Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon Study Guide

Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon by Li Bai

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Contents

Introduction

"Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon" was written around the year 743 by Li Po , who is widely considered to be one of the greatest poets in Chinese history. Written nearly thirteen hundred years ago during the T'ang Dynasty, the poetry of Li Po has been as familiar to readers in China and Japan as the poetry of Shakespeare is to Western audiences. During the early twentieth century, the poet Ezra Pound helped introduce Li Po to readers of English with his meticulous and moving translations of many of Li Po's works.

This poem presents a typical example of Li Po's poetic stance: cool detachment from the world around him, yet keenly observant of the slightest details. It is an attitude that displays elements of Taoism and Zen Buddhism, which are both traditional spiritual practices of China. Also evident in this poem is Li Po's legendary love of wine, which was a great creative inspiration to him, as well as to many of the poets of the time. As can be seen in "Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon," Li Po found freedom from the common world in drinking, similar to the release from self that comes from meditation.

Despite the poet's widespread influence in his native country, there are few collections of Li Po's poetry available in the West. "Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon" can currently be found in *The Selected Poems of Li Po*, translated by David Hinton and published by New Directions Press.

Author Biography

Li Po's family was originally from China, but his great-grandfather had been sent into exile almost a century before, for unknown reasons. Li Po was born in 701, most likely in central Asia. When he was four, his family moved back to China, settling in Mien-chou in the southeastern province of Szechwan.

There is little record of his life. Much of what is written comes from Li Po himself and is of uncertain veracity. He is said to have worked for a while as a knight errant, tracking and killing people who had committed crimes. He left Szechwan some time around 724 and traveled extensively throughout the eastern and central regions of China and abroad. In 727, he married and settled down for eight years in An-lu in Hupei. After the death of his wife, Li Po left An-lu and traveled up the Yangtze River for several years.

In 742, he was summoned to the capitol, Ch'ang-an. Emperor Hsüan-tsung awarded Li Po membership to the prestigious Hanlin Academy, and he became a celebrity in the Chinese literary world. His days as a court poet were marked by his meteoric wit and by his brash insolence, usually associated with his frequent, excessive drinking. It was around this time that Li Po seems to have written the poem "Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon." The emperor was amused by Li Po's talent, but something happened□history does not have a record of what□and he was banished from Ch'ang-an in 744.

Late in this same year, Li Po met and formed a lifelong friendship with Tu Fu, another of the greatest poets in Chinese history, who was younger and at the time unknown. The following year, Li Po was initiated into the Taoist religion and then spent several years in a Taoist monastery in the mountains near his home.

After some more traveling, Li Po married again and started a new family in the eastern province of Sha-ch'iu. He spent little time with his family, however, choosing to leave home and travel. In the early 750s, China was beset by civil wars that lasted the decade. Li Po ended up moving further south and establishing himself as the official poet of Li Lin, Prince of Yung, but Li Po, along with most of Li Lin's army, soon realized that the prince's intent was to oppose the government, and they abandoned him. That did not stop the central government from arresting Li Po and sentencing him to death. Li Po spent several months in jail before the charges were dropped, but then a new administration came to power. The charges were raised again, and Li Po was exiled to the far southwest, traveling down the Yangtze river through areas that were unknown to civilization. Sick and old, he was expected to die in exile, but he returned triumphantly when pardoned nearly two years later.

Legend has it that Li Po drowned in 762, after stepping out of a boat, drunk, trying to embrace the moon's reflection in the water.

Plot Summary

Lines 1—2

"Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon" begins by setting a scene. There are flowers in bloom, and the poem's speaker finds a jar of wine. He takes note of the fact that there is no one else around to drink it with, and then proceeds to pour a cup for himself.

Lines 3—4

The speaker, having already emphasized the fact that he is alone, raises his cup to toast the moon. Among the T'ang Dynasty poets, and especially in the work of Li Po, the moon was considered to have special significance. It was thought to be the feminine balance of the masculine Earth, in keeping with the way that Taoist philosophy sees all things in complimentary pairs. As such, the moon was considered to be the poets' major source of inspiration.

As he is toasting, the speaker notices his shadow, which is, naturally enough, posed in the same position that he is, also making a toast. The shadow is the result of the moonlight reaching his own body, and he immediately treats the shadow like a third person, along with himself and the moon.

