

LITERARY CRITICISM



High School 2022-23
NOTES

LIT CRIT NOTES 2022-2023

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Lit Crit Notes are written by **Jennifer Bussey** and her team of writers. Bussey is a freelance educational writer specializing in literature with almost 25 years' experience and has authored Hexco's Lit Crit products since 1999. She has a B.A. in English Literature and an M.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies. Her team consists of **Luke Hardt, Lisa Holmes, and Joshua Prybylski**. Hardt is a retired Professor of Theater with over 30 years' experience teaching at the college level, including every aspect of drama from understanding plays to performing them. He has directed more than 85 plays in his career. Holmes is an educational writer with over 20 years' experience as a high school English teacher, exploring texts across genres and literary periods with numerous students. In addition, she is an experienced writer of book abstracts, lessons, and tests. Przybylski has over 10 years' experience as a teacher--both in person and online--and as a writer and researcher. His experience with high school students spans an impressive range of abilities, interests, and cultural backgrounds, and his expert grasp of literature make him uniquely skilled in opening up literary texts to students.

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FRANKENSTEIN

By Mary Shelley

AUTHOR PROFILE

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin--later known as Mary Shelley--was born on August 30, 1797, in London, England. Her father, William Godwin, was a daring political writer and philosopher and an early proponent of utilitarianism and anarchism. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was a highly-regarded feminist philosopher, historian, and author.

Unfortunately, Mary Wollstonecraft died shortly after Mary Shelley's birth, of complications arising from the delivery. William Godwin was devastated. While caring for the infant Mary and her older half-sister, Fanny, who was Mary Wollstonecraft's child from an affair that predated her marriage, William wrote a memoir about his beloved wife. He didn't realize that the things he would reveal about his wife's personal life would destroy her reputation. With the 1798 publication of Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, many of Wollstonecraft's former admirers denounced her as immoral and even perverse because of her struggle with depression, her affairs, and Fanny's illegitimacy.

When Mary Shelley was four years old, William remarried. Mary Jane Clairmont and her two children, Charles and Claire, moved into the Godwin household. This was the beginning of a life of conflict between Mary Shelley and her father's new wife. Their antipathy toward one another was so strong that Mary was temporarily sent away in her early teens to live with family friends in Scotland. Mary Jane Clairmont Godwin became the only significant female publisher operating in London. It was her ability more than her husband's that was responsible for the success of M. J. Godwin & Co, the publisher of the well-received "Juvenile Library" collection. But Mary Shelley never liked or respected her father's second wife, and Mary Jane Clairmont seems to have openly favored her daughter Claire over both Mary and Fanny.

Claire was sent away to be educated, for instance, but Mary Jane Clairmont refused to allow Mary Shelley the same privilege. Fortunately for Mary Shelley, her father ensured that she received some education at home. He encouraged young Mary to write, allowed her unfettered access to his library, and introduced her to his political philosophies and his circle of literary friends. One of the writers and philosophers who frequented the Godwin home was a young radical named Percy Shelley. Despite the fact that he was a married man and the father of an eleven-month-old daughter, Percy began a romance with the teenaged Mary.

In June of 1814, Mary and Percy announced their love to William Godwin and declared their intention to live together. Godwin threw Percy out of the house and forbade Mary from seeing him. In response, Mary, her step-sister Claire, and Percy fled together to Europe. They traveled across France to Switzerland, where Percy hoped his wife Harriet, now pregnant with their second child, would bring him some of the money he had left in England for her. Harriet did not arrive with funds for Percy, and the trio soon had to return to England.

By this point, Mary was also pregnant with Percy's child. She was depressed by their social isolation and financial circumstances. Her depression only worsened when Harriet, Percy's wife, gave birth to a male heir who would be the legitimate heir to Percy's father's fortune and title. In February of 1815, Mary and Percy's daughter was born prematurely and died ten days later. Mary's journal from this time records the terrible moment that she woke to find her daughter dead. It also tells of a recurring nightmare she had afterward, in which her daughter was still alive and only appeared dead due to extreme cold. In her dream, Mary took the baby close to the fire and rubbed her skin to warm her, bringing her back to life.

