African ancestry coupled with the melody and harmony of the southern American slave master's religious music during and after the Civil War.

The Negro spiritual represents the most basic elements of the survival of African slaves transported to America, derived from the profound emotion emanating from a sorrowful, patient, long-suffering, hard-working, persistent, jubilant, creative, clever, and religious people who regularly emitted the plaintive cry of the wounded and entrapped. The songs illuminate the quality of a people who were metaphorical in their Biblical imagery,

even under the harness of slavery, stoic in their vision of ultimate victory over imminent oppression, and clever in their ability to inject their songs with concealed messages of escape. In *The Historical and Cultural Atlas of African Americans,* Molefi K. Asante and Mark T. Mattson catalog the myriad creators of the spiritual who emanated from over 250 groups from various parts of the continent of Africa and were transplanted and enslaved in America. They include the Y oruba, lbo, Hausa, Fulani, Akan, Ewe, Ga, Wolof, Touculeur, Mande, Sherbro, Luba, Kuba, Dan, Douala, lbidio, and Edo.

Similar to Asante and Mattson's assessment, specific African conventions have been noted in the Negro spiritual "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." In *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame,* John Lovell, Jr. remarked on the presence of African musical transfers to Black American music, especially in the formal structure: the use of the pentatonic, hexatatonic, and heptatonic scales; of lowered thirds, raised sixths, and lowered sevenths; of rhythm that dominates metrics; of scale that is ruled by song, rather than song ruled by scale; and, most significantly, the call and response pattern of a lead singer who positions the short choral phrase against the longer melodic line or refrain of a chorus.

For instance, the African convention of call and response is apparent in "Swing Low Sweet Chariot": Leader: Swing low sweet chariot, Congregation: Comin' for to carry me home. Leader: Swing low sweet chariot, Congregation: comin' for to carry me home. Leader: I look over Jordan, what do I see? Congregation: Comin' for to carry me home. Leader: A band of angels comin' after me, Congregation: Comin' for to carry me home.

Lovell and Mark Fisher both observed that "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" uses the same response and refrain structure as 'The Story of Tangalimlibo," a Bantu song from Rhodesia in south central Africa.

Like most Negro spirituals, "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," though deceptively simple in theme, content, and form, is thematically rich in its Christian references and signals the sense of victory over despair that was crucial to the physical, emotional, and psychological survival of the slave. The eschatological belief system or "other-world" theology that promises heavenly relief for those who faithfully endure the trials and tribulations of this world is apparent in the opening lines: "Swing low sweet chariot / Comin' for to carry me home." The chariot is the vessel that will transport the weary slave from the sordid world of enslavement to the beauty and freedom in the otherworld of heaven. The spiritual embodies the slave's plaintive response to the alien conditions and experiences that he encountered in America-a new land, a new language, and a new religion-and is informed by his exposure to the Judeo-Christian biblical legacy. As the early African slaves merged into the American plantation system, the spirituals became the emotional release valve that permitted them to sing of their grief, sorrow, and pain. But the slaves were not without hope, and their songs reflect a deep religious commitment, the spirit of ultimate victory over despair and hope as a measure of their faith in transcending the bowels of slavery. As a reward to having braved their earthly enslavement, they looked forward to going to their heavenly home to live with God.

However, there are scholars who pose an alternate explication of Negro spirituals such as "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." For instance, abolitionist and ex-slave Frederick Douglass was adamant in his view that the Negro spirituals were not limited to such simplistic Biblical interpretations, but, instead, were encoded with a secret language of escape. Based on that view, the second stanza of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" offers a vastly different interpretation:

I looked over Jordan, an' what did I see, Comin' for to carry me home, A band of angels comin after me, Comin' for to carry me home. In this view "home" would imply escape from slavery, and the "band of angels" would be representatives from Harriet Tubman's Underground Railroad who would lead groups of slaves north to freedom. This message would be disseminated among slaves as a warning to anticipate escape. What in Biblical terms might be explained as the slave expressing a poignant sense of beauty, a deep religious feeling, and a deep longing for peace would, by contrast, be interpreted as a desperate longing for escape from slavery to freedom. Thus Douglass' view of the language of Negro spirituals such as "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" dispels the myth of the contented slave whose religious fervor erased the pain of enslavement. As Du Bois wrote, "Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope-a faith in the ultimate justice of things."

Source: B. J. Bolden, in an essay for *Poetry for Students.* Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Cuny-Hare offers a brief description of the development of this spiritual.

These songs known as Spirituals are the expression of a supreme belief in immortality that transcends mere religious creeds and theoretical dogma. Through them the paganism of African "spirit" songs are reboro and modified by Christian doctrines, and they are the musical expression of spiritual emotion created by the race and not for it.

"Swing Low Sweet Chariot," an American "Negro Spiritual" in the pentatonic scale, noted in *Fisk Jubilee Songs,* 1871, offers a key to this development. The variants of this song are "Good Old Chariot," "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," (Hampton) and "The Danville Chariot." In the first movement of Dvorak's "New World Symphony," in which this theme occurs, it is given out by the flute. The song has been arranged with piano accompaniment by many composers, and transcribed for organ by Carl R. Diton. William Arms Fisher, who has given the melody a setting for solo voice and piano, tells an interesting story about the song, which was told to him by Bishop Frederick Fisher of Calcutta, India, who had recently returned from Central Africa. He relates:

"Bishop Fisher stated that in Rhodesia he had heard the natives sing a melody so closely resembling "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" that he felt that he had found it in its original form; moreover, the subject was identical. The tribe of natives that inhabit the region near the great Victoria Falls have a custom from which the song arose. When one of their chiefs, in the old days, was about to die, he was placed in a great canoe together with the trappings that marked his rank. and food for his journey. The canoe was set afloat in midstream headed toward the great Falls and the vast column of mist that rises from them. Meanwhile the tribe on the shore would sing its chant of farewell. The legend is that on one occasion the king was seen to rise in his canoe at the very brink of the Falls and enter a chariot that, descending from the mists, bore him aloft. This incident gave rise to the words 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,' and the song. brought to America by African slaves long ago, became anglicized and modified by their Christian faith."

