

2

Lesson Two

FOCUS: Historical Criticism

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “*Night Without Sleep*”

Cataract, *n.*

1. A descent of water over a steep surface; a waterfall
2. Any furious rush of water

Thwart, *adj.*

Lying crosswise or across

Torrent, *n.*

A rushing, violent stream

Knowing as much as possible about when a poet lived can be as important as knowing where he or she lived. To fully appreciate a play by Sophocles, a grasp of ancient Greek history is helpful. In the same way, the more one knows about Medieval Italy or Elizabethan England, the better for an understanding of Dante or Shakespeare. This approach to literature is called *historical criticism*. Readers who favor it study literary works and their authors within their social, cultural, and intellectual settings.

Robinson Jeffers was born in 1887 and died in 1962. During this period, scientific discoveries, technological inventions, and artistic revolutions touched every aspect of life in America. After their marriage in August 1913, Robinson and Una Jeffers hoped to live in England for a while. Before they could finalize their plans, World War I began in Europe, and they were forced to remain in America. The monumental loss of life during both World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1939-1945) affected the art and literature of this period, leading—as was the case at times with Jeffers’s work—to expressions of bitterness, nihilism, and pessimism. In the Reader’s Guide, Dana Gioia explains that Jeffers “saw the pollution of the environment, the destruction of other species, the squandering of natural resources, the recurrent urge to war, and the violent squalor of cities as the inevitable result of a species out of harmony with its own world.”



Discussion Activities

Read the quote from Jeffers cited on the inside back cover of this Teacher’s Guide. The subtitle to Jeffers’s “The Day Is a Poem” is “September 19, 1939,” the morning of a pivotal Hitler speech at Danzig. Ask students to consider the poem’s final lines—“The day is a poem: but too much / Like one of Jeffers’s, crusted with blood and barbaric omens, / Painful to excess, inhuman as a hawk’s cry.” Ask students to consider how poetry can respond to profound historical events.

“Night Without Sleep” and “The Answer” were written by Jeffers just before World War II. What do the poems reveal about his response to that gathering storm?



Writing Exercise

In the midst of a whirlwind, where does Jeffers find calm? Select one of the poems from this lesson and write an essay about Jeffers’s response to danger. Do you agree or disagree with his strategy?



Homework

Have students read two essays from the Reader’s Guide: “Jeffers and California” (pp. 8-9) and “Tor House and Hawk Tower” (pp. 10-11), then two poems by Jeffers, “The Stone Axe” and “Oh Lovely Rock.” Who is the speaker in each of these poems? How do you know?