

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES
**“Selected Poems by Kenneth
Slessor”**

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SAMPLE

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AREA 1:

READING AND RESPONDING

Chapter 1

AUTHOR NOTES

Kenneth Adolph Slessor was born in Orange, New South Wales in 1901, the year of Australian federation. He was raised in Sydney, where he largely lived and worked until his death in 1971. Slessor completed secondary school while World War I raged. As an adolescent, he studied the Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth, Keats and Coleridge, at school.

Slessor's upbringing was heavily influenced by the morally, religiously and spiritually serious attitudes of his parents. His mother, Margaret, was a fundamentalist Presbyterian. Though Slessor's parents held rather puritanical beliefs about sex and sexuality, Slessor attributed his awareness of metaphysical processes and the depths of consciousness to the literary liberalism of his father, Robert, who was educated in Belgium and London.

Slessor seems to be attempting to shed the ideological influence of his parents in some of his later poetry. Nonetheless, Slessor's quest to answer the great metaphysical questions for himself was partly inspired by his father.

The issue of identity is a central conflict in the work and life of Slessor. In 1914, his father changed the family name from Schloessor to Slessor in order to limit possible prejudicial social judgements of his family. This name change during his vulnerable adolescent period cast Slessor into somewhat of an identity crisis. This personal conflict was manifested as a clash between his familial connections to European traditions and conformity to Australian identity and its embodiment of masculinity and mateship.

Slessor pursued a successful, life-long career as a journalist. In 1920, he was first employed by the *Sydney Sun*, where he remained until 1925 when he moved to Melbourne to work for newspapers, including the *Melbourne Punch* and *Melbourne Herald*. He returned to Sydney in 1927 and was employed by *Smith's Weekly* until 1939.

After the onset of World War II in 1939, Slessor was given an appointment as an official war correspondent, which he undertook from 1940 to 1944 travelling with Australian troops to England, Greece, the Middle East, New Guinea and North Africa, where he wrote *Beach Burial*. During the war, he also wrote the poem *An Inscription for Dog River*. After the war, Slessor returned to Sydney and resumed employment at the *Sun*, where he worked in the capacity of leader-writer and literary editor. From 1956 to 1961, he wrote for the *Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph* and was also editor of the literary magazine *Southerly*.

Through his journalism, Slessor kept in touch with the values of mainstream society and was able to experience a sense of connection with the larger community. In direct contrast, his art was a solitary practice through which he explored the depths of his inner consciousness. Slessor's art of poetry was largely practiced in

solitude and formed somewhat of a balance to his journalistic career through which he kept in touch with the community.

One of the most talented and important Australian poets, Kenneth Slessor's poetry has been the subject of much academic and critical analysis and approbation due to its timeless appeal. At the age of sixteen, his first published poem, *Goin'*, appeared in the *Bulletin* magazine in 1917. *Goin'* is about a dying soldier's memory of Sydney Harbour, thus it foreshadowed some of Slessor's well-known poems, such as *Beach Burial* and *Five Bells*, which were written much later in his career. He crafted most of his poetry during his thirties.

In 1922, Slessor married Noela Senior, who died from cancer in 1945. Slessor sought a sense of power and confidence in marrying a teenage girl who was five years younger than him. Hence, their marital union was the source of some anguish for his fairly conservative mother. In 1950, he married Pauline Bowe with whom he had a son, Paul, in 1951. His second marriage ended in divorce in 1961. Slessor's marital experiences presented interpersonal challenges and were sources of much anguish for the poet.

Slessor was deeply inspired by such friends as Norman Lindsay, Hugh McCrae, Jack Lindsay. Slessor worked with Jack Lindsay on editing an anthology of Australian poetry. Norman Lindsay and Hugh McCrae were highly respected by Slessor as literary figures, thus their influences are evident in Slessor's works of poetry and prose.

Slessor entered a period of artistic silence long before his death in 1971, and did not write any more poetry after 1944, but continued to occupy himself with literary activities.