Bright Star! Would I Were as Steadfast as Thou Art Study Guide

Bright Star! Would I Were as Steadfast as Thou Art by John Keats

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Contents

Introduction

In the summer of 1819 Keats and his friend James Rice left for an extended stay on the Isle of Wight *J* off the southern coast of England. Keats had spent time alone on the Isle in the spring of 1817, reading Shakespeare and receiving the inspiration that led to the long poem "Endymion" as well as some of his most famous insights about the nature of art. He hoped the 1819 journey would prove equally invigorating, but he was distracted by his troubled love for Fanny Brawne. Keats had met her in December, 1818, but he was having trouble fully committing to their relationship. He wrote several letters to Fanny during his stay on the Isle, and one in particular seems to give insight into "Bright Star! Would I Were Steadfast as Thou Art." In the letter, he writes, "I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them both in the same minute." Keats's biographer Aileen Ward writes that while composing the letter, Keats witnessed the planet Venus rising outside his window. At that moment, Ward says, "doubt and distraction left him; it was only beauty, Fanny's and the star's, that mattered."

"Bright Star!" considers a similar moment, and the sonnet is considered one of Keats's loveliest and most paradoxical. The speaker of the poem wishes he were as eternal as a star that keeps watch like a sleepless, solitary, and religious hermit over the "moving waters" and the "soft-fallen mask / Of snow." But while he longs for this unchanging state, he does not wish to exist by himself, in "lone splendor." Rather, he longs to be "Awake for ever" and "Pillowed upon my fair love's ripening breast." Unfortunately, these two desires□to experience love and to be eternal□do not go together. To love, he must be human, and therefore not an unchanging thing like the star. The speaker seems to reveal an awareness of this in the final line of the poem. He wishes to "live ever" in love, but to be in love means to be human, which means that the speaker and the love he feels for the woman will change and eventually die. The only other possibility he can imagine is to "swoon to death." This can be interpreted to mean that he wishes to die at a moment when he is experiencing the ecstasy of love. Despite the awareness that the speaker seems to express about the paradox of having love and immortality, the poem as a whole can also be seen as the speaker's plea to have both of these qualities, however impossible that may be.

Author Biography

Born in 1795, Keats, the son of a stablekeeper, was raised in Moorfields, London, and attended the Clarke School in Enfield. The death of his mother in 1810 left Keats and his three younger siblings in the care of a guardian, Richard Abbey. Although Keats was apprenticed to an apothecary, he soon realized that writing was his true talent, and he decided to become a poet. Forced to hide his ambition from Abbey, who would not have sanctioned it, Keats instead entered Guy's and St. Thomas's Hospitals in London, becoming an apothecary in 1816 and continuing his studies to become a surgeon. When he reached the age of twenty-one, Keats was free of Abbey's jurisdiction. Supported by his small inheritance, he devoted himself to writing. Keats also began associating with artists and writers, among them Leigh Hunt, who published Keats's first poems in his journal, the *Examiner.* But within a few years the poet experienced the first symptoms of tuberculosis, the disease that had killed his mother and brother. He continued writing and reading the great works of literature. He also fell in love with Fanny Brawne, a neighbor's daughter, though his poor health and financial difficulties made marriage impossible. He published a final work, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems,* which included his famous odes and the unfinished narrative, *Hyperion: A Fragment.* Keats traveled to Italy in 1820 in an effort to improve his health but died in Rome the following year at the age of 26.

Poem Text

Bright star! would I were steadfast as thou art-

Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night,

And watching, with eternal lids apart,

Like Nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,

The moving waters at their priestlike task

Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,

Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask

Of snow upon the mountains and the moors□

No□yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,

Pillowed upon my fair love's ripening breast,

To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,

Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,

Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,

And so live ever□or else swoon to death.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4:

In the opening lines, the poet establishes the image of the star that is the central focus of the poem. The star is said to be eternal ("patient"), unchanging ("sleepless"), and beyond the speaker's immediate grasp ("aloft"). Furthermore, the star is described as watching over earth, rather than being watched by someone. As a result, the star nearly pushes the speaker's presence out of the octave□the poem's first eight lines: the word "I" is mentioned only in the first line. This is indicative of a change that occurred in Keats's work as his career progressed. His earlier poems are more concerned with self-consciousness and personal matters but his later work, such as "Bright Star! Would I Were Steadfast as Thou Art," include a more harmonious acceptance of nature for what it is, beyond the self s interpretation of it.

Lines 5-8:

The second part of the octave describes what the star watches. Here, two symbols emerge, both suggesting the idea of pureness. The first is the "moving waters" the star watches over. The waters here take on a spiritual significance, their "ablution" suggesting religious purification, "a priestlike task" that is performed on the "human shores." The second symbol is contained in the image of snow: "the new soft-fallen mask" that covers "the mountains and the moors." By introducing these images, the speaker seems to identify with those things that can, in some sense, make humans pure or spiritual. Perhaps he feels this to be a way to transcend the limitations of human life□the changes and eventual decay that result in death.

Lines 9-14:

In the sestet, the speaker turns from the star's existence to his own. Keats uses related imagery to emphasize this process. In lines 5 and 6 he spoke of the moving waters washing the shore, an image that suggests the rising and falling of ocean waves. In line 11, the reference is made to the "soft fall and swell" of the woman's breast, which also suggests water and waves.

In comparing himself to the star, however, the speaker wishes for something the star does not have: steadfastness without solitude. Though he wishes to be "still unchangeable" like the star, he wishes his eternity to be in the context of human love: to be "Pillowed" upon his love's breast. The breast, itself a symbol of fertility, is described as "ripening." But while fertility is the organic basis of life, the star's steadfastness is "aloft," or far above such this process. Thus, a paradox is created. While the star is merely "watching" the "moving waters," the speaker wishes to actually "feel" his love' s living body. His desire is not to exist in "lone splendor" but rather to be in "unchangeable" proximity with his love□to be, in other words, eternally human.

This, of course, is impossible. The qualities that make the star eternal are non-human ones. While the star fails to sense the procession of time□it is "patient"□the speaker envisions an eternity of "sweet unrest." Thus, in the final two lines there are two mutually exclusive possibilities. On the one hand, the speaker can live in the sensual experience of love, which, because it is characterized by the slipping away of apparent time, seems to be "for ever." Failing that, the speaker hopes he might "swoon to death" at the moment of purest happiness.