THEMES

THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF HUMANITY

The Romantics were profoundly influenced by the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. One of Rousseau's most famous ideas is that of "natural man." Rousseau argued that human beings come into the world with only two pre-existing dispositions: compassion and self-preservation. Humans are not born good or evil, but their natural compassion means that all humans have the *capacity* to be good. As De Lacey tells the creature, "The hearts of men, when unprejudiced by any obvious self-interest, are full of brotherly love and charity." It is only the corrupting influence of society that creates artificial desires and provokes prejudice, thereby creating evil in some people.

This is clearly what happens to the creature. At first, in his natural state, he is content in nature and full of good-will, so long as he does not feel threatened. He represents what Rousseau called *homme sauvage* (savage man, or natural man). This is likely why, when Walton first spies the creature from across the ice, Shelley has Walton describe the creature as "a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island." As he travels, the creature learns to feed himself a vegetarian diet, discovers fire, and learns through the music of birds and instruments to transform his inarticulate grunting into language--exactly as Rousseau portrays his *homme sauvage* doing in various books and essays.

But finally, the creature's constant negative encounters with others corrupt his nature. Convinced that his fate is to be alone, persecuted, and cut off from the pleasures that others seem to enjoy, he becomes angry, jealous, and violent.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY AND OF TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR ONE'S PROGENY

"Our first duty is to render those to whom we gave birth, wise, virtuous, and happy."

—Mary Shelley, *Lives of the Most Eminent Literary and Scientific Men of France (1839)*

Although Mary Shelley was brought up to revere the ideas of Rousseau--and indeed, did admire much of the man's philosophy--she was unsparing in her 1839 biography of Rousseau. For Rousseau had committed what, to Shelley, was an unpardonable moral crime. Despite being well known for his ideas about the importance of nurturing and educating children, Rousseau abandoned each of his five children to an orphanage soon after their birth. Orphanages in Rousseau's time took little interest in the health and well-being of their charges, and historians think it unlikely that any of Rousseau's children survived to adulthood. Mary Shelley made it clear in her biography that Rousseau might have been a great thinker, but he was a failure as a family man and father.

Shelley's friendship with Byron provided her with yet another example of the devastating consequences of abandoning a child. After Mary and Percy escorted young Allegra to Italy so that Byron could spend time with his daughter, Byron refused to return the toddler to her mother's care. Byron rapidly tired of the child and put her into the care of others. When she was three, he had her sent to a convent, and when she was five, he had her sent to an even more distant convent, despite her mother's constant pleas to return the child. Allegra died at the age of five without ever seeing her parents again.

Frankenstein contains two key portraits of family life: the Frankensteins and the De Lacey's. The narrative stresses how nurturing, generous, and loving these families are, and the reader sees the positive impact this has on the Frankenstein and De Lacey children. Alphonse and Caroline Frankenstein and M. De Lacey embody the ideal parent according to Rousseau's philosophies. He claimed that those who are responsible for the young must be benevolent, humble, and self-aware so that they can be careful educators and nurture a child's compassion and capacity for goodness.

If the elder Frankensteins and M. De Lacey embody Rousseau's ideal, Victor embodies Rousseau's (and Byron's) real-world choices. He refuses to take any responsibility whatsoever for his "progeny." Victor's

TIME

While distilling certain historical accuracies, time is manipulated at will. The Stage Manager can not only skip a few hours within the day being enacted, he can inform the audience where many of the lives they are watching will end up. Emily's return to her twelfth birthday from her grave bridges the mundane momentary with awesome eternity. Emily's journey is an Americanized version of another story from Ancient Greece. The hero of that story, too, cannot bear to relive *and* foresee the end. We live moment to moment because it is too overwhelming to love fully.

ETERNITY/THE AFTERLIFE

Wilder insists more than once that while this play may include sentiment, it is not *sentimental*. The dead are not sad, but they remain caught in a process of leaving their earthly memories. Interestingly, though all the characters are Christian by faith, the depiction of their existence on the other side is inconclusive. In this way, Wilder imagines an open-ended mystical question without a limiting religious dogma. The play includes observations about the concept of light- years and how the only life we're sure exists is our own.

FULLNESS OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

According to numerous notes from theater practitioners and scholars, the play, if looked at carefully, is not cute and full of folksy charm, as it balances those depictions with tough reminders of pain (nobody says their lives are easy), ignorance (they choose to look the other way about Simon Stimson's troubles), and suffering (Emily's death while giving birth). But *Our Town* ends by endorsing the challenge for human beings to continue the effort to make things better.

