Vancouver Lights Study Guide

Vancouver Lights by Earle Birney

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Introduction

"Vancouver Lights" appears in Birney's first collection of poems, *David and Other Poems,* most of which Birney wrote shortly after World War II began in 1939. The collection launched Birney's career as a poet and the book received the Governor General's Award for Poetry in 1942, the most prestigious award given for poetry in Canada. Birney read the poem on a CBC radio program on Canadian poetry in early February 1943. Consisting of five stanzas which utilize a kind of visual prosody, the poem is a lyric meditation on humanity's frailty, and on the possibility of faith in humanity's future. In that sense it is similar to Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." However, "Vancouver Lights" is a much more difficult poem, to read and to understand. Birney's grammatical inversions, frequently abstract allusions, and at times impossible to grasp associations require multiple readings before meaning coheres. Although the poem suggests despair born of World War II, Birney's pessimism goes deeper, implying a cosmic hopelessness which has no remedy. Using thick descriptions of nature and humanity (figured as the lights from the city of Vancouver, British Columbia) colliding and overlapping, the speaker presents humanity as a small and insignificant part of the universe which has only itself to blame for its serf-destructive behavior. The poem makes generous use of Greek mythology to underscore the idea that World War II is only the latest manifestation of humanity's impulse to destroy itself, that what history teaches us is that we make the same mistakes over and over again. At the end of the poem, the speaker questions whether humanity has the capacity to change its course.

Author Biography

The only child of farmers Will Birney and Martha Robertson, Earle Birney was born May 13, 1904, in Calgary, located in the foothills of Alberta, when it was a part of the Northwest Territories. Birney spent much of his childhood hiking and camping, and learning first hand about the natural world in theKootenay Valley of eastern British Columbia. These experiences served him well when he later worked as an axe man and a rod man on survey crews. In 1922 Birney enrolled at the University ofBritish Columbia, first intending to be a chemical engineer, and then a geologist, but wound up taking a degree in English. Birney's political awakening came shortly afterwards, while he was a graduate student at the University ofToronto. In Toronto, Birney steeped himself in political philosophy, particularly the writings of Marx and Trotsky, and by the time he graduated was a self-proclaimed socialist. He practiced his new-found political ideals while in London on a Royal Society Fellowship, working for the Independent Labour Party. In Europe, Birney met Trotsky and had a few run-ins with the Nazi Party in Berlin, being arrested once for not saluting during a Nazi rally. When World II broke out Birney enlisted with the Canadian Army and was posted overseas, serving for three years as a personnel specialist in Belgium, England, and Holland before returning home in 1945. Birney wrote some of his most well-known poems during this time. Upon his return he was offered a full professorship at the University ofBritish Columbia. His experience in the war provided him with material for novels, plays, television scripts, and essays, as well as poems. *Turvey,* perhaps his best prose work, is a darkly comic work set in World War II whose main character is a personnel officer like Birney himself. Birney was a tireless promoter both of his own writing and of Canadian literature, traveling the world to give readings and lectures. Critics consider Birney to be one of the first true Canadian modernists. His collaboration with musicians and film makers, and his attempts at sound poetry, concrete poetry, and other forms of visual prosody mark him as a writer who always tried to expand the horizons of his field, looking for news ways of poetic expression. When Earle Birney died in 1995 he left behind him one of the most significant and diverse collections of Canadian writing to date.

Poem Text

About me the night moonless wimples the
mountains
wraps ocean land air and mounting
sucks at the stars The city throbbing below
webs the sable peninsula The golden
strands overleap the seajet by bridge and buoy
vault the shears of the inlet climb the woods
toward me falter and halt Across to the firefly
haze of a ship on the gulfs erased horizon
roll the lambent spokes of a lighthouse
Through the feckless years we have come to the
time
when to look on this quilt of lamps is a troubling
delight
Welling from Europe's bog through Africa's
flowing
and Asia drowning the lonely lumes on the oceans
tiding up over Halifax now to this winking
outpost comes flooding the primal ink
On this mountain's brutish forehead with terror of
space
I stir of the changeless night and the stark ranges
of nothing pulsing down from beyond and between

the fragile planets We are a spark beleaguered
by darkness this twinkle we make in a corner of
emptiness
how shall we utter our fear that the black
Experimentress
will never in the range of her microscope find it?
Our Phoebus
himself is a bubble that dires on Her slide while
the Nubian
wears for an evening's whim a necklace of nebulae
Yet we must speak we the unique glowworms
Out of the waters and rocks of our little world
we conjured these flames hooped these sparks
by our will From blankness and cold we fashioned
stars
to our size and signalled Aldebaran
This must we say whoever may be to hear us
if murk devour and none weave again in gossamer:
These rays were ours
we made and unmade them Not the shudder of
continents
doused us the moon's passion nor crash of comets
In the fathomless heat of our dwarfdom our
dream's combustion
we contrived the power the blast that snuffed us

No one bound Prometheus Himself he chained
and consumed his own bright liver O stranger
Plutonian descendant or beast in the stretching
night-
there was light

