

A Comprehensive Study Guide for Ezra Pound's "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter"

Ezra Pound's "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" is a captivating poem that delves into the themes of love, longing, and cultural identity. This study guide will provide an in-depth analysis of the poem, including its historical context, literary devices, and thematic significance.

Historical Context

Written in 1915, "The River-Merchant's Wife" is inspired by a ninth-century Chinese poem by Li Bai. Pound's exposure to Chinese literature during his travels in Asia strongly influenced his modernist style and his interest in exploring cross-cultural perspectives.



Study Guide for Ezra Pound's The River-Merchant's Wife by Course Hero

★★★★★ 5 out of 5

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Literary Devices

Pound employs a variety of literary devices in the poem, including:

- **Imagery:** Vivid and evocative imagery creates a strong sensory experience for the reader, transporting them into the poem's setting.
- **Irony:** The contrast between the wife's idyllic memories of her past and her present reality creates a poignant sense of irony.
- **Parallelism:** The poem's structure is characterized by a parallel structure, which reinforces the idea of contrasting perspectives and the passage of time.
- **Symbolism:** The river symbolizes the passage of time, separation, and the inevitable nature of change.

Thematic Significance

The poem explores several key themes that resonate with readers across cultures:

- **Love and Longing:** The wife's deep love for her husband and her longing for his return are central to the poem's emotional core.
- **Cultural Identity:** The poem juxtaposes Eastern and Western cultural perspectives, exploring the challenges of navigating different societal norms and expectations.
- **The Passage of Time:** The river's relentless flow serves as a reminder of the fleeting nature of life and the inevitability of change.
- **Female Empowerment:** Although the poem reflects the patriarchal norms of its time, the wife's voice and perspective are given significant weight, challenging traditional gender roles.

Detailed Analysis

Let's delve deeper into the poem's specific stanzas and analyze their meaning:

Stanza 1:

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead I played about the front gate, pulling flowers. You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse, You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums. And we went on living in the village of Chokan: Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

Analysis: This stanza introduces the wife's idyllic memories of her childhood and her first encounter with her husband. The imagery of flowers and playing horse evokes a sense of innocence and carefree youth.

Stanza 2:

At fourteen I married My Lord you. I never laughed, being bashful. Lowering my head, I looked at the wall. Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

Analysis: The transition to marriage marks a significant change for the wife. The imagery of lowering her head and avoiding eye contact reflects the traditional expectations of women in her culture.

Stanza 3:

At fifteen I stopped scowling, I desired my dust to be mingled with yours Forever and forever and forever. Why should I climb the lookout?...

Analysis: The wife's feelings of love and devotion deepen as she expresses her desire to be eternally united with her husband.

Stanza 4:

At sixteen you departed, You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling eddies, And you have been gone five months. The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

Analysis: The husband's departure and the wife's loneliness are conveyed through the desolate imagery of the swirling eddies and the mournful sounds of monkeys.

Stanza 5:

You dragged your feet when you went out. By the gate now, the moss is grown, thick and high. It trails over the jambs, It makes a soft mat, green as jade.

Analysis: The growth of moss symbolizes the passage of time and the wife's longing for her husband's return.

Stanza 6:

At thirty I closed the doors, And I sat by the window working. At fifty I gave birth to a boy. At sixty I am mourning for my father.

Analysis: The wife's life unfolds in parallel to the seasons, marking the passage of time through her domestic duties and family events.

Stanza 7:

The waters of Ch'u are clear as glass: The hill of Wu is blue as pale blue silk. But when my heart grieves, They make me weep.

Analysis: The beauty of nature contrasts with the wife's emotional pain and longing for her husband.

Pound's "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" is a powerful and evocative poem that explores universal themes of love, loss, and the passage of time. Its rich imagery, skillful use of literary devices, and poignant emotional core make it a timeless work of art.



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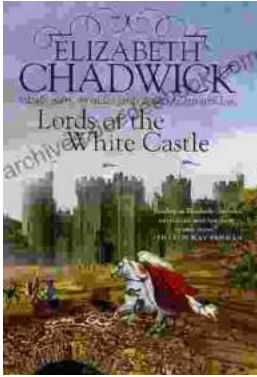
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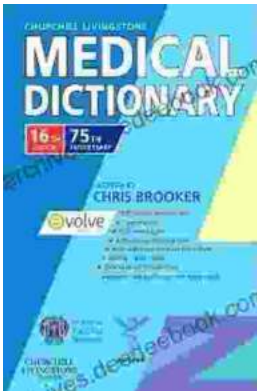
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