



Poetry Synopses

Two hundred years ago, Walter Scott's poems were read everywhere, by everyone. They offered glimpses into history; presented scenes of drama, magic and intrigue; they were tragic, romantic, comedic, and human. They were also, often, incredibly long! Some of Scott's longer poems could amount to thousands of lines- which would take many hours to read, and even more to read aloud, as was popular to do.

In case you don't have those hours to spare, we've summarised several of Scott's poems featured in this resource, to help give you context and understanding of the poems when looking at excerpt with your class. You can supplement these synopses with our video summaries, which you may wish to watch or listen to with your class.

'Jock of Hazeldean' (1816)

In this work, Scott used a fragment of an older ballad as its starting point (the first verse) and then added his own composition (the verses that follow) inspired by that fragment. It was first published in Alexander Campbell's *Albyn's Anthology* in 1816. The ballad tells the tale of a young English maiden who is being forced to marry against her will. The speaker in the poem tries to convince the woman of the benefits of this marriage (the groom's good looks, bravery, status and wealth), but she only weeps in reply as she loves another- Jock of Hazeldean. On the day of the wedding, however, whilst the rest of the wedding party are waiting at the kirk, we are told that she 'was not seen' there, as she has fled away over the border with her true love, Jock of Hazeldean. The work employs typical ballad devices such as repetition of words and phrases- as ballads were traditionally oral works, the repetition made them easier to remember for both the performer, and for those listening, who may even join in.

The Lay of the Last Minstrel (1805)



This was Scott's first narrative poem- meaning, it was his first longer poem which told a story with characters and a detailed plot, much in the same way that a novel does, but instead using the shape and form of poetry to tell the tale. In this poem, a wandering poet (the Minstrel) visits a Scottish castle, and tells a story about love, war, and magic. The story he tells is as follows.

Margaret Scott of Buccleuch and Lord Henry of Cranston are in love- but their clans, the Scotts and the Kers, are enemies. Margaret's mother, Lady Margaret, does not approve of the match and decides to use magic to prevent it. To help her to do this, she sends a knight, Sir William Deloraine, to fetch a magic book which has been buried at Melrose Abbey in the grave of the long-dead wizard Michael Scott. Returning from the Abbey with the magic book, Deloraine meets Cranston; they fight, and Deloraine is wounded. Cranston has a goblin-page, who he commands to take Deloraine back to Branksome Hall. On the way the goblin finds the book of magic, and uses it. He lures Lady Margaret's young son into the forest, where the child is captured by the English, led by a man called Lord Dacre, who seeks revenge on Deloraine. The English attack Branksome Hall and, in despair of this attack and the plight of her son, Lady Margaret suggests that Dacre and Deloraine instead fight in single-handed combat. Dacre agrees. Cranston then uses the magic help of the goblin page to take the form of Deloraine, fight Dacre, and defeat him. The child is returned- and Margaret and Cranston are wed. At the wedding, the wizard returns from his grave to reclaim his magic book- and takes the goblin page with him.

The Lady of the Lake (1810)

Just as *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* was set in the Scottish Borders, Scott's 1810 poem was also set in the real geographical location of Loch Katrine in the Trossachs. James Douglas, Earl of Bothwell, has been banished from Scotland; but instead of leaving the country, together with his daughter, Ellen, he instead takes refuge at the home of Roderick Dhu at Loch Katrine. A mysterious visitor arrives, calling himself James Fitz-James, and promptly falls in love with Ellen. Ellen, however, is in love with someone else- a man called Malcolm Graeme. As Roderick is sheltering a banished man, royal forces threaten to attack his home- and so, to prevent this, Douglas travels to Stirling to surrender himself. Fitz-James offers marriage to Ellen, but she refuses. He gives her a ring which he claims would ensure any favour to be granted by the king. On his way back to Stirling, he meets Roderick, they fight, and the latter is mortally



wounded. Ellen travels to Stirling to seek her father's pardon from the King, presenting the ring to ensure the favour is granted- when she discovers that Fitz-James is the King. Her father is pardoned- the two men are reconciled, and Ellen marries Malcolm Graeme.

The Lord of the Isles (1815)

In the year before this poem was published, Scott had written *Waverley*, his first historical novel. A historical novel is a work inspired by and using a mixture of real and imagined events, places, and people. This poem similarly uses a mixture of real and imagined figures and events, such as Robert the Bruce (King of Scots) and his leadership of the Scottish Wars of Independence, and is set in real places in Scotland such as Skye and Stirling.

The poem takes place shortly after Robert the Bruce's involvement in the murder of John Comyn. Passing as a knight, the King, together with his brother Edward and sister Isabel, take shelter at Ardtornish Castle with Ronald, Lord of the Isles, and his betrothed, Edith of Lorn, on their wedding day. Edith suspects that Ronald does not love her; and indeed, when Edith's brother recognises the Bruce as the man who killed his kinsman John Comyn and tensions flare, Isabel's plea for peace and Ronald's reaction to it reveal that Ronald is in love with Isabel. The Abbot (there to conduct the wedding) gives his support to the Bruce, causing Edith and her brother to leave in fury.

Ronald joins the Bruce as he goes first to Skye, where they are joined by a mysterious minstrel-boy. When news comes of the death of King Edward, the Bruce travels to Arran where support for his cause and kingship is gathering. There he also visits Isabel, who is in a convent, and on Ronald's request suggests she marry the Lord of the Isles. However, Isabel tells her brother of her wish to be a nun. Edith, meanwhile, is disguised as the minstrel-boy, and takes a message to one of the Bruce's followers, but is captured and imprisoned by the English, and condemned to death. The Bruce storms the castle in time, saving Edith, and gaining momentum on his cause by this victory. The cause culminates in the Battle of Bannockburn, where the Bruce is victorious. Isabel takes orders and becomes a nun. Edith (encouraged by Isabel) disguises herself once more, and attends the battlefield to see for herself whether rumours of Ronald's remorse at his faithlessness are true. The two are reunited, and their engagement resumed.