Plot Summary

Stanza 1:

The poem opens with the speaker describing the landscape surrounding him. The "moonless" night has an almost omnivorous quality, as it "wimples," "wraps," and "sucks" everything around it. Birney uses the word "wimple" to show the way the darkness creates what looks like folds or ripples around the mountain. The city itself "webs" the peninsula, suggesting its spider-like qualities. This buried metaphor is taken up again at the end of the fourth stanza. The lights of the city, which itself is described as "throbbing," are as active as the night is hungry, as they "overleap," "vault," and "climb" towards the speaker. In the distance, the speaker sees a lighthouse, from which light emanates like "lambent spokes." The overwhelming sense we have from the description is one of humanity and nature overlapping, with light serving both as both agent and effect of that overlapping. The speaker locates himself in an almost dreamlike world which we feel could change at any time. As is typical in lyric poems, the speaker will use his surroundings as backdrop and metaphor for the ideas upon which he will meditate.

Stanza 2:

The vague, dreamy setting described in the first stanza prepares us for the statements made in the second. Birney moves from an "I" to a "we," emphasizing that his descriptions are meant to speak for all of humanity, not just himself. He characterizes history as "feckless," meaning that it has been purposeless and meandering. But he also finds hope in humanity when he says that to look on it (figured as the city of Vancouver, itself figured as a "quilt of lamps") "is a troubling delight." This last phrase is an oxymoron, that is, it joins two terms which are contraries. The "bog" of Europe refers to the chaos of conflicts engulfing that continent during the onset of World War II, when Birney wrote the poem. The city's lights, paradoxically, drown the ocean's waves. Birney plays on images of lightness and darkness throughout the poem, suggesting a war between hope and meaninglessness that humanity has waged and continues to wage. The final few lines in the stanza are ominous, as humanity, first represented by the city of Halifax, Nova Scotia, on Canada's east coast, and then Vancouver, "this winking / outpost," located on the country's west coast, is on the brink of being overwhelmed by the ocean's dark waters, "the primal ink".

Stanza 3:

The mountain Birney refers to in the first line isGrouse Mountain, from whose high ridge one can look down upon Vancouver. By using the adjective "brutish" to describe the mountain's ridge, Birney echoes Thomas Hobbes's well-known statement that human life is "nasty, short, and brutish." He now considers humanity in light of the universe, and

sees human beings as "a spark beleaguered / by darkness." The sinister "black Experimentress" is that darkness. Not even the sun god, Phoebus, can penetrate her black emptiness for very long. For all of his brightness he amounts to nothing more than "a bubble that dries on Her [microscope's] slide." The stars themselves (the "necklace of nebulae" the Nubian wears) are only an "evening's whim," to be extinguished in time themselves. Images of despair punctuate this stanza ("terror of space," "stark ranges / of nothing," "corner of emptiness"), underlining the speaker's own sense of foreboding.

Stanza 4:

Against all of this darkness and emptiness, against all the meaninglessness that the speaker catalogues, he nevertheless insists that "we must speak." Describing humanity as "unique glowworms," he claims that we have created the world "by our will." But not even Aldebaran (the red star which is the eye of the constellation Taurus, Birney's own astrological sign) which humanity has created by our sheer act of naming, will survive time. Speaking out for the voiceless has been a traditional role of poets, and one that Birney takes on in this poem to both describe the past and to sound a warning for the future. The last image of the stanza completes the weaving metaphor introduced in the first stanza.

Stanza 5:

In Greek mythology Prometheus was one of the Titans, a family of gods who roamed the earth before the creation of man. He and his brother were entrusted with providing man with animals and the means for preserving and taking care of them. With the intention of helping man, Prometheus gave him the gift of fire (which he stole) from heaven. Jupiter then created woman and sent her to Prometheus to punish him for stealing the fire. The woman, Pandora, was given a jar, or in some versions of the story a box, and forbidden to open it. She disobeyed orders and opened the box, releasing plagues of the mind and body upon humanity. The only thing which did not escape was hope, which lay at the bottom. Prometheus was punished by Zeus, who had him chained to a boulder, where an eagle pecked at his liver until he was eventually freed by Hercules. Contrary to Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound," in which humanity is described as having the capacity to perfect itself, Birney's Prometheus is responsible for his own suffering, and it is not clear that he will be rescued. Pluto is the god of the underworld and for Birney represents humanity's darker impulses, its drive towards self destruction.