Themes

Art and Experience

The qualities that Keats attributes to the star in this poem are the qualities of the artist - it is said to be "watching, with eternal lids apart," while remaining uninvolved in the events that it is witness to. In this particular case, the observations are made of nature, which is described as being holy, "priest-like" acts, while the star that observes them is also described with the religious term "Eremite." There is a difference in their religious qualities, though, as the observer keeps aloof, removed from the situation. It all adds up to the reverent stance that Keats took toward his artistry and the things that he wrote about, particularly when the subject matter was nature, which he held in the kind of esteem that many people reserve for God. To Keats, it was the artist's goal to be able to observe and fully understand her/his subject without interfering with it, so that it could be recorded as it existed, with no bias or interference. The reference in line 7 to "grazing" the "mask" of snow might be meant to imply that, as the poet saw it, the star could undo that mask to know the reality beneath, or it could mean that observing the contours of the mask closely enough could lead one to understanding what the mask hides. Keats's view of the relationship between the artist and experience is somewhat unique and unexpected from a poet who led an active life: in countless novels and memoirs, artists are seen trying to immerse themselves in experience in order to give themselves true understanding of their subjects. In this poem Keats draws a line between observation and experience, presenting the two as mutually exclusive, so that a person cannot, try as he might, have both at the same time.

Change and Transformation

The problem facing the speaker in this poem is that he would like to stop all change, to freeze things at one particularly wonderful moment, but he realizes that doing so would be the opposite of living life, that life *is* change, even when that change is something as small as the motion of his lover's breathing. In the first part of the poem, the octet, he focuses on images of nature that either do not change or else show changes that are part of a larger pattern that does not change. The oceans do move constantly, from our earthly perspective, but from a star's perspective they would look as constant as a star would from Earth. Similarly, snowflakes fall but the snow that blankets or "masks" hills and fields of a countryside changes the color but retains the land's original shape. From a great distance, no transformation is discernible. Keats, aware of his impending death from tuberculosis, would naturally have a reason to fear change, and he would have wished to stop the clock before his life ran out of minutes, but, as he admits here, doing so would mean missing out on life's pleasures. In the end he notes that the ideal would be for time to stop at a moment when he is wrapped up in one of those pleasures, such as when lying with his lover. He could live within such a moment for the rest of eternity. In the last four lines he punctuates this idea with the phrases "To feel for ever," "Awake for ever," and "And so live for ever." The poem's sad tone comes from the fact that the

speaker knows that it could never be, that as a living being he could never, like the star, stay the same from one moment to the next.

Death

The sudden appearance of death in the last line of this poem might take readers by surprise, especially since the preceding lines of the sestet had provided gentle images of life, such as the lover's breathing and the hint of fertility in the "ripening" breast. This reversal should not come as too much of a shock, though, given that, by the fourteenth line, the speaker has already wedged himself into an unsolvable predicament. Some of the complexity of life that he is getting at here is implied in the poem's twisted language. For instance, lines 2 through 9, starting with "Not" and drifting from that thought until "No-," leave one idea after the next unfinished, so that the subject that began the poem, the speaker's actual life, is forgotten. It becomes difficult for the reader to follow the central idea as it loops off, one prepositional phrase leading from the last, until, like life, the poem's central unity is just a mass of knots that cannot be untangled at the end, just abandoned. The air of contradiction is captured in the last line: "And so live forever - or else swoon to death." Eternal life might logically be paired with a long life, or instant death considered beside dying soon, but mentioning these two ideas that are so opposite just does not seem to make sense. This is the nature of paradox, to drive readers to a deeper level of thought by canceling out their preconceived notions. As a matter of fact, death and eternal life do have something in common: they both last forever. This poem makes the point that at a moment of perfect bliss, this speaker could accept either death or eternal life, because either would freeze the moment and allow him to continue on in the same way forever - to be "steadfast."

Style

"Bright Star! Would I Were Steadfast as Thou Art" is a sonnet, a traditional poetic form characterized by its length of fourteen lines and its use of a set rhyme scheme. Although there are many variations on the sonnet form, most are based on the two major types: the Petrarchan, or Italian, sonnet and the Shakespearean, or English, sonnet. In different ways, "Bright Star!" resembles both. While its rhyme scheme is that of the Shakespearean form three quatrains rhyming *abab cdcd efef,* followed by a couplet rhyming *gg*its thematic division most closely follows the Petrarchan model. In this type of sonnet, the first eight lines, or the octave, generally present some kind of question, doubt, desire, or vision of the ideal. The last six lines, or the sestet, generally answer the question, ease the doubt, satisfy the desire, or fulfill the vision. In Keats's poem, the first eight lines explore the steadfastness of the star, which watches over nature "with eternal lids apart." The speaker longs to be just "as steadfast," yet, like the star, he needs something to watch over. In the sestet, he turns his attention to his love, the object of his eternal vigilance.

Historical Context

Discussion of English Romantic poets usually refers to the small handful who wrote in a short period of time around the turn of the nineteenth century. Three poets in particular—Keats, Lord Byron, and Percy Shelley—dominate the public's imagination of what a Romantic poet is like. All three were friends and associates, they were gifted and serious about artistry, and all three died relatively young, leaving their poetry to be associated with the compelling blend of youth and doom. Romanticism, in fact, can be seen in almost all poetry, with stylistic strains going back at least to Shakespeare's peer Edmund Spenser (1553-1599), whose allegorical epic *The Faerie Queen* was to have a profound influence on Keats in the 1800's. It was the generation immediately preceding Keats's, though, that brought Romanticism into its own as a conscious artistic practice. A strong influence on those early Romantics was Thomas Chatterton, who killed himself in 1770, just before his eighteenth birthday, out of despair over the lack of critical reception for his works. Chatterton had a talent for mimicking the penmanship and language of the Middle Ages, and at age fifteen he published a collection of poems attributed to Thomas Rowley, a fifteenth-century poet he had made up. This nostalgia for the long-ago past became a key element of writing of the time, and is strongly evident in the works of the Scottish poet Robert Burns (1759-1796) who is usually considered a quasi-Romantic poet, and of Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), who started his career writing mediocre poems but became an important part of literary history with historical romance novels. In the last years of the eighteenth century William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge began Romanticism as we talk about it today. Both poets were free-thinkers, somewhat radical, ready to change conventional assumptions.