Lines 5—6

Because wine is intended to bring humans to the same spiritual harmony with the earth that the moon already has, it is not at all unusual that the poem would claim that "the moon has never understood wine." Even though he feels that they are drinking together, the narrator does not feel that he and the moon are on common terms with each other. He has the same feeling about his shadow, which is present with him but will never be his peer. Although he considers himself to have found two drinking companions, he still is lonely.

Lines 7—8

Despite the differences that separate him from his drinking companions, the speaker finds a moment of blissful harmony as the three of them appreciate their relationship. Li Po says here that it is not the coming of spring, with the blossoming trees, that have brought him joy, but rather the joy he gains from sharing this moment of drinking with the moon and the shadow, which then serves to makes the springtime seem joyful.

Lines 9—10

In this stanza, the poem gives readers a visual description of the speaker's experience, illustrating the fact that drinking wine is not entirely a spiritual event. Li Po is reminding us that even the most joyful experience has some physical element, that any mental process still takes place within the real world. Here, the speaker's growing drunkenness is measured. He is singing, and, evidently, swaying, although the second is expressed in terms of the moon swaying. Not only does he personify the moon to make it sound like it is his drinking companion, but he also pretends that the moon is as drunk as he is. The third member of the group, the shadow, breaks apart as he moves, divided over the various surfaces that it is cast upon.

Lines 11—12

The mood of the poem changes in this couplet. Up to this point, it has been a joyful experience, as the speaker has eased his loneliness by finding friends in the moon and shadow and has made himself happy by drinking. Here, though, he points out how friendship and drinking are incompatible. While he was able to bond with the elements of nature when he was sober, he is unable to focus when drunk, and therefore the happiness he found disappears. The moment of kindred feeling that he referred to in line 8 was just a fleeting one; it passes, and the three elements of person, moon, and shadow are destined to go their own separate ways.

Lines 13—14

The poem's first section ends with the assurance that, though they must scatter, the speaker and his imaginary drinking companions will be "intimates forever." The moment when they were all in harmonious union is over, but that does not mean that there is no connection between them. Li Po expresses his assurance that the three elements□one human, one celestial, and the last almost supernatural□are all part of the same system and will one day be together again in the sky.

The Star River referred to in line 14 is the constellation that contemporary Americans refer to as the Milky Way. The poet's expectation to end up there, along with his shadow, reflects what he thinks will happen after death, when he will be integrated into nature in a way that he cannot be in life.

Lines 15—16

The poem's second section presents a treatise on the benefits of drinking wine. In the first two lines, Li Po explains the designation of a star in the sky as the "Wine Star" as proof that heaven loves wine. In a way, he is correct, because the naming of a star Wine Star reflects the interests of the astronomers who gave it that designation.

Lines 17—18

The second stanza uses the same reasoning that was used in lines 15 and 16, claiming that the earth loves wine and citing, as proof, the name Wine Spring for a stream. In each case, the poem supposes that heaven and earth each had a role in naming the features they possess. It is this kind of personification, similar to the way that he turns the moon into a drinking companion in Section I, that allows Li Po's poetry to connect the human lives and concerns with the vast wonders found in nature.

Lines 19—20

In this couplet, the poem alludes to a shame associated with drinking that has not been brought into the discussion before. The point made in the previous stanzas is made again, even more powerfully than before: not only do heaven and earth love wine, as previously stated, but they have *always* loved it. In line 20, the concept of shame is brought up, but it is only applied to heaven, as if there was never any question that earth could be shamed for loving wine. This distinction refers to two traditions. First, there is the close association between wine and the earth: wine is made of the fermented juice of fruit, most often grapes, and as such is a simple product that is not much different than the way it grows from the ground. In addition, heaven is associated with perfection, which is usually not one of the things that is associated with drunkenness. Therefore, it could easily be assumed that heaven would be ashamed of its love of wine. This poem assures readers that it is not.

Lines 21—22

What the poem calls "clear wine" is what contemporary American society calls "white wine": translucent to the eye and lighter to the tongue. "Murky wine" would be red wine, which is usually too thick to see through, with a stronger fragrance and taste. Because of its physical qualities, it is easy to see why, of the two, folk traditionalists would connect the ideas associated with enlightenment to the lighter of the two, and, having determined that, why darker wine would gain a reputation for wisdom. This brings up another Taoist dichotomy: two concepts, enlightenment and wisdom, are used to describe the two halves of human experience.