Themes

Nature

Birney's description of the relationship between nature and culture in "Vancouver Lights" is a metaphor for humanity's relationship to the universe and to history. In the first stanza the speaker, his vision "guided" by the moonless night, sees lights from the city "overleaping the sea jet" and "vaulting] the shears of the inlet," metaphorically suggesting that human beings have overrun nature, that human-made things such as cities dramatically affect the ways in which we see and interact with the natural world. But nature also overruns culture, as in the second stanza when the ocean, metaphorically described as "the primal ink," threatens to engulf cities. Birney both underlines Nature's indifference to human concerns *and* figures Nature as a malleable substance which can be molded by human will. His description of the "mountain's brutish forehead" and night that "black Experimentress," which threatens to swallow all of human existence, shows a view of a natural world that does not need human beings. However, when he claims that "out of the water and rocks of our little world / we conjured these flames," Nature is presented as less threatening and a substance with which humanity can do as it desires. Birney also seems to imply that distinguishing between what is human-made and what is natural has become more difficult, giving rise to a greater sense of dislocation in human beings. This sense of "lostness" is reinforced in the many images of emptiness and space, and the description of history as "feckless years." The universe itself, the poem seems to say, is like history. Both are governed by whim and chance and circumstances beyond humanity's control. We attempt to control the randomness by controlling and colonizing the wilderness, but this also will prove impossible.

Meaning of Life

"Vancouver Lights" asks not what kind of meaning human life has, but if it has *any.* Writing like a prototypical existentialist, Birney appears to conclude that humanity is responsible for making its own meaning, and it will be responsible for negating that meaning. Birney underscores the randomness of human existence when he refers to history as "feckless," and he emphasizes that emptiness is at the root of life in his figure of the "black Experimentress," an all encompassing darkness that continually threatens to blot out humanity itself. For Birney, humanity "is a spark beleaguered / by darkness," but that darkness is as much inside as outside ourselves. Birney's insistence that humanity is responsible for its own condition is a familiar existential refrain, one popularized by writers such as Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and others during the mid-twentieth century. In existential thought, existence precedes essence. There is no predetermined serf or a destiny that human beings float toward. Rather, we create our own essence by the choices that we make: "we conjured these flames hooped these sparks / by our will From blankness and cold we fashioned stars / to our size ..." When we are told that "No one bound Prometheus," we are being told that he created his own

circumstances by the choice he made in stealing fire from the Titans and befriending man. Birney uses Greek mythology□a system of stories which came about to explain natural phenomena and give meaning to existence□to undercut the influence of such stories, and to highlight the notion that there are no forces which create us, only we who create ourselves.

Style

"Vancouver Lights" is a meditative-descriptive lyric. In five irregular stanzas, Birney uses a kind of visual prosody to map the poem and to embody the poem's subjects. His inter- and intra-sentence spacings makes for a kind of staccato reading experience: we read the poem in the same way that the light and darkness Birney describes appear to him. Similarly, his enjambed lines emphasize the overlapping of the natural and the human worlds.

The poem's descriptive elements utilize concrete imagery and symbolic metaphors to depict a turbulent sea and busy, chaotic city. The active verbs□"wimples," "wraps," "sucks," "webs," "vault," "climb," "falter," "halt"□used to describe the light and darkness in the first stanza echo the ebb and flow of the sea described in the second stanza. Light and darkness themselves symbolize the flow of time and the alternating currents of hope and despair throughout human history. Many of the metaphors employ visual images. For example, "this quilt of lamps" in the second stanza refers to the lights of Vancouver that Birney sees from the "mountain's brutish forehead," as does "this winking / outpost." By referring to humanity as "unique glowworms," Birney captures both the ephemeral quality of human life as well as its animal nature.

The poem's didactic elements are embodied in Birney's use of characters from Greek mythology. Just as the ancients used myths to make sense of their own world, so too does Birney use them to make sense of his. Birney's use of myth is two-fold: on one hand he alludes to these characters and stories to emphasize the theme of creation; on the other hand he comments on the myths to highlight their function *as* stories. As long as we have history, Birney suggests, we cannot *not* have stories. But if we have them let's tell the truth about ourselves.

The poem's highly stylized diction and grammatical inversions also undergird the serious, grave tone of the poem and add to the image of the speaker as an oracle of sorts. At times phrases and metaphors veer towards melodrama and hyperbole, as when in the final stanza the speaker locates humanity's relative unimportance "In the fathomless heat of our dwarfdom ..."

Towards the end of his life Earle Birney chose to call his writings not poems, but "makings" and "alphabeings." He did so that readers might approach them without so many of the (potentially) debilitating expectations sometimes brought to poetry. According to Peter Aichinger in his book *Earle Birney,* Birney eschewed the label "poet," choosing instead to refer to himself and other Canadian writers as "men of letters" or "men of images."

Historical Context

The Treaty of Versailles, which had officially ended World War I, crippled Germany's economy, guaranteeing the country a future of social turmoil which only added to the insecurity the German people already felt. In 1933, The National Socialist German Workers Party exploited this sentiment and took power, installing Adolf Hitler as its leader. With much of the German population supporting him, Hitler spent the next six years re-building the German military while invading and occupying nearby countries such as Czechoslovakia and Austria. Exhausted from the First World War, European countries did little or nothing to confront Hitler, practicing appeasement and negotiation instead of militarily confronting Hitler's army.