A main influence on them, and on the Romantic movements all over the world and in all different branches of art and philosophy, was the French Revolution. The central force of the Romantic movement was the importance placed on individuality, and the French Revolution was the key moment in world history when the rights of individuals came to be recognized. It marked the shift from a feudal society, where citizens were locked into the social fate that they inherited. Previously, about three percent of the population had owned most of the land in France and held all of the political power, while the other ninety-seven percent worked to pay rent and taxes with no hope of social gain. The American Revolution from 1776 to 1783 prompted the citizens of France to act against this unfair system. It showed them an example of a society in which the monarchy was dismissed in favor of democratic elections that would enact the will of the common person. The French King, Louis XVI, had been supporting the Americans against his long-standing enemies, the British, and had tripled the amount that was due on the public debt. To cover the payments, greater taxes were levied, putting even more pressure on the taxpayers and pushing them even closer to revolution. The revolution began in 1789 when people panicked over the rumor that the nobility, in response to the growing political power being demanded by the commoners, planned to collect all of the nation's grain and ship it abroad, to starve the population. What started with ideals of liberty, equality and respect for all broke down into violence. Nobles, including the King

and Queen, were captured and beheaded. Between 1793 and 1794 seventeen thousand people were put to death during a period that came to be known as the Reign of Terror. To take advantage of the violence and confusion in France's political system, enemy nations, Austria, Prussia, the Netherlands, Spain, Sardinia, and Great Britain stayed on the offensive. France was able to hold up against them by conscripting more and more people into the army. The new revolutionary government was turning out to be just as hard on the common citizens as the aristocracy had been. In 1799 a powerful military leader, Napoleon Bonaparte, rose up to lead the government: he disbanded the government of the people almost immediately, ruled with absolute authority, and in a few years proclaimed himself Emperor for Life, putting France back into the political inequality that had sparked the revolution.

Coleridge and Wordsworth had each witnessed the events in France and had been stirred by the early revolution's promise of respect for the individual but had been horrified by the bloody chaos that resulted. The two poets Coleridge and Wordsworth met and became friends in 1795, and they both ended up writing poetry that was private, that emphasized nature and history and personality, that looked sadly at the world without pretending that it could be made better with political solutions. In 1798 they published a collection of poems together, anonymously, called *Lyrical Ballads.* When it was reissued in 1800, it included a preface that outlined their theories of poetry, and that preface turned out to be one of the most influential poetic manifestos in history. In it, they rejected things that tied poetry too closely to the society the poet lived in; things like sophistication and elevated diction and current events were to be avoided, while a deep appreciation of the serf and its relationship with nature were to be cultivated. By the late 1810s, their influence had evolved, in the works of Keats, Byron and Shelley, into a poetic stance that showed the Romantic poet as a lonesome, brooding soul who felt misunderstood, alienated within his own time and place, overcome by powerful desires that society wanted to repress.

Critical Overview

In her book *John Keats,* Aileen Ward discusses the conflicts Keats weighs in "Bright Star! Would I Were Steadfast as Thou Art." She believes that the poem represents a way for Keats to come to terms with contrasting elements that he addressed in other works. In the poetic odes that he wrote, including "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Keats considered the difference, as Ward puts it, between "the timeless but unreal perfection of art and the time-bound realizations of life." In other words, Keats was enthralled by the beauty and permanence of art and nature, but he knew that the human experience was different, limited by time and self-awareness. To resolve this dilemma, "Bright Star!" considers, in Ward's words, an "ideal moment made actual." This moment is "a vision of death at the moment of supreme happiness" for the speaker. In other words, the way that the speaker is able to understand timelessness and perfection is to imagine dying when he is with his love, enjoying a perfect moment of calm.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Jeannine Johnson received her Ph.D. from Yale University and is currently visiting assistant professor of English at Wake Forest University. In the following essay, Johnson demonstrates that although Keats 'sprayer in "Bright star!" goes unanswered, the poet is not disappointed but remains content.

In "Bright star! would I were steadfast as thou art," the object of John Keats's initial address is the North Star, or polestar. He speaks of it as existing "in lone splendour," referring to the unequaled brightness of this star. Navigators have long relied on the North Star to help them determine latitude and north-south direction in the northern hemisphere, and at the beginning of the poem, the poet is in the position of the navigator, observing the star and looking to it for guidance. Yet when Keats invokes this relationship, he reverses the parties' normal positions: instead of a navigator looking at the star, the poet says that the star is "watching ... / The moving waters" and everything on it. With this subtle reversal, the poet attempts to appropriate for himself the star's steadfastness, which is his aim in this piece. Although he is ultimately unsuccessful in obtaining this unchangeableness and reliability, the poet remains tranquil, knowing that his love is true, even if time is fickle.

The poet first tells us what he wants - steadfastness - and then he tells us why he wants it. He wishes to be forever linked in passion to his "fair love," a poetic figure inspired by Frances ("Fanny") Brawne, Keats's neighbor and, by 1819, his fiancee. Several of his poems - informally known as the "Fanny lyrics" - are associated with her. In addition to "Bright star!" these are: "The Day is Gone, and All Its Sweets Are Gone!" "I Cry Your Mercy, Pity, Love - Ay, Love!" "What Can I Do To Drive Away," and "To Fanny." The ghoulish late poem, "This Living Hand, Now Warm and Capable," is also frequently linked to Fanny. Confusion and desperation characterize the other Fanny lyrics, as well as many of his letters to her. For example, in "I Cry Your Mercy" the poet pleads with his paramour, "Yourself - your soul - in pity give me all, / Withhold no atom's atom or I die," while in "What can I do to drive away" he revels in his agony, crying, "O, the sweetness of the pain!" *(The Complete Poems).*

However, in "Bright Star!" there is little, if any, of this extravagant agitation. The poem is an even-tempered prayer, made not out of distress but out of contentment. Further, the poet does not pray for affection: in contrast to the other Fanny lyrics, the speaker of this poem is fully certain that his feelings are returned by his beloved. Instead, the poet asks for "steadfastness." In the first line, he prays to be as constant and unchangeable as is the North Star, but very quickly he qualifies his request. As the literary critic Harold Bloom succinctly puts it, "Keats wants to be as steadfast as the star, but not in the star's way of steadfastness" *(The Visionary Company,* Bloom's emphasis).