In America, it is told that the song arose from an incident which happened to a woman sold from a Mississippi plantation to Tennessee. Rather than be separated from her child, she was about to drown herself and little one in the Cumberland River, when she was prevented by an old Negro woman, who exclaimed, "Wait, let de Chariot of de Lord swing low and let me take de Lord's scroll and read it to you." The heart-broken mother became consoled and was reconciled to the parting. The song became known with the passing on of the story, which seems more legendary than real.

Source: Maude Cuny-Hare, *Ne{;ro Musicians and Their Music,* Associated Publishers, 1936. pp. 68-69.

Topics for Further Study

Write your own lyrics, describing what you will be doing when the modem equivalent of the Chariot-a Rolls Royce, a Cessna plane, or whatever you choose-comes for to carry you to the afterlife.

Choose the lyrics to a contemporary song that you think will still be in the poetry books a hundred years from now. Explain what you think about these lyrics is memorable and what they will tell people of the future about our culture.

Why do you think the phrase "Comin' for to carry me home" comprises half of this piece? Why have those who wrote the song down left the "g" off of "coming"?

Compare and Contrast

1863: The Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Lincoln declared that the U.S. government did not recognize the institution of slavery.

1865: The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution made slavery a crime in the United States.

1870: Black Americans were given the right to vote by the Fifteenth Amendment.

1896: In the case of *Plessy* v. *Ferguson,* the Supreme Court approved of segregation by accepting the concept that facilities for blacks and whites could be "separate but equal."

1954: The Supreme Court overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine and pushed for immediate desegregation.

Today: Voters in several states have voted down Affirmative Action measures, which are meant to equalize the opportunities available to all.

1861: A Western Union telegraph line between New York and San Francisco brought an end to the Pony Express letter delivery system.

1876: Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone.

1962: The first active communications satellite was placed in orbit.

1975: The first personal computer, the MITS Altair 8800, was released to the market in kit form.

Today: Although mostly replaced by faxes and e-mail, personal letters are still written.

1861: Elisha G. Otis patented a steam-powered elevator.

1890=5: Chicago architect Louis Sullivan developed the concept of the high-rise office building, based on new, inexpensive steel production methods and the elevator.

1931: The Empire State Building in New York was the tallest building at 1250 feet tall.

1973: Chicago's Sears Tower was built at 1454 feet tall (1707 with antennae).

Today: The Petronas Towers in Malaysia will be 303 feet taller than the Sears Tower when they are completed.

What Do I Read Next?

Alex Haley's 1976 novel *Roots* presents the history of a black family from pre-slavery times up to the present. The sections concerning his slave ancestors are very vividly rendered and give the reader a good sense of what life in plantations was like for slaves.

Poet, ambassador, and publisher James Weldon Johnson's 1927 volume of poems, *God's Trombones,* is written in the voice that a nineteenth-century preacher would use in addressing a congregation, but unlike the poet in "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," Johnson pointedly refuses to use dialect in spelling words, for reasons explained beautifully in the introduction. The history lesson to be gained from the introduction alone makes this book worth reading.

W.E.B. du Bois was one of our country's lead ing African-American intellectuals. His 1961 collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folks,* is a landmark, written with grace and understanding.

American Negro Slavery: A Modern Reader, edited by Allen Weinstein and Frank Qtto Gatell and published in its second edition in 1973, is a collection of essays by historians that offers the reader one of the most complete and intelligent overviews ever compiled in one book about what it was like to be a slave.

In *Moses, Man of the Mountain,* Harlem Renaissance author Zora Neale Hurston's 1939 novel (available in a 1991 reissue), the Biblical story of Moses is retold in the voice of a southern Negro, giving the reader a sense of this story's importance to an enslaved people without addressing the relationship between the two cultures directly.

Further Study

Cone, James, "The Black Church and Black Power," in *The Black Church in America,* edited by Hart M. Nelsen, Raytha L. Yokley and Anne K. Nelsen, New York: Basic Books, 1971, pp. 335-55.

Cone makes the case that what appeared to be longing for the afterlife in spirituals was actually a covert way talking about freedom in this life.

Harper's Bible Dictionary, edited by Paul G. Achtemeier, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985, pp. 604-5.

This source gives the historical and biblical significance of the River Jordan.

Meier, August, and Elliott Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto,* third edition, New York: Hill and Wang, 1976.

The explanation of slave life here is interesting in that it puts American slavery into a broad context of other slave countries.

Shaw, Arnold, *Black Popular Music in America,* New York: Schirmer's Books, 1986.

Shaw's first chapter begins with black music being popularized by the Fisk Jubilee Players in 1871 and then traces the Spirituals back to work songs and from there to Africa: the rest of the book traces clear steps from one genre to the next, up to rap and hiphop.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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