When Birney wrote "Vancouver Lights" in 1941 he was already at the end of a decade-long experiment in extreme politics. As World War II approached, Birney become more and more disenchanted with organized revolution and finally managed to distance himself from it. He took up poetry writing in earnest shortly afterward. In a 1939 interview he says that "I was writing because I felt, dammit, I wanted to say this kind of thing, I wanted to do this kind of thing, or see if I could do it, for a long time, and now I see the war closing around me and I'm either going to go to jail [for his political work] or I'm going to go overseas, and don't know who's going to survive or what. In 1939 as soon as war's declared, I began writing poems" (quoted in Davey).

Canada had the spent the 21 years from the close of World War I until the beginning of World War II fighting for autonomy from Great Britain, which they finally achieved in 1931 when Britain passed the Statute of Westminster, a law which gave Canada the right to form its own foreign policy. But Canada's ties to the United Kingdom were hard to break, and they joined England in declaring war on Germany September 10, 1939. This was just nine days after Germany had sent troops and tank divisions into Poland, marking the beginning of the war, and just one week after Britain itself had declared war on Germany. Birney enlisted in 1941, serving as a personnel specialist with the Canadian army in Canada, Britain, and various locations in Northwest Europe, attaining the rank of major before he was sent home in 1945. In 1941 shortly before he enlisted, the Royal Canadian Navy, the Canadian Merchant Navy, and the Royal Canadian Air Force were all fighting to help keep the sea lanes of the North Atlantic free of enemy warships. Halifax, Nova Scotia, which Birney names as a threatened city in the second stanza, was a major port from which Canada shipped goods and troops to the United Kingdom. The Royal Canadian Navy's chief responsibility during the war was escort work for cargo ships. It was dangerous work and many sailors died, as much from exposure and accidents in the treacherous Atlantic waters as from enemy fire. All told, Canada lost more than 40,000 men and women in World War II, no small number for a country its size. The war affected Canadians both economically and psychologically. On the one hand, employment soared and women entered the workforce in large numbers, taking jobs traditionally performed by men. By 1944 more than 400,000 women were working in the service sector while almost that many worked in manufacturing. On the other hand, there were shortages of basic foodstuffs and goods, and luxury items were hard to come by.

Critical Overview

Birney began writing poetry in earnest after the outbreak of World War II. In a burst of creative energy he wrote many of the poems that would be included in *David and Other Poems,* his first collection. "Vancouver Lights" was one of these. Peter Aichinger writes that it is "one of the few poems Birney ever wrote that expresses any sort of pride or satisfaction in the human race and its accomplishments." Aichinger believes that the poem "suggests the cyclical pattern in the affairs of men, of grand achievement followed by wretched disaster. It is an expression of pride in man's ability to raise a Camelot at the same time that it acknowledges the probable victory of the forces of darkness in man's spirit." Frank Davey in *Earle Birney* sees "Vancouver Lights" as an indicator of Birney's own movement away from Trotskyism and towards a sense of himself as a poet. Davey writes that "Throughout the thirties he [Birney] had seen himself 'as a scholar, critic, Marxist, potential novelist,' but not as a poet." Birney biographer Cameron Elspeth considers the poem a statement of Birney's inherent distrust of humanity's capacity to do good. Elspeth writes in *Earle Birney: A Life* that "["Vancouver Lights"] is suffused with self-disgust, stark terror and a suspicion that man is headed for serf-destruction as he pollutes and destroys the planet." David Stouck agrees with this view, but elaborates on it, observing that according to Birney, humanity's capacity for violence and malevolence is mirrored by nature as well. Stouck writes in *Major Canadian Authors* that for Birney "Nature is beautiful but frightening .... [although] nature's malevolence exists primarily in the mind of the human observer." In a letter to critic Dorothy Livesay and quoted in Elspeth's biography, Birney himself says about the poem that "What I want to say, though I grant I may not have said it, is something much more complicated and tenuous□that man has now reached a stage in his development in which for the first time he has created the conditions for his own destruction."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Bruce Meyer is the director of the creative writing program at the University ofToronto. He has taught at several Canadian universities and is the author of three collections of poetry. In the following essay, Meyer suggests that Birney's poem represents humankind as a Prometheus who is responsible for both his own success and his own failure. The failure threatens to destroy the whole race, but there is a faint hope for ultimate survival.

The late Canadian literary critic, Northrop Frye, used to tell a story about Earle Birney's poem "Vancouver Lights" and the events of one single winter evening that helped Frye, at least spiritually, through the darkest days of World War II. Just before Christmas in 1941, the prospects for Canada and Great Britain looked dim. Earlier in the month, the garrison at Hong Kong had fallen□taking with it a third of the Canadian Army, many of them University ofToronto students. The United States Pacific fleet had been mauled at Pearl Harbor. England lay devastated during the worst days of the Blitz and its gradually dwindling air force was a thin line of dogged determination that lay between the British Empire and Nazi domination. The overwhelming drain on manpower, from both the call to arms and the call to factory work had depleted the enrollment at the University of Toronto to the point where the university was about to close its doors and submit to the veil of darkness that lay across the free world.