As Bloom points out, the poet goes on in lines 2-8 to describe the star's way of steadfastness *(The Visionary Company).* This "way" is above all one of solitude. The star hangs "in lone splendour," and the poet calls it an "Eremite," or hermit. Keats says that it rests "aloft the night," meaning both *in* the night sky and *above* the night sky. This

ambiguity suggests that the star's distance from earth is so great that we cannot fix its position with any certainty. The star is "patient" but also "sleepless," implying that its calm condition is less desirable than it is stoical. The star's existence is an austere one, and it is associated with sacred observations. It oversees the oceans which are "priestlike" as they literally wash the shores of the land on which we live and figuratively purify our unholy lives. This link to the religious and spiritual further distances the star from the worldly concerns of the poet.

As he makes clear with the "Not" that introduces the second line, the poet desires another kind of steadfastness, which is described in lines 9-14. The "No" that begins line nine reiterates the poet's wish to qualify the type of unchangeableness that he seeks. The literary critic David Perkins explains that "In the drama of the poem, he discovers that his wish is not to be like the star after all, but rather to transpose the potentiality of the star for eternal awareness into the realm of human life and feeling, and that of the most intense variety" (*The Quest for Permanence).* The poet does not envy the star's temperate piety. He does not want the complete vision of a distant domain but an "eternal awareness" of his own immediate sphere of ardor and devotion. As Keats has it, he seeks to be "Awake for ever in a sweet unrest" and in the company of his beloved.

The problem with this aspiration is that it is not possible. John Barnard, a contemporary editor and critic of Keats, observes that "the sonnet's yearning for the star's 'steadfastness' and un-changeability admits that human love cannot attain its calm certainty or eternity. The long moment may feel like a kind of sensual eternity, but, unlike the star's lonely splendour, the mutual pleasure of human lovers is only attainable or meaningful in a time-scale which includes change" *(John Keats).* That is to say, Keats longs to experience an infinite romantic climax, but a climax implies a progressive series of moments which have preceded it. This progression occurs in time, not out of time, and with time comes change, something which the poet wishes to forestall.

The poet's desire to resolve opposites is also reflected in the poem's structure. In this poem, Keats cleverly combines the English and Italian sonnet forms. The rhyming pattern *(abab cdcd efef gg)* creates three quatrains and a couplet, the form common to the English, or Shakespearean, sonnet. But the poem also is clearly divided between the first eight lines and the last six, establishing the octave and sestet split that characterizes the Italian, or Petrarchan, sonnet. In an Italian sonnet, a problem is posed in the first eight lines, and a response or solution to that problem is offered in the last six. In "Bright Star!" the problem, such as it is, is that the poet wants to be like the star in some respects but not in others. The response or solution, set forth in the last six lines, is to embrace some of the star's qualities and reject the rest. The poet addresses the star in the octave but then shifts to a third person address (speaking of "her") in the sestet. Similar vowel sounds in "breast," "rest," "breath," and "death" further mark the sestet as a single unit. However, the sonnet returns to a dominant Shakespearean form at the couplet. In the last two lines the poet provides a final statement that comments upon - and is separable from - the rest of the poem.

The purpose of the last six lines - whether viewed as a sestet or as a quatrain plus a couplet - is made more clear when we examine the revisions that Keats made in

composing the poem. During the nineteenth century, "Bright Star!" was thought to be Keats's last poem, written in September 1820, when he copied it out in a volume of Shakespeare's poems. In the 1848 collection, *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats,* for instance, this poem was given the simple title, "Keats's Last Sonnet." However, in the twentieth century, an earlier version of the poem, dated 1819, was discovered. Though there is continuing debate, most scholars believe the poem to have been composed in the late fall of 1819, by which time, as Keats's biographer Walter Jackson Bate reminds us, "the tuberculosis of the lungs that was to prove fatal to him had seriously begun (or suddenly moved into an active stage), bringing with it periods of immense fatigue and some fever" *{John Keats).*

The primary revisions involve the last five lines of the sonnet, and, with perhaps only one exception, they do not alter the substance of the poem's thought. The end of the earlier version reads: "Cheek-pillow'd on my Love's white ripening breast / To touch, for ever, its warm sink and swell, / Awake, for ever, in a sweet unrest, / To hear, to feel her tender-taken breath, / Half passionless, and so swoon on to death." In the 1820 version, Keats creates two more sensuous and deliberate lines in writing "Pillowed upon my fair love' s ripening breast / To feel for ever its soft swell and fall." The repeated "f," "s," and "l" sounds roll gently through these lines, without the encumbrance of the rather brusque "ch," "k," and "t" sounds in the words "Cheek," white," "touch," and "sink."

In his revision, Keats slows the introduction of the couplet with the repetition of the word "Still." Here, "still" means both "always" and "unmoving." But it also means "again" - and in fact the word is stated once and then *again* - suggesting the movement of time and the variation of activity on which human life depends. With this duplication, Keats creates in miniature the paradoxical state in which he hopes to remain forever: this is a moment in which change and passion are possible, but a moment that is also infinitely repeated, unchanging, and eternal.

The repetition of "still" also underscores the break between the rest of the poem and this final statement. In the 1819 version, the poet equates his passionate summit with death: he speculates that he will be "Half passionless, *and* so swoon on to death" (emphasis added). It is a sweet transition from consummation to collapse. However, in the 1820 version of the poem, death is not the consequence of, but the alternative to, passion: the poet hopes to lie on his lover's breast "And so live ever - *or else* swoon to death" (emphasis added). This more ominous line hints that neither possibility is completely desirable. Indeed, though Keats and Fanny Brawne were engaged, the poet was aware by 1820 when he revised the poem that he would not live long, and that, due to his illness and confirmed poverty, marriage would be impossible. The poet's situation was unenviable, and his attempt in "Bright Star!" to unite earthly desire with celestial privilege fails. Nevertheless, the overall tone of the poem is serene, and even in these final lines the poet's voice is relatively self-assured, a sign that, though Keats might ask for more time to live and to love, what he does have will suffice.

Source: Jeannine Johnson, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Aviya Kushner is the Contributing Editor in Poetry at BarnesandNoble.com *and the Poetry Editor of* New World Magazine. *She is a graduate of the acclaimed creative writing program in poetry at Boston University, where she received the Fitzgerald Award in Translation. Her writing on poetry has appeared in* Harvard Review *and* The Boston Phoenix, *and she has served as Poetry Coordinator for* AGNI Magazine. *She has given readings of her own work throughout the United States, and she teaches at Massachusetts Communications College in Boston. In the following essay, Kushner describes the sonnet as expressing Keats's desire to have the "steadfastness" and immortality of a star and of a Shakespeare, able to look upon one's love and to be remembered for one's verses for eternity.*

Sonnet Written on a Blank Page in Shakespeare's Poems

The oldest son of a stable-keeper, the great poet John Keats devoted himself to poetry at the age of twenty-one. Tragically, after five years of feverish writing and significant publication, Keats died at twenty-six - a victim of consumption.