Lines 23—24

In these lines, the poet asserts that drinking wine has nearly religious implications. Wine, like gods and immortals, offers to the person who imbues it enlightenment and wisdom, making the quest for other religious experience almost irrelevant.

Lines 25—26

This stanza measures different levels of intoxication. At some point in drinking wine, the poet says that he has "plumbed" the great Way, which means that he has been given insight into the great oneness of the universe. He is able to see the infinite and understand it. After drinking an entire bottle of wine, though, he is taken so far that he can merge with the singular spirit of the universe and experience it himself.

Lines 27—28

The middle section of the poem ends with an explanation of why drinking would make a person capable of religious enlightenment. By making thought difficult, wine makes one experience life in its immediacy. It puts the drinker into direct contact with life, uninhibited by mental activities. Sober people, on the other hand, have to live with the conflict between direct experience and thought, and are therefore kept at a distance from real life.

Lines 29—30

Ch'ang-an was the capitol of China in the 740s, when Li Po wrote this poem. It was a center of culture, comparable to New York or Paris today. He begins this third section of the poem describing the capitol city in bloom in April. The time of day has shifted, from moonlit night to a sunny day. A "brocade" is a heavy fabric made of tightly woven material, like a tapestry. Interestingly, Li Po does not say that the dense blossoms made a brocade themselves but that the sunlight shining through them made a rich pattern on the ground. This awareness of the sun filtered through the trees is a reminder of the personification of the poet's shadow in the poem's first section.

Lines 31—32

Unlike most nature poetry, which presents springtime as a time for celebration, "Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon" presents it as a sad time of year. Usually considered a time of hope and rebirth, when problems are washed away and the world begins anew, spring is presented here as a time of "lonely sorrow." The poet uses wine to combat this sorrow, just as he uses it in the night time to connect to the natural world directly and without thought.

Lines 33—34

Here, Li Po explains the sorrow that he mentioned in the stanza before. It stems from a pervading sense of futility. All people, he explains, are ruled by God, who is referred to here as "the Changemaker." This makes all human action irrelevant, as fate is all

predestined. Nothing one can do matters. The coming of spring brings this out in a most regretful way, cruelly giving false hope where no hope is available.

Lines 35—36

Having established the root cause of his philosophical suffering, Li Po offers a solution in this stanza: when he drinks wine, the miseries of consciousness are all evened out, and he is able to blissfully forget about all concerns, including the largest ones about life and death.

Lines 37—38

In the previous lines, the poem mentioned the power of drinking to even out concerns about heaven and earth. That same idea is mirrored here, where, after drinking some more wine, the very concepts of heaven and earth disappear. The poem, which has been a long meditation on the problems created by human awareness and the way that wine helps one keep that awareness in check, slows down as it nears the end. The speaker, who started this philosophical journey in the night, drinking under the moon, and continued to find himself needing even more wine while facing the morning, has finally gotten himself to bed. He is, in fact, surprised to be in bed, "suddenly," an indicator of the ability of drink to cloud one's memory.

Lines 39—40

The final lines state one of the basics of Zen philosophy. The poet only finds true peace when he is able to forget about his existence. The ability to get beyond awareness of one's existence is at the heart of many religious experiences: here, Li Po says that he can find it only in drink. He is satisfied, though, because drinking has led him to the deepest joy of them all.

Themes

Pleasure

Drinking alcohol is often thought to increase pleasure, and it certainly has that effect on the speaker of this poem. In the fifth stanza, Li Po speaks of singing and dancing as the alcohol takes its effect. On the other hand, the following stanza introduces the bittersweet pathos of drinking, telling readers that the speaker is happy when he is sober and that he loses his friends as he drinks. The poem's praise of wine as a source of pleasure is mixed up with the poet's pleasure with the companionship that he finds from the moon and his own shadow. Later, the benefit of wine is not its ability to give pleasure at all, but its ability to let a person see the world more clearly. As a philosopher and poet, Li Po finds his greatest pleasure in contemplating the world around him and understanding what it means, and wine, which is praised freely in his poetry, is really only a tool for him to reach a greater level of understanding.

