

Janis Ian



Janis Ian began her career as a Folk singer in the 1960s, when she was barely a teenager. Her first hit single, “Society’s Child,” about an ill-fated interracial romance, was written when she was 13. While many radio stations refused to play it, the song caught the attention of classical music conductor Leonard Bernstein, who included it in a television documentary about popular music, and it became a hit. In 1976, Ian won a Grammy Award for her best-known song, “At Seventeen,” which she wrote when she was 22. The album on which it appeared, *Between the Lines*, reached No. 1 on the *Billboard* charts.

Below is an excerpt to the lyrics for “At Seventeen.” Listen to the song, and then discuss the questions below.

*I learned the truth at seventeen
That love was meant for beauty queens
And high school girls with clear skinned smiles
Who married young and then retired
The valentines I never knew
The Friday night charades of youth
Were spent on one more beautiful
At seventeen I learned the truth*

Discussion Questions:

- What is the general mood and tone of the song? What words would you use to describe it?
- What is the song about? What had the singer learned “at seventeen?”
- What kinds of attitudes about feminine beauty is the singer confronting? About traditional female roles?
- Who might have developed the roles and standards by which girls and women judge themselves? Feminist Gloria Steinem once said, “The first problem for all of us, men and women, is not to learn, but to unlearn.” What has the character in the song learned? Why might she want to “unlearn” it?
- Does the song have a good beat? How would you describe the musical style?
- How would you describe Ian’s singing? How effective is it?
- How important are the lyrics? What seems more important in the song: the tune or the words?
- Is this a personal song or a song about society? Can it be about both?
- Does the singer sound like a “girl” or a “woman”? Why?
- Why do you think this song resonated with so many listeners in the 1970s? Do you think it only appealed to females? Why or why not?

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