The fact of his early death colors the reading of many of Keats's most accomplished poems, and even their rapturous moments tend to appear tinged with the sorrow of impending doom. Though he continued to write magnificent odes which address truth, beauty, and the lure of immortality, Keats was painfully aware that he would die. He wrote of what he would never get to see, both poetically and personally. The woman he loved and the words he loved were not to be his for long.

In the introduction to his lengthy and masterful poem "Endymion," Keats wrote movingly of the limitations of all beginning poets, and he was particularly humble when referring directly to his own work. He noted that "the reader ... must soon perceive great inexperience, immaturity, and every error denoting a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished." What's more, Keats wrote that "the foundations are too sandy. It is just that this youngster should die away: a sad thought for me...."

Reading this description of the shortcomings naturally faced by a young man writing ambitious poems, it is hard not to imagine what such a self-aware young writer might have grown to achieve had he lived.

Keats wondered that too. In Sonnet 24, he looks at a bright star illuminating the night, and wishes that he were as "steadfast" - as lasting - as that heavenly resident. In many of his poems, Keats uses the conditional - "had I," or "if only I would" - to introduce a point. In a life cut so short, Keats unfortunately had many "what ifs" to write about. Sonnet 2, for example, details how he might be received by a woman if only he were better-looking:

Had I a man's fair form, then might my sighs / Be echoed swiftly through that ivory shell, / Thine ear, and find thy gentle heart: so well / Would passion arm me for the enterprise: / But ah! I am no knight whose foeman dies;

In Sonnet 2, Keats imagines that his "sighs" and other overtures would be more welcome if he had a "fair form." In the first line of Sonnet 24, Keats muses that his life would be better if he had another seemingly essential quality. In the opening line, punctuated by an exclamation point, the speaker looks longingly at the star and cries:

Bright star! Would I were as steadfast as thou art -

"steadfast" was what the illness-plagued Keats wanted to be but couldn't. He then takes a closer look at this star and details why it is fortunate:

Not in lone splendour bring aloft the night / And watching, with eternal lids apart, / Like Nature's patient, sleepless Eremite ...

With the phrase "eternal lids," Keats introduces the notion of immortality. The "steadfast" star has been there for a long time, and will remain there long after the speaker is gone. The star has eternal life, which is what the speaker most craves. The star also gets to look leisurely at the beauty of the natural world, which was one of Keats's great themes:

The moving waters at their priestlike task / Of pure ablution round earth's human shores, / Or gazing on the new soft fallen mask / Of snow upon the mountains and the moors

With "moors," a word associated with the English landscape, Keats establishes this as a British poem, descended from the tradition of Shakespeare. Interestingly, this sonnet was written in a blank page in Shakespeare's poems, which certainly may have brought on thoughts of both a "bright star" and immortality. As a writer, according to many scholars of English literature, Shakespeare certainly stands in "lone splendour." But many critics would argue that Keats was also a writer of "splendour."

However, there is one key difference between Shakespeare and Keats. Shakespeare lived long enough to produce a wide array of plays and poems, both comedies and tragedies. In this devotion to writing and his consistent production of high-quality work, Shakespeare was certainly "steadfast." But by the time this sonnet was written, Keats knew that the steadfastedness born of longevity was beyond his grasp.

Keats does choose a "steadfast" form - the sonnet. The sonnet was around before him and is still around several centuries after his death. As is traditional for a sonnet, the first eight lines here form one thought, and the last six represent a break into another thought.

Here, the word "no" introduces a new idea. The poem here becomes personal. Instead of simply watching, the star is now directed at an individual sight - the fair love. Keats wrote numerous poems about his lady love, and here he expresses some jealousy

because the bright star will be able to continue to look at this woman and feel her "ripening breast":

To feel for ever its soft fall and swell, / Awake for ever in a sweet unrest / Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath, / And so live for ever - or else swoon to death.

Unlike the speaker, the star has a chance to see the lovely girl sleep and watch her as she breathes in and out. By watching the beautiful girl and touching her moving, breathing body, the star has the capacity to "live for ever." Alternately, the star has the choice of dying brilliantly. While Keats coughed his way to an unglamorous end, the star can "swoon" to its death, flayed by beauty. For Keats, life - and death - were about beauty, and the opportunity to observe it and to sing its praises.

Source: Aviya Kushner, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

David Kelly is an instructor of Creative Writing at several community colleges in Illinois, as well as a fiction writer and playwright. In this essay, he examines the variations on human identity that John Keats explores in the sonnet "Bright Star!" and how death is the logical end.

In an October, 1818, letter to his friend Richard Woodhouse, John Keats wrote, "A Poet is the most unpractical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity - he is continually for - and filling some other Body - The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse and are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute - the poet has none; no identity - he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures." In the poem, "Bright Star! Would I Were Steadfast as Thou Art," we see the qualities that Keats gave to the poet projected onto the star. The poem's speaker expresses his wish to reach that same level of detachment from the things of the world. At the same time, though, he also praises the poetical experiences that he can have as a man - the manifestations of Identity that Keats says the poet does not have available to him. He wonders whether, if he could be just one, he would be the man or the poet. The complex interweaving of confidence and doubt regarding just who he is tilts, in this sonnet, first one way then the other. Where it ends is death, which, probably not by coincidence, Keats had experienced in recent events of his life and was aware was coining for him all too soon. It is Keats's glory that he was able to see himself evenly suspended between the two sides that made up his Identity, between involvement and isolation, a conundrum that other poets claim to solve or else allow to drive them insane. To pin down with any degree of precision what each of these identities meant to Keats might lead to at least an understanding of the bigger puzzle of how he is able to present death as the same thing as eternal life.