Consciousness

Western philosophy generally concerns itself with raised consciousness, as best exemplified in the adage that is frequently ascribed to Socrates, upon whose ideas much of Western thought is built: "An unexamined life is not worth living." In Eastern philosophy, however, and particularly in the Zen Buddhism that was popular among educated people of Li Po's time, the goal is not to concentrate on oneself but to transcend oneself, in order to realize the oneness that the individual shares with the universe. It would be therefore wrong to say that wine increases the poet's consciousness in this poem when the real goal is to lose consciousness of one's self.

In pursuit of that goal, the poem follows its speaker through three different stages in his relationship to wine. In the first stage, Section I, he is drinking for no other reason than to dissolve the mild self-consciousness that the poem indicates, just slightly, by starting with the poignant word "alone." The alcohol works quickly, and in a few moments he can think of the moon and his own shadow as drinking companions. His bond with other things, both tangible and intangible, is short-lived, though, as drunkenness makes them scatter away; the poet is aware that he has a relationship with them, but he is still conscious that he is a very different thing than them.

In the second section of the poem, Li Po reflects on the usefulness of wine for uniting conflicting parts of the human experience: heaven and earth, instinct and emotion, and wisdom and enlightenment are all variations on the same two ideas. Early in this section, he says that wine is approved of by both heaven and earth, which implies that both the physical and spiritual aspects of a person enjoy it. Later, he plays off of old slang that refers to red wine as "wisdom" (rational knowledge) and white as enlightenment (intuitive knowledge). If these various aspects of consciousness could be combined, then the speaker of this poem would be happy. At the end of this section,

though, thought is still considered to be an intrusion: when the poet says "wine's view is lived," he is showing a clear disinterest in the mental processes that result from consciousness.

The third section has wine leading the poet to a place beyond consciousness. It is here that the poem is most direct about the philosophical problem of consciousness. Early on, the daylight (often used as a symbol of clear, rational thought) reminds the poet of loneliness and sorrow. Wine dissolves that awareness, though: "heaven and earth vanish," leaving the poet "forgetting that person I am even exists." He is not able to combine reason with instinct, and so he chooses to eliminate reason entirely with wine. In the end, he is as unaware of himself as the moon or his shadow would be of themselves, and this causes, for him, the deepest of joys.

Clarity

Li Po takes an unusual position toward drinking in this poem, proposing to readers that wine can lead to more, not less, mental clarity. In the very middle of the poem, for instance, he identifies the two types of wine as being commonly called "enlightenment" and "wisdom." Drinking helps him bond with the moon as a friend, measure the depth of "the great Way," and drive concerns about heaven and earth out of his mind. It makes him understand and appreciate life.

But there is enough uncertainty in his poetic voice to make readers wonder if all of the claims that the poem makes on the behalf of wine are positions in which Li Po himself believes. There is some tension, for instance, in the poem's first section, in the sixth stanza, where he notes man, moon and shadow are "together and happy" when they are sober but scattered when he is drunk, as if he cannot keep their harmony clear in his mind when he has been drinking too much. Later emphasis on the joys of drinking are given in character: he is so extreme in his enthusiasm about wine, and the great uncertainty that he feels without it, that readers are welcomed to question whether he really does see things more clearly when drunk. Although the poem is direct in its support of wine as a way of achieving mental clarity, the character that Li Po projects in the poem invites readers to wonder if he means what he says, or its opposite.

Style

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is the literary practice of giving human characteristics to animals or inanimate objects, as Li Po does here when he talks of the moon and his shadow as drinking companions. Usually, it is done in order to shed more light on the subject, by explaining its behavior in terms of human behaviors with which the reader is familiar. For instance, chemists might say that an atom that is missing two electrons "wants to bond" with one that has two extra ones to form a molecule: neither electron really has a desire, but phrasing their purely physical process in this way makes sense to humans, as if the two atoms were characters in a story. In this poem, anthropomorphism works in two ways. First, it shows how drinking wine can break down mental barriers, so that the speaker realizes all that he has in common with the moon and his shadow. In addition, it works psychologically: just as the speaker is talking about being alone, these two elements of nature show up, as if they are friends of his, to join him in his solitary drinking. Giving them human characteristics makes him feel less alone, until, like three friends who drink too much, they "scatter away into our own directions."