STYLE

What makes Wilder's singular distinction as the rare literary artist to succeed in two categories (fiction and drama) is fully demonstrated in *Our Town*. Novelists have an omniscience limited only by their facility to create through *words*. Playwrights use words but the live art demands *action*. In creating the character of the Stage Manager, he brings to theater the ability to manipulate time, space, and action. At the same time these evocations take place, the visuals are abstracted, which heightens the emotional impact. As audiences connect with these simple rituals, the style of the play transforms minutiae to the archetypal.

CHARACTERS

THE STAGE MANAGER

The Stage Manager narrates and sometimes steps into the scenes he's describing, assuming the roles of Mr. Morgan, the drugstore owner and the minister at the wedding.

DR. FRANK GIBBS

Grover's Corner's town doctor, Julia's husband, Emily and Wally's father

JOE CROWELL

In Act I, young (11) Joe delivers the town newspaper, *The Sentinel*.

HOWIE NEWSOME

Delivers milk to Grover's Corners' residents

MRS. JULIA GIBBS

wife of Frank, mother of George and Rebecca

SONNET 138 "[WHEN MY LOVE SWEARS THAT SHE IS MADE OF TRUTH]"

LITERARY DEVICES: anastrophe (lines 7, 9, 10, 14), repetition (lines 9, 10), double meaning (line 13)

VOCABULARY: *Wherefore* means why.

THIS POEM IS ABOUT:

In this sonnet, Shakespeare is describing a relationship built on mutual deception. Despite the lying from both parties, he sees this relationship as a healthy one because, although they lie to each other about things like age and infidelity, they each know that the other is lying, and see these lies as kindness.

In the opening couplet, Shakespeare makes it clear that he knows his love lies to him, but he chooses to believe her when she says she's honest. He claims in the second couplet that he does this in order to convince her that he is young and naive about the ways of the world. He explains this dynamic further in the second quatrain. He's willing to accept her lying, as long as she's willing to accept his. Up to this point, Shakespeare hasn't been clear on exactly what his love may be lying about; we just know that she lies. In line nine, Shakespeare asks "wherefore says she not she is not unjust?" The word "unjust" has connotations not just of dishonesty but also of infidelity; the implication here is that she is cheating on him. His use of anastrophe is in full effect here with the phrase "she not she is," which creates a doubling effect, reflecting the idea that each knows the other is lying but pretends not to. So the whole line, in plain, modern English, might read "But why doesn't she say that she's unfaithful?" He follows this up with the same question from his side of the relationship: "And wherefore say not I that I am old?" We see the same doubling, confusing anastrophe, and the same question: Why not just tell the truth?

Shakespeare's answer to this question is that "seeming" or pretend trust is "love's best habit," suggesting that it is the key to a successful relationship. He reinforces this claim with another example of kind deceit in relationships: old couples don't like to be reminded of just how old they are or how long they've been together. He does this through personifying love itself when he says "age in love loves not to have years told". Age itself stands in for the old couple.

He concludes by resolving to continue this relationship, deceit and all. He uses a double meaning when he says "I lie with her and she with me," since "lie" could mean "deceive," or could refer to lying in bed with someone. The word "flattered" suggests both that they will both be pleased by this relationship dynamic, while also having a connotation of deceit.

Themes include: Love, relationships, deception, honesty.

SONNET 141 "[IN FAITH, I DO NOT LOVE THEE WITH MINE EYES]"

LITERARY DEVICES: alliteration (line 2), anaphora (lines 5, 6, 7), anastrophe (lines 2, 5, 6, 12,13), metaphor (lines 5, 7, 8)

VOCABULARY: *Unswayed* means ungoverned or uncontrolled, as in the phrase "to hold sway over something".

THIS POEM IS ABOUT:

In this sonnet, Shakespeare describes how he loves someone despite everything his senses, both physical and mental, tell him. His heart is set on this person, and he is willing to suffer the consequences. Whereas Shakespeare seemed to be critical of his lover's appearance in sonnet 130, but actually suggested that she was beyond poets' ability to properly describe, there is no double meaning here; he really is calling his love ugly in several ways, but the love he has for her is still powerful.