Such a delicate balance was not always a part of Keats's worldview, but something that he grew into. In a long essay dissecting how he came to his theory of poetry, Walter Jackson Bate mentioned, among others, the influence of philosopher and literary critic William Hazlitt, whose depth of taste Keats listed, along with Wordsworth's *Excursion* (published 1814) and Benjamin Hay don's pictures, as "the three things to rejoice at in this age." According to Bate, Hazlitt thought of himself as a philosopher and psychologist (the two were closely linked in the years before psychology was recognized as a science). His book *Essay on the Principles of Human Action,* which he began in his early twenties, was not ready for publication until he was twenty-seven: if he had been more prolific he might be widely remembered today as a philosopher, but instead he is remembered for his brilliant and scathing essays of literary criticism. When Keats read *Essay on the Principles of Human Action,* his thinking about the role of the artist was changed. Hazlitt tried to contradict the widely-held assumption that human behavior was ruled only by serf-interest, which was itself controlled by sensory input and memory. Memory and sensation could only account for behavior that was based on what had happened and what was currently going on: what, Hazlitt asked, about behaviors based on concerns for the future? Humans constantly make decisions to steer themselves from fates that they have observed happening to others. Hazlitt

proposed that the mind forms empathy for others, even when the "other" is the self as one imagines ending up in the future. The mind acts according to what it thinks the other person's experience must feel like.

Hazlitt's theory of empathy shows up in much of Keats's later work, including "Bright Star!" The speaker of the poem is a human being, and as such has the ability to project himself into the position of the star, to imagine what its existence must be like. It is notable that the poem does not try to give the star any response to all that it sees transpiring beneath it, the waves and the snow and so forth. The inanimate star would of course hold no opinions about such things, but even when he imagines himself witnessing the same sights Keats expresses no reaction, no judgement. His empathy enables him to put himself in the star's place, but this human trait stops there: he is not empathetic as the star. In his imagination he takes the trip from the Earth up into the sky, but once there his imagination stays up there, isolated out in the cold, "in splendor held aloft."

It is evident that the speaker's desire to leave his earthly vantage point and experience vast landscapes is in fact his ideal of a poet who has reached perfection, no longer held down by a serf, by any identity that would intrude upon the empathetic experience of seeing what it is like in other people's lives. This is such a lonely view of the artist's life that it almost raises the question for the reader about just why one would want to be a poet, except that Keats answers that by conjuring up wonders from an angle unseen before the Age of Flight, unavailable to the non-artist whose vision is cluttered with his own ego. With just the few simple lines that render the lapping waters and the soft-fallen snow, Keats draws the reader into his vision, making us jealous of the abstracted solitude of the star. It may be isolated from the world that we know, but the consolation of philosophy has always been that knowledge is a greater thrill than human companionship, and in this poem Keats gives us a glimpse from the ultimate position of knowledge: the all-seeing star, the poet. And if superior human knowledge is not enough to trade off against the fear of isolation, there is also the element of moral righteousness that is implied. The star/poet is presented as a quasi-religious figure, an Eremite, and from its unique vantage point is witness to the ocean's baptism of the shore. Intellectual and spiritual fulfillment are offered to fill the hole left within the artist who steps outside of the poetry of humanity to become "the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures."

But that whole case is presented first, in the octet, to upset the readers' preconceptions that humans would be happier in the company of their own and not, like poets, observing from afar. In the sestet, Keats reintroduces the pleasure of human companionship in graphic terms, to show that it is actually as important as distant observation. He gives to his view of humanity the life-filled images of love, breath, and budding breasts, which, both in the poem and in the common adage, bring him back to Earth. It is no coincidence that the rolling waves in the first stanza and the lover's soft breathing in the second resemble one another in their hypnotic regularity, for they are both the living pulse of life. The waves, though, are only observed, not truly experienced, while the heaving chest is *felt,* flesh against flesh, and so its influence is difficult for the poem's speaker to ignore or rationalize away. From an imagined distance the speaker can think of himself as enlightened and heavenly enough, but it is plain that

once the lover is introduced the cool remoteness that meant so much has a difficult time justifying itself.

And so Keats ends up at the very sharpest point of the artist's eternal dilemma. He is left to decide which is more important to him, being an artist or being a human. In other places, notably his "Ode On a Grecian Urn," Keats has marveled at the artist's power over time, over such simple things as human emotions. This time the "poeticness" of his lover draws him obsessively back toward life. The right combination of love and libido changes the question a person is faced with. Life is no longer an issue of whether one should become distant and eternal through art, but rather how to use art's eternal quality in order to make a fleeting moment of life last. The problem that Keats cannot solve, according "Bright Star," is that art makes a moment eternal by taking it away from life and making it into an artistic piece, and he can only be a successful artist absent from life. He finds no way for eternity and life to exist at the same time.

Hence, death. In the last line of this sonnet he is willing to accept death, even to "swoon to" it, using a word that implies both being dragged against one's will and also being intoxicated with pleasure. This meditation has shown the poem's speaker that living forever with his lover could be done, through the way an artist can freeze the world, but the true lesson of "Bright Star!" is that art is not life. Death, usually considered life's opposite, is more of a part of the process of life than emotional detachment is. It is human nature to straggle against death, and that may lead sometimes to a wish for eternal life, but Keats realizes the implications of what it would mean to stand outside the flow of life and live forever, and in the end this poem brings readers to understand that death could be no worse.

David Kelly, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #4

In this excerpt, Roe argues that Keats's sonnet, although written to his beloved, is more than just a love poem. Rather, it contains the author's central themes of beauty and mortality.

... For Wordsworth as for Shelley, the star is a radiant emblem of imagination as the translated expression of political ideals. For Wordsworth and Shelley, too, the star was explicitly associated with Milton's political constancy, the lack of which Shelley "alone deplored" in Wordsworth. I want now to return to Keats, and offer a reading of one of his best-known sonnets that will draw upon the political and literary context that I've been exploring so far:

Bright star! Would I were steadfast as thou art□ Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night And watching, with eternal lids apart, Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite, The moving waters at their priestlike task Of pure ablution round earth's human shores Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask

Of snow upon the mountains and the moors; No□yet still steadfast, still unchangeable, Pillowed upon my fair love's ripening breast, To feel for ever its soft fall and swell, Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath, And so live ever□or else swoon to death.

Keats's "Bright star" sonnet is frequently read as a love poem to Fanny Brawne, alongside other lyrics to her such as "The day is gone"; "To Fanny"; "I cry your mercy, pity, love"; and "Ode to Fanny." But as John Barnard recently pointed out, these "poems [to Fanny Brawne] are painful to read because they are private and desperately confused." "Only the 'Bright star' sonnet," he goes on "is in control of its emotions." That control derives from the imaginative priority of the poem as one more effort to reconcile Keats's central themes of poetry and mortality; the permanence of art and the transience of life. This ballasts Keats's private feeling for Fanny, and generalizes the poem beyond personal intimacy to address the great presiders of Keats's art: Milton and Wordsworth.