Couplet

This version of the poem, translated by David Hinton, divides the lines of the poem into couplets. Couplets are groupings of two lines that each contain a single thought. Although some translations do not divide the poem up like this, it is easy to see why it would be put into couplets: the thoughts here fit into two-line sections. They are not flowing, not convoluted or tied together throughout the poem: each thought is finished within two lines, and then tied to the next. This is not to say that the poem lacks coherence: clearly, it follows through with the same basic ideas throughout the course of all three sections. But each couplet stands on its own, with a different, unique piece of the argument to tell.

Historical Context

Li Po wrote "Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon" while living in Ch'ang-an, which was then the capitol city of China. He was in attendance at the court of Emperor Hsüan-Tsung. At that time, Ch'ang-an, with a population of two million people, was one of the most bustling, cosmopolitan cities in the world. It was the zenith of the T'ang Dynasty, which over the course of the past century and a half, had transformed China into one of the world's most cultured and civilized countries at the same time that Europe was lost in the Dark Ages.

The T'ang Dynasty came to power in 618, under Li Yuan. The previous ruling family, the Sui Dynasty, had prepared for China's modernization by establishing a strong central government. Under Li Yuan and his son, Li Shimin, who took power in 628, reforms took place to divide fields more evenly among farmers. The T'ang government is also credited with a renewed emphasis on foreign trade. The Silk Road, a 4,000-mile trade route that ran from China to the West, was expanded, eventually reaching the Mediterranean Sea. One of the most important cultural imports was Zen Buddhism, which began in Japan and flourished throughout all aspects of Chinese society in the seventh century.

Several rulers came to power and lost office in a series of royal intrigues, with one ruler banishing her sons so that she could become the first woman to rule imperial China, and another female rose to power by poisoning her husband. Then, in 712, Hsüan-Tsung came to power. His long reign, from 712 to 760, was an age that is known as the High T'ang period.

Hsüan-Tsung was a patron of the arts and a competent administrator. He surrounded himself with strong political advisors, and built ties to the provincial areas by spreading greater authority to local governments. He also surrounded himself with great poets, including Li Po and Tu Fu, who are still considered to be among the most talented and influential poets in Chinese history. Unfortunately, Hsüan-Tsung's interest in philosophy and the arts demanded too much of his attention: he left governmental affairs to his trusted advisor, Li Lin-fu, who acted against Hsüan-Tsung to consolidate his own power.

Li Lin-fu replaced many of the royal ministers of the army with barbarians whom he thought he could control. In 755, when Li Lin-fu died, An Lushan, a provincial governor, felt that he should replace Li. When the position was given to another, it was easy for An to gather the support of the armies against the government. Li Po was gone from the capitol by this time, having been a part of the court for only a few years. The ensuing revolution eventually forced Hsüan-Tsung to flee from the capital, and even then he was not safe: his own army rebelled against him. Before the uprising was quelled in 756, the mutineer soldiers had killed the new minister, and demanded that Hsüan-Tsung kill his concubine, Yang Guifei, whom he loved very much. Hsüan-Tsung ordered her strangled to death, in a scene that is familiar in Chinese literature, having been retold infinite times throughout the ages. The emperor returned to the throne, but withered away over the next few years until his death.

Critical Overview

Li Po is generally considered to be one of the most important poets of Chinese history. Writing in an age ripe with poetic talent, including Tu Fu and Wang Wei, Li Po stood out among his peers. As Burton Watson writes in his introduction to the poet in *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*, "It was some centuries before the true worth of Tu Fu's work was acknowledged, but Li Po's poetry seems to have gained immediate recognition." Watson goes on to observe, "Li Po's distinction lies in the fact that he brought an unparalleled grace and eloquence to his treatment of traditional themes, a flow and grandeur that lifts his work far above the level of mere imitations of the past."

While he has been famous in China all along, Li Po was practically unknown in America until the twentieth century. There were a few scholarly papers written about him and some substandard translations of his poetry. One of the greatest boosts to his reputation in the West was the publication, in 1915, of Ezra Pound's book *Cathay*, which contained many of Li Po's works. Pound was a celebrated poet, and his fame, along with the sensitivity that he applied toward his translations, brought Li Po to the attention of the English-speaking world. His translation of "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" has become a standard in poetry anthologies. Since American education has shifted its focus to multiculturalism in the 1980s and 1990s, Li Po has been receiving some of the attention in the West that he has gotten all along in his home land.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature at two colleges in Illinois. In this essay, Kelly argues that Li Po's poem is more than just a song of praise for wine that it balances its praise with an attitude that most readers would consider modern.

Some poems are good for capturing the moment in which they are written, and these might even be of interest to future historians. Few poems, though, can keep people's attention over the course of generations without tapping into eternal truths. Ideas of truth might change, but literature that endures must be as relevant to people not born in the author's lifetime as they were when they were first devised. A good example of this is the poetry of Li Po, considered one of China's preeminent poets. During his lifetime, from roughly a.d. 701 to 762 , he struggled against formality and intellectualism in poetry, establishing himself as a plainspoken man who drank to excess and was not afraid of who he offended. Readers, therefore, often assume, upon encountering his works, that they are simple in their meanings. They generally *are* simple, in the sense that one can get a clear idea of meaning after reading one of Li Po's poems just once. But if surface meanings were all that his poems had going for them, then they would have been lost in time centuries ago, as new civilizations have come to regard truth differently. What has kept Li Po relevant for thirteen hundred years is that his poems do not contain just one simple truth, but several; another way of looking at this is that his poems add up conflicting truths to arrive at one truth that is greater than its parts.

There is no greater example of this than his poem "Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon." It was written during the time when Li Po was at the Han-lin Academy and was an attendant in the court of Emperor Hsüan-Tsung. Both were prestigious positions, but Li Po held them for less than two years before losing them by offending members of the court. He spent his days and nights drinking, and, when summoned to the palace, was just as likely to send an offensive refusal as he was to show up. His behavior during those few years in the capitol, 742—744, earned him the nickname the "Banished Immortal."

Given the life he led, there should be no problem in understanding his feelings about drinking. When it endangered his secure position, he was happy to take the loss, pack his belongings and move on, rather than stop. "Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon" explains how wine helped him understand nature and see himself as part of the natural world, rather than obsessing over the concerns that usually capture people's attention. Obviously, he considered alcohol an important tool in his art and in his spiritual life.

If this were the only message "Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon" had to offer, it would have ceased to be relevant centuries ago. There are several levels to what Li Po has to say about wine in this poem, giving it a balance that has kept it alive.

Contemporary translations of this poem often render only the first section, and that is certainly the most interesting of the three. It offers a story, a scene: the poem's speaker, finding himself alone, pours himself a drink of wine and raises it in a toast to the moon.

As he does so, something magical happens. The moon becomes his drinking companion, as does the shadow that it casts off of him. The three enjoy just one kindred moment, but then, as he drinks more, the man dances around. His motion jostles his concentration, and the spell is broken: the moon and his shadow become separate entities again. This section ends on an upbeat note, assuring us that man, moon, and shadow will be reunited again someday in the stars. This story has a beginning and an end, an engaging protagonist, and supporting characters: it is no wonder it is popular. It also offers a simple message about how wine can help put one in touch with the natural world. At least, that would be the easy way to read it.

The problem with the easy way is that it leaves too many questions unanswered. Once the moon and shadow are introduced as characters, then their opinions have to be listened to and respected. They show their opinions by leaving when the poem's speaker becomes intoxicated. "Sober," Li Po writes, "we're together and happy. Drunk, we scatter away into our own directions." What this does is bring the reader back to the first couplet, where the speaker is already without human companionship. A shallow reading of this section would emphasize wine's ability to bring human, moon, and shadow together for a kindred moment, like some sort of liquor commercial on the television where wine creates an instant party. There is too much sorrow and loneliness to ignore, though. This lonely protagonist does not really find any companionship from drinking and is left just as deserted as before, with the hope that, someday, he will unite with the moon, which "has never understood wine."

The poem's second section is a polemic about the importance of wine. The first three couplets profess to show proof that heaven and earth love wine, though their evidence is pretty shaky: the fact that there is a Wine Star and a Wine Spring might show the importance of wine if heaven and earth had named these things, but it was humans who named them, and humans' love for wine is not in question here. Likewise, this section's middle stanzas use tortured logic to associate wine with enlightenment and wisdom. Li Po must surely have known that he was putting forth a weak argument when he labeled his evidence of wine's association with higher intellectual functions with the phrase, "I have heard it said." A primary rule for introducing evidence is to know the source. This section of the poem ends with two thoughts melded together, as if they belong with each other: "Wine's view is lived: you can't preach doctrine to the sober." This seems to be a crucial point of the poem, but it contrasts with the rest of this section, which in fact is an exercise in preaching the doctrine of wine. So, one might think that the poem is reciting the doctrine of wine for an audience that is not sober, but why would they have to hear it if they already agree? This is a problematic section of the poem, with grand pronouncements that turn either insignificant or self-contradictory under inspection; it is small wonder that so many translators choose to ignore it.