On that winter night shortly before Christmas in 1941, Frye gathered at Earle Birney's apartment on Hazelton Avenue along with a group of other Canadian poets that included the Canadian poet laureate E. J. Pratt, and younger voices such as Roy Daniels and A. J. M. Smith. Binrey was about to leave academic life for a tour of duty in the Canadian Army (the events of which would form the basis for his comic novel, *Turvey).* Pratt opened the evening by reading his poem, "The Truant," a fantasy/satire which tells the story of how a little "three by six" foot man stands up to a huge deistic entity called "the Great Panjandrum." Daniels and Smith chimed in with their new wartime poems. Birney then followed with a poem he had written while out West to visit friends in his home city of Vancouver the previous summer.

"Vancouver Lights" was based on an actual experience that Birney had while climbing a mountain above the west coast metropolis. It was night time and, as Birney stared from the mountaintop down onto the city below, district by district of the city suddenly went black□the first of many wartime black outs. As Birney often later recalled during my many lunches with the poet, it "was as if I was witnessing the end of the world from the point-of-view of God in Heaven." Birney speculated on the annihilation of the free world and what would cause, in the words of Winston Churchill, "the lights to go out" not only "all over Europe" but around the world. At the same time, Birney was struck by the idea that even in the face of total darkness and a bleak future there still exists "a will to light and life."

It was the final line of "Vancouver Lights," that profound statement "there was light," that so moved Northrop Frye. Perhaps the light had gone out of the world for the perceivable

future, but the memory of it continued to exist, and that alone was signal enough of why the university should remain open and why Canada and the free world should be dedicated to the cause at hand. Like the defiant Prometheus who was bound and chained to the mountain side, Birney perceived the very heroic, yet ultimately responsible position of mankind for the sad state of affairs the world had become in the winter of 1941. For Frye, that paradox, the possibility of the world seeing its way clear of Fascism and mass destruction, was a signal of hope, albeit a faint one, that gave him the reassurance that the free world would endure.

Some of that hope resides in the position of the persona in "Vancouver Lights." The voice is one of an individual who finds himself lost and awed by both the splendor and the horror of the world around him. The poem begins with the phrase, "About me the night moonless wimples the mountains" as if the darkness is enveloping everything. The word "wimples" is also unique in that it signals a sense of almost cloistered withdrawal on the part of the world from the aspects of light, a humbling gesture that covers even "the mountains." That same darkness, however, is more than a habit donned to mask the glory of earth□it is a force that "sucks at the stars," as if to drain the very life force from the heart of the universe. The city below, still "throbbing" is treated almost as an amulet or jeweled talisman, a signal of vitality, beauty and elegance in an otherwise empty cosmos. The lamps of the city streets "webs the sable peninsula" (a reference to the fact that Vancouver is composed of five major peninsulas that jut into the Georgia Strait like five hands reaching into the sea). The diction and cadence of Birney's descriptions of the geographic interaction between the sea and the land are very reminiscent of the descriptions utilized by E. J. Pratt in many of his sea poems such as "Silences."

In fact, Birney makes a subtle tribute to Pratt's poetry in his use of the words "seajet," "buoy," and "shears," and in the cadence of the three lines in stanza one that deal with the city's venue. Also evident in the opening stanza is Birney's love of Anglo-Saxon poetry (he was, by academic profession a medievalist, and many of his poems, such as "Anglo-Saxon Street" are written in parody of Anglo-Saxon poetry). The use of alliteration in "by bridge and buoy" underscores this very elemental "Englishness" and aligns the world of "Vancouver Lights", at least in an allusory sense, to the cold, cruel world that is depicted in such early English poems as "The Wanderer" or "The Seafarer." The resulting staccato rhythm of the poem's sonics is further enhanced by the 'breaks' or 'rests' within the lines where the addition of spaces creates a series of halting pauses, breathing spots, where a tentativeness enters the voice. Birney recorded this poem many times (the last recording with the percussion group Nexus shortly before his final illness) and it is evident from listening to these recordings that the pauses were intended to punctuate with silence the rhythms of the lines and, in a very Black Mountain fashion (in later editions of the poem Birney removed his punctuation) to serve as points of grammatical organization. As is the case with Anglo-Saxon masterpieces, "Vancouver Lights" is intended to be an oral poem, a voice sounding in the darkness and taking up Wilfred Owen's claim that "the purpose of poetry is to warn."

The opening stanza concludes with a brief description of the lighthouse: "Across [to] the firefly / haze of a ship on the gulf's erased horizon." What the first stanza of poem

establishes is the tension between what is and all that might vanquish it. The language, for its energy and beauty of description, flirts with an overwhelmingly negative presence where the "horizon" is "erased" and the cloaking darkness that "wimples the mountains" is set to humble everything that is visible either to the eye or the spirit. The reader is told from the outset that this is a poem about fear, and about confronting the challenge of a world where possibilities are suddenly diminishing.

The second and third stanzas of the poem attempt to trace the sequence within the cause and effect relationship that underlies that moment in history. History, in this sense, is not perceived in the Nineteenth century idiom of "progress" but as a kind of 'spreading-out' or European culture to the point where the problems of European culture have become the problems of the world. The years, he says, have been "feckless" and the source for the problems is "Europe's bog." This description of Euro-cultural growth serves to make the world a small place where even the "outpost," that supposed safe haven on the very edge of the world is under the thumb of that darkness which emanated from the very heart of European culture. In this sense, Birney is presenting an indictment as well as an apology for his culture; the bad and the good seem so inextricably intertwined that only a 'Promethean' effort of distinction can separate them. In the world of "Vancouver Lights," eschatology is a gray area; and while one is attempting to sort it out, the "primal ink" of spiritual and political darkness continues to flow. One is reminded of C. Day Lewis's famous lines on the eve of the Second World War that mankind was confronted with the dilemma of "defending the bad against the worse." Politically speaking, "Vancouver Lights" shares that same sense of ambivalence, a distrust of the verities of the world which the century had called into question. Birney was, during the Thirties, a committed Communist and spent almost a year and a half living with Leon Trotsky and his family in Mexico. His sense of political cynicism feeds into the poem in the subtle distrust of culture and in the tone of ambivalence in the poem's delineation of good and evil. In this sense, "Vancouver Lights" is not a typical wartime poem. It does not offer a "rah-rah" take on events or a political "cause." Instead, the persona takes the position of the epic observer, the voice that is both elevated and objective. The point-of-view is not of someone on one side or another in the war, but that of a besieged humanity. "We are the spark beleaguered," he announces. The darkness that the persona faces is "the changeless night" where the end result of human suffering is the ultimate negation of death where the "black Experimentress," perhaps fate but certainly nothingness, stares back at the observer and leaves him with an acute sense of littleness and Kierkegaardian angst. Even the sun, that eternal source of light (associated since Classical times with Phoebus Apollo, the god of light and learning) is but a "bubble" on the side of the "Experimentress," and the endless night, "the Nubian" dwarfs the tiny sparks of possibility in the cosmos by wearing the stars as a "necklace of Nebulae."

What remains for mankind among all these shards of light and dying sparks, is the determination to articulate itself into existence. "Yet we must speak" is a declaration that there is a divine spark in mankind, an animate and life-affirming force, that cannot be snuffed out. Just as Prometheus stole the gift of fire from the gods, so mankind is driven [by] the scintillation, the energy, to confirm and reconfirm "our will." What mankind has made, beyond culture, beyond politics and beyond civilization, is an on-going pact with

himself to exist: "we conjured these flames." What is important regardless "if the murk devour and none weave again in gossamer" is that mankind has sent a signal to the cosmos that "there was light" and that "these rays were ours," as if the dimming lights of the city were affirmations of the marvel of humanity and footprints left on a dark beach even as the tide comes in. In a statement that would be sounded by the likes of William Faulkner in his Nobel speech, Birney sees mankind as the master of its own fate, where the decision to exist or to cease rests solely in its own will: "No one bound Prometheus Himself he chained / and consumed his own bright liver." Many critics of Birney's have pointed out that the phrase "the blast that snuffed us" is eerily prophetic and foreshadows the coming of the atomic bomb and the nuclear age. What Birney did acknowledge is that he feared that mankind was on the verge of annihilating itself and that he sought to produce a poem that would warn while offering the choice between existence and destruction.

The final line, "there was light," reverberates with the tone of ambivalence that is carried throughout the poem. There was light. Will there be light again? What does the light say and to whom? As much as the final statement is a conclusion, it is not a conclusion□it is the presentation of a future thesis; yet it is the open-endedness of the statement that offers a sense of hope. It was this sense of hope that Northrop Frye acknowledged that night in Birney's apartment on Hazel-ton Avenue. What Frye saw was not the fear in the persona's words, but the presence of possibilities past, present and future, that even if the light should go out of the world, there had been enough of it, particle traces floating through the universe, to suggest that what was here was meaningful, alive and worth preserving.

Source: Bruce Meyer, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Chris Semansky's poetry, essays, and stories appear regularly in literary magazines and journals. In the following essay, Semansky explores how Birney uses the imagery of light and darkness in "Vancouver Lights" to question and comment on the meaning of human existence.

For most of his life Earle Birney was a relentless traveler and seeker of new experiences, concerned as much with the processes of becoming as he was with the work of being. Raised on the outskirts of the Canadian wilderness, Birney was also acutely attuned to nature and its processes. His best poems embrace both his passion for exploration of life's meaning and his experience with the natural world. "Vancouver Lights," included in *David and Other Poems,* his first collection, is one such poem. In it, Birney uses light and darkness in their various and varied forms as its central metaphoric images, allowing him to meditate on the relationships between insight and vision, between how we see the physical world and what sense we make of it. Birney's typographic use of space itself also underscores the poem's preoccupation with seeing.

We are introduced to light and darkness in the first stanza. Darkness is the province of space and has the capacity to alter the natural world for the speaker. The night "wraps ocean land air" and "sucks at the stars." Birney takes up the impersonal but ominously omnivorous quality of darkness later in the poem but here it serves as the backdrop which enables the speaker to see light as well. For without the darkness, the speaker would be unable to witness "The city throbbing below." In this stanza it is light which, underscoring the poems mythic theme of good versus evil, fights against the darkness. The speaker sees "strands" of it which "falter and halt," and through a "firefly / haze" spies the "lambent spokes of a lighthouse." The thinness and attenuated nature of the light he describes is apropos for what they signify: humanity's striving in the dark for meaning. This striving occurs, as Birney tells us in the second stanza, "Through the feckless years," underscoring the inherent futility of human effort. The light in this stanza similarly has a temporal quality to it. The city's lights are described as a "quilt of lamps" (lamps are lighted and go out) and the city itself as a "winking / outpost." Darkness is the constant, Birney implies, the backdrop of time and existence itself, the natural state to which all things and beings eventually revert. Again, he figures darkness as a consuming force, this time in the guise of the oceans, which threaten civilization, as represented by the Canadian city of Halifax, located in Nova Scotia on the country's east coast. The "primal ink," another form of darkness, here represents the world's many wars and conflicts at this time. Its "flooding" highlights the ways in which these wars are spilling and threatening to spill over onto every continent. In his 1971 work *Earle Birney,* Richard Robillard writes that "This section suggests the question: Can we, having lived through careless, thoughtless, spiritless years, read the message of the 'primal ink'? The great irony is, of course, that there is little whiteness or brightness to set off the message: the ink floods almost the whole page."

Birney emphasizes the constancy of the dark in the third stanza where□in its incarnation as night□he describes it as "changeless," yet "pulsing," a kind of symbolic

blood in which even planets are shown to be "fragile," presumably because they too will succumb to time. In this "atmosphere" Birney locates humanity as "a spark beleaguered / by darkness." The paradox *and the* irony is that the very thing which gives birth to the light is responsible for its death. The symbol of light representing deity and life and darkness representing evil and death is universal. In this vein the speaker's question□"how shall we utter our fear that the black Experimentress / will never in the range of her microscope find it?"□can also be read as an implicit death wish, for to be found surely means to be devoured, blotted out. Even Phoebus Apollo, the Sun God, does not stand a chance against darkness; he is merely "a bubble that dries on Her slide." Calling darkness an "Experimentress" also underscores an intentionality behind it, a force which is merely playing, "experimenting," and that humanity falls within the scope of the potential subjects on which she experiments. Birney's biographer Elspeth Cameron believed that after Birney lost faith in Trotsky, who epitomized for him the "visionary male leader," "What was left was the principle of female power represented not by humanist vision but by scientific investigation."

The encroaching darkness is no reason, however, for humanity not to try, not to voice its place in the darkness. In the fourth stanza, the speaker, building on his own identity as a representative spokesman for humanity, insists on this, suggesting even that language itself, in the form of speech, is a form of salvation, of hope.

Yet we must speak we the unique glowworms

Out of the waters and rocks of our little world

we conjured these flames

hooped these sparks by our will

From blankness and cold we fashioned

stars

to our size and signalled Aldebaran

This must we say whoever may be to hear us

if murk devour and none weave again in gossamer:

These rays were ours

we made and unmade them Not the shudder of

continents

doused us the moon's passion nor crash of comets

In the fathomless heat of our dwarfdom our

dream's combustion

we contrived the power the blast that snuffed us

No one bound Prometheus

Himself he chained and consumed his own bright liver

O stranger Plutonian descendant

or beast in the stretching

night-there was light

Describing humanity as "unique glowworms" is apt, as the poem returns again and again to the claim that humanity has created itself, and so is responsible for its own condition. Figuring human beings as worms and insects (spiders weave gossamer webs) makes sense in that both create worlds out of themselves, the former reproducing itself, the latter spinning its own abode. But they are also sub-human species and hence underscore humanity's own insignificance in relation to the universe and history itself.

Humanity contains both the forces of light and the forces of darkness, Birney suggests. We can either choose to live or choose to destroy ourselves: "We contrived the power the blast that snuffed us", he says. The "black Experimentress" did not incite man to make war; it was "Not the shudder of continents / ... the moon's passion nor crash of comets", but man himself who makes and unmakes his own light. In *Major Canadian Authors* David Stouck observes that "Humankind's capacity to create light... is threatened by a primal instinct for violence and destruction." If indeed these forces are built into human beings, as the poem implies, then the speaker's insistence that humanity has created its own mess because it chose to is a contradiction at best, disingenuous at worse. The lines make more sense if we see it as a contradiction. In this way Birney's probing examination of humanity's drive to both destroy and save itself is echoed in the poem's own logic, something of which the writer may or may not be aware. As if to emphasize the (apparently) irresolvable nature of the conflict, the poem juxtaposes Pluto and Prometheus in the last stanza, again foregrounding the mythic battle between light and darkness, this time in the figures of the god of fire and the god of the underworld. The poem ends with an image of light, echoing the light of Genesis at the beginning of the world. The prophetic tone of these last lines in particular and of the entire poem in general, position the speaker as a kind of demi-god who has also has the power to create and destroy the world through his words.

Source: Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Adaptations

The National Film Board of Canada produced a film in 1981 titled *Earle Birney: Portrait of a Poet.*

High Barnet of Toronto has sound recordings of Birney reading his poems.

C.B.C. Learning Systems of Toronto has produced a cassette by Birney called *The Creative Writer.*

A font of information about Earle Birney can be found on this website dedicated to him: http:// www.cariboo.bc.ca/ae/E_BIRNEY/Home.htm

Bushed, with words by Earle Birney and music by Nancy Telfer, can be purchased from Waterloo Music of Waterloo, Ontario.

The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education has produced a number of Birney poetry readings on tape.

In 1966 the Canadian Broadcasting System produced an audiocassette of Birney reading his poems.

In 1994 the National Film Board of Canada produced a short animated film of Earle Birney's expressive interpretation of "Trawna Tuh Belvul," a poem by Knayjim Psifik. This film is an adventure aboard a train. The characters on the train, their stories, and the evocative blend of rail sounds, original music, and Earle Birney's reading of the poem all contribute to a memorable experience of the journey from Toronto to Belleville, Ontario.

The University ofToronto sponsors a Canadian Poetry website, with useful and informative links to Canadian poetry journals and information on Canadian poets including Earle Birney: http://www.library.utoronto.ca/canpoetry/

Topics for Further Study

Existentialism, a philosophy which holds that humanity is essentially alone in the universe and that individuals choose their own destinies, was a popular idea in the mid-twentieth century. After researching existentialist thinking, write an essay exploring how "Vancouver Lights" can be seen as an example of this philosophy. Use lines or phrases from the poem to support your claims.

Find a place of high altitude which affords a view of your city or town and go there on a moonless night. Write a short descriptive essay on your observations, paying particular attention to how the city lights change how you see what surrounds them.

After researching the history and causes of World War II, write a speculative essay proposing how you think the war could have been avoided.

Compare and Contrast

1941: Adolf Hitler becomes Commander-in-Chief of the German army.

Today: Right-wing military groups and neo-Nazis are gaining in popularity in Germany once again.

1941: German writer Bertolt Brecht's play about the absurdity of war, *Mother Courage,* is staged for the first time, foregrounding the relationships between capitalism and war.

1991: President George Bush sends American troops to the Persian Gulf to fight against Iraqi troops who have invaded Kuwait, claiming that it is in America's political as well as economic interest.

1943: Joe Louis knocks out Buddy Baer to retain the world heavyweight boxing championship. Boxing's popularity is soaring.

Today: Boxing's heavyweight division is in chaos, and many of its former stars are considered to be jokes by the public. Former champion George Foreman continues to fight, though he is approaching fifty years old, and former champ Mike Tyson continues to make a spectacle of his life both inside and out of the boxing ring.

1942: Albert Camus publishes *The Stranger,* which becomes a classic text for understanding existentialism.

Today: Theories of Existentialism are a staple of literature and philosophy classes in higher education in the West.

1951: Mid-century census records Canada's population as 14 million.

Today: Canada's population stands at thirty million.

What Do I Read Next?

Frank Davey' s *Earle Birney* provides a solid and succinct introduction to the life and writings of the Canadian poet.

In 1967 M. L. Rosenthal published *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II.* This critical study describes many of the movements and individuals who have helped define landscape of poetry written in the English-speaking world in the last half of the twentieth century.

David Stouck's *Major Canadian Authors,* published in 1984, provides a comprehensive introduction to the life and works of seventeen Canadian authors from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Stouck locates the work of these writers in the context of both regional and world literature.

Out of the Shadows: Canada in the Second World War, a 1995 study by William A. B. Douglas and Brereton Greenhous, explores the contributions and sacrifices of Canada during World War II.

Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre, **published** in 1988 and edited by Walter Kaufmann, provides a strong introduction to some of the more prominent existentialist thinkers throughout history.

Further Study

Atwood, Margaret, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature,* Toronto: Anansi, 1972.

For those interested in the history and themes of Canadian literature, this is a must read. Novelist and poet Margaret Atwood provides not only an idiosyncratic thematic overview of Canadian literature but also her own polemics and manifestos on literature and the literary life.

Birney, Earle, *David and Other Poems,* Toronto: Ryerson, 1942.

Birney's first collection of poetry is also his best known and most widely praised. The collection contains "David," one of the most anthologized poems in Canadian literature, as well as "Vancouver Lights" and others. Most of the themes and many of the poetic techniques that Birney would develop throughout his career can be found here.

Cameron, Elspeth, *Earle Birney: A Life,* Toronto: Viking,1994.

Elspeth has written the definitive biography of Earle Birney. She uses Birney's volumnuous correspondence, notes, and his published and unpublished writing to construct a fascinating portrait of a complex and complicated literary figure. Cameron pays particular attention to the intersections between Birney's volatile emotional life and his productive professional life as political activist, poet, novelist, critic, and teacher.

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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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