A number of Keats scholars, among them Christopher Ricks, have linked the "Bright star" sonnet with Keats's letter to Fanny of 25 July 1819, particularly Keats's closing words:

I am distracted with a thousand thoughts. I will imagine you Venus to night and pray, pray, pray to your star like a Hethen.

Your's ever, fair Star, John Keats

However, as John Barnard again points out, in this letter "Fanny is ... imagined as the evening star, Venus, and in the sonnet Keats is thinking of the North Star." And indeed, the sonnet does open as a prayer to be "constant as the northern star," but then withdraws from that remote, inhuman changelessness to admit the sensual intimacy of

the lovers. Keats's symbolic wish is seemingly that his "Bright star" might simultaneously represent a polar constancy as well as the westering presence of Venus, the lover's evening star. This potential reconciliation takes one back to Keats's letter to Tom in June 1818, where he describes his response on seeing Lake Windermere for the first time. "There are many disfigurements to this Lake," he writes, "□not in the way of land or water. No; the two views we have had of it are of the most noble tenderness□they can never fade away□they make one forget the divisions of life; age, youth, poverty and riches; and refine one's sensual vision into a sort of north star which can never cease to be open lidded and stedfast."

The point here is not that the "Bright star" sonnet echoes the letter word for word, "north star ... open lidded ... stedfast"; "Bright star ... steadfast ... eternal lids apart." Keats's letter to Tom describes an imaginative process by which apprehended beauty□or "sensual vision"□is refined into a permanent ideal that Keats likens to the "north star." For Keats such a constancy assuages the mortal "divisions of life." Not only is this the wishful state of Keats's sonnet□"Awake for ever in a sweet unrest"□it is the distinctive ideal of all Keats's greatest poetry: the eternal yearning of lovers in the *Grecian Urn;* the ecstatic ceaseless ceasing of the *Nightingale Ode;* the patient prolonging of the moment in *To Autumn,* such that the season's passing is infinitely delayed, while "by a cyder-press, with patient look, / Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours." Keats's desire to "refine ... sensual vision into a sort of north star" is the imaginative pole to which all of these great poems move. In the letter to Tom, though, it is an immediate consolation for "the divisions of life" and for what he terms "the many disfigurements to [the] Lake." The source of this "disfigurement" is rather surprising. Keats's letter goes on: "The disfigurement I mean is the miasma of London. I do suppose it contaminated with bucks and soldiers, and women of fashion□and hat-band ignorance. The border inhabitants are quite out of keeping with the romance about them, from a continual intercourse with London rank and fashion. But why should I grumble? They let me have a prime glass of soda water□O they are as good as their neighbors." Yet this conceited tirade against London tourists□Keats was one of them himself□is actually a distraction from the focal point of "disfigurement" Keats has in mind, and which immediately follows: "But Lord Wordsworth, instead of being in retirement, has himself and his house full in the thick of fashionable visitors quite convenient to be pointed at all the summer long." Keats's desire to resolve the "divisions of life" into permanence finds its ultimate cause in Wordsworth's forsaken retirement; his political orthodoxy; his fashionable popularity. And Keats's "north star which can never cease to be open lidded and stedfast" represents a constancy that finds its deepest significance in Keats's disappointed recoil from a Wordsworthian mutability: "Sad□sad□sad ... What can we say?"

Keats's "Bright star" sonnet is a love poem for Fanny Brawne that also draws upon this more distant but enduring disenchantment with Wordsworth. In that "Lord Wordsworth's" orthodoxy was one outcome of Wordsworth's experience of revolutionary defeat, Keats's sonnet is a late approach to consolation for that failure and an attempt to compensate for the Miltonic task that Wordsworth had set himself in the "Prospectus" to *The Recluse,* and apparently failed to carry through. One can substantiate this larger point by returning to the first poem in Wordsworth's "Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty":

Composed by the Sea-Side, near Calais. August, 1802

Fair Star of Evening, Splendor of the West, Star of my Country! on the horizon's brink Thou hangest, stooping, as might seem, to sink On England's bosom; yet well pleas'd to rest, Meanwhile, and be to her a glorious crest

Conspicuous to the Nations. Thou, I think, Should'st be my Country's emblem; and should'st wink,

Bright Star! with laughter on her banners, drest In thy fresh beauty. There! that dusky spot Beneath thee, it is England; there it lies. Blessings be on you both! one hope, one lot, One life, one glory! I, with many a fear For my dear Country, many heartfelt sighs, Among Men who do not love her linger here.

This sonnet was written at Calais during Wordsworth's visit in August 1802. It presents the translation of Wordsworth's political allegiance from France to England and□at another level□the shift in his affections from Annette Vallon to his future wife Mary. Hence the "Fair Star of Evening" is Venus, the lover's evening star about to "sink" in its evening splendor "On England's bosom." But as if to rescue the star from a wholly erotic declination and preserve it as a national "emblem" of England, Wordsworth has it "well pleas'd to rest, / Meanwhile," apparently stationary over "[his] Country."

Wordsworth's "Fair Star" is an image of arrested incipience calculated to strike Keats, "stooping ... yet well pleas'd to rest." It provides a symbolic reconciliation of the sonnet's political and personal themes, an ideal poise that Keats believed Wordsworth had failed to sustain. Keats's "Bright star" sonnet retains the star as an emblem of steadfastness, "watching, with eternal lids apart, / Like nature's patient, sleepless eremite"□but rejects its "lone splendour" in isolation for the erotic fulfillment that Wordsworth's sonnet had deferred,

No□yet still steadfast, still unchangeable, Pillowed by my fair love's ripening breast, To feel for ever its soft fall and swell, Awake for ever in a sweet unrest.

For Wordsworth the star was associated with a Miltonic constancy that he had celebrated in *An Evening Walk* in 1794, and sought to emulate in *The Recluse* as projected in the "Prospectus." For Shelley the "lone star" had represented Wordsworth's former dedication to republican ideals, an eminence that he had lost in later years. But Keats's wish for "steadfastness" as a poet is conditional only upon "earth's human shores"; his "Bright star" sonnet admits human vulnerability and redeems it in the tender union of the lovers. In so doing the upheaval of revolution, "the weariness, the fever, and the fret," are resolved by the "sweet unrest" of their lovemaking. And the disappointed idealism of Wordsworth, Shelley, and of Keats himself finds a last, fully human consolation.

Source: Nicholas Roe, " 'Brightest Star, Sweet Unrest': Image and Consolation in Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats," in *History & Myth: Essays on English Romantic Literature,* edited by Stephen C. Behrendt, Wayne State University Press, 1990, pp. 13CM8.

Adaptations

Spoken Arts, Inc., has produced an audio-cassette entitled *Treasury of John Keats* (1989).

Anthony Thorlby can be heard on two audio-cassettes entitled *Keats and Romanticism* (1973) for Everett/Edwards.

Blackstone Audio Books presents *John Keats* (1993) on two audio-cassettes.

Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature, Library of Congress, has produced *Cheryl Crawford and Greg Morton Reading Poems and Letters of John Keats, May 1952* (1952) on audiotape reel.

The King's Collage has produced an audio-cassette entitled *John Keats' Pursuit of Essence* (1972) with Kathryn Ludwig.

Harvard Vocarium Records has produced a 78 r.p.m. record album entitled *Poems of John Keats* (1941) with Robert Speaight.

Annenberg/Corporation for Public Broadcasting Project has produced an audio-cassette entitled

John Keats and the Romantic Agony (1987) from the "Introduction to Modern English and American Literature" series.

Listening Library has produced an audio-cassette entitled *The Essential Keats* (1989), selected and with an introduction by Philip Levine.

Monterey Home Video has produced a video-cassette entitled *The Glorious Romantics: A Poetic Return to the Regency* (1993).

Encyclopedia Britannica Corporation has produced a videocassette entitled *John Keats: His Life and Death* (1991), written by Archibald MacLeish and narrated by James Mason.

Films for the Humanities and Sciences has produced a videocassette entitled *The Last Journey of John Keats* (1998).

Landmark Media has produced a videocassette entitled *John Keats, Poet: 1795-1821* (1994).

Center for Cassette Studies has produced an audio-cassette with graphics entitled *The Quintessential Keats: Dr. John Theobald Lectures on the Life of the Immortal Romantic Poet* (1970).

Topics for Further Study

In this poem, the speaker says that the star has qualities□steadfastness, watchfulness, fidelity□that he would like to have himself. Write a poem about an object of your choosing, in which you give that object qualities you admire.

Do you think a star is a powerful way for an author to imagine his relationship with his lover? Point out the strengths and weaknesses of this image.

Keats was criticized during his lifetime for being a "Cockney Poet," by which his detractors meant that he wrote like a lower-class person, a worker rather than a refined poet. Pick specific details about this poem that might have led them to this conclusion, and explain your choices.

John Keats was only 26 when he died. Read about someone who was famous and died young and draw a chart that points out other aspects that their life had in common with Keats's.

Compare and Contrast

1819: An iron cooking stove was patented by inventor John Conant. It was not a commercial success, however, because most housewives chose to cook food on their fireplaces, as they were accustomed.

Today: Many cooks are impatient with the time it takes to heat food with fire, gas, or electric heat, so they use the microwave oven, using principles they do not understand.

1819: The French Revolution was over: Napoleon had been defeated at Waterloo four years earlier, and King Louis XVIII was restored to the throne.

Today: France is ruled by a president. It is one of the largest Western democracies to have elected a socialist leader in modern times (Francois Mitterand, in 1981).

1819: The *Savannah*was the first steamship to cross an ocean.

Today: Although the airplane has replaced steamship travel as a mode of transportation, luxury cruises are a popular vacation option.

1819: Beethoven, who had been losing his hearing since 1801, was completely deaf.

Today: Music aficionados find some of Beethoven's works composed after he went deaf, including his string quartets, to be among the most beautiful ever written.

What Do I Read Next?

Both the Modern Library and Penguin Classics have versions available of *The Complete Poems of John Keats.*

It is almost impossible to talk about Keats's poetry without encountering some discussion of the poet himself, and in particular the controversy between critics who thought he lacked talent and his friends who saw his genius. The debate is played out before readers' eyes in G.M. Matthews' collection of reviews and letters from Keats's time, called *Keats: The Critical Heritage* (published by Barnes and Noble in 1971).

One of the most influential recent books about Romanticism is by influential critic Northrop Frye, whose short 1968 book *A Study of English Romanticism* gives an excellent quick background to the cultural movement that is almost always mentioned along with Keats's name.

John Evangelist Walsh, whose earlier work includes a biography of Edgar Allan Poe, wrote the 1999 book *Darkling I Listen: The Last Days and Death of John Keats,* available from St. Martin's Press.

Keats's name is often mentioned in conjunction with his friend and peer, Percy Bysshe Shelley. The Modern Library edition of *The Complete Poems of Shelley* includes an introduction by his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (author of *Frankenstein).*

Keats was greatly influenced by the work of poet William Wordsworth, who is credited with being one of the founders of English Romanticism. W.W. Norton has made a book-length study of the different versions of Wordsworth greatest poem available in *"The Prelude": 1799, 1805, 1850.* This book includes critical essays.

Probably the best poet to follow Keats and show his influence was Robert Browning. Browning was too prolific for all of his poetry to be collected in one volume, but the important works are available in Penguin Poetry Library's *Browning: Selected Poetry.*

Further Study

Armstrong, Isabel, *Language as Living Form in Nineteenth Century Poetry,* New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1982.

This book examines the culture of the ear and discusses many of the literary figures associated with Keats, including Shelly and Wordsworth, but Keats himself is hardly mentioned.

Bernbaum, Ernest, *Guide Through the Romantic Movement,*New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1949.

Bernbaum gives brief biographies of all of the most notable authors associated with Romanticism, including many who are not usually recognized as being with the group.

Bostetter, Edward E., *The Romantic Ventriloquists: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley and Byron,* Seattle: University ofWashington Press, 1963.

Bostetter's chapter on Keats covers all of the major points of his philosophy and technique in an insightful if slightly stiff manner.

Jones, John, *John Keats' Dream of Truth,* New York: Barnes& Noble, Inc., 1969.

In analyzing the scope of Keats's poetry, Jones includes an interesting comparison of the use of the eternal in "Bright Star!" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

Sherwin, Paul, "Dying Into Light: Keats' Struggle with Milton in 'Hyperion,'" in *John Keats,* edited with an Introduction by Harold Bloom, New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985.

This essay finds "Bright Star!" to be a statement of how Keats's world view differed from that of the poet John Milton.

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Perkins, David, *The Quest for Permanence: The Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats,* Harvard University Press, 1959.

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Ward, Aileen, "Between Despair and Energy," in *John Keats,* Octagon Books, 1982, pp. 292-300.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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