The poem's third section is only slightly less problematic, but offers some intellectual content for the trouble it takes to understand it. Here, the same ambivalence that colors the first two sections is evident, but by the end it reaches a strong and definitive conclusion. Like the first section, this one begins with the speaker alone, under the flower blossoms, except that this time the setting is not night but day. Daytime is when readers might expect to see the poem start to slide away from the importance of wine,

but what happens instead is that it stays as important as always. It is important, but the sense of fun is gone. Here, wine is used in desperation, as a way of staving off sorrow and fatalism. The speaker's need to use wine in the daytime to inoculate himself against his fears lacks the festive mood of the first section, showing no more nobility than a desperate daytime drinker would have today.

Although the poem is more willing to admit the pathos of drinking than a quick reading might show, it cannot be taken to be an ironic comment on the speaker's fixation with wine. It ends with too much sincerity for that. Having shown his awareness of the sorrow of the drinking life□the fear and loneliness and self-delusion□Li Po ends this poem by noting that wine takes him to the deepest of all joys. These are not words that can be dismissed lightly or explained as meaning anything but what they say. He is clearly, deeply committed to drinking. His rhetoric about its grander benefits, enabling him to bond with the moon, enlightenment, wisdom, and such, ring falsely, but there is no denying that he honestly needs wine to dull his fears. In short, the religious and political arguments for wine are put forth weakly, but the personal argument rings true.

A poem that only praised wine might have some interesting twists, but if it lacked scope then it would only be relevant in times when poetry readers saw drinking the same way as the poet. Times change: today, people are much more aware of wine as an addictive substance than they were just a few decades ago. If Li Po's poem "Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon" had only been a paean to wine, its values would be virtually unrecognizable today, and the poem itself would be irrelevant. Instead, it has stayed alive by acknowledging the complexity of drinking, offering readers ideas that are as true today as they were in the eighth century.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Adaptations

A.B.C. Audio of Sydney produced an audiocassette in 1979 titled *Some Poems of Li Po*. These poems were translated from the Chinese by Arthur Cooper and are read by John Warnock. This cassette is part of the "Poet's Tongue" series.

Topics for Further Study

Research the thoughts of some writers who are for and some who are against drinking and make a display of their one-line quotes that show both sides.

Li Po's friendship with the poet Tu Fu is legendary. Find out about their very different personalities and then write a two-person play that shows them interacting.

Study the traditional Chinese art of calligraphy. After studying it, use principles that you have learned to write a few lines from this poem. Explain to your classmates the significance of your method.

The poet Ezra Pound is famous for translating some of Li Po's works for Western readers. Study a few of Pound's translations and compare them to other translations. How do the translations differ? Why do you think Pound's translations are so recognized? Write a paper explaining Pound's approach to translating Po's work.

Compare and Contrast

740s: Wine consumption is celebrated as a means for poets to reach spiritual understanding.

Today: Excessive alcohol consumption is frequently associated with liver problems, stroke, diabetes, high blood pressure, traffic fatalities, and mental illness.

740s: A poet in China becomes famous by becoming a member of the emperor's royal court.

Today: Few Americans can name America's current Poet Laureate, Louise Glück.

740s: China is an international center for culture: people from all over the Asian Peninsula travel there for trade and experience the greatest artistic and philosophical minds in the world. Meanwhile, Europe is mired in a period so empty of cultural achievement that it is remembered as the Dark Ages.

Today: China's culture is hidden by a totalitarian government that represses political and artistic freedom in an attempt to manage a population of over a billion people.

740s: The moon is considered a bright, shining mystery.

Today: Since the first craft landed on the moon in 1964 and the first person walked on the moon in 1969, it holds fewer and fewer mysteries.

What Do I Read Next?

Contemporary poet Carl Phillips has written a poem "Undressing for Li Po" that attempts to capture Li Po's spirit in an absurdist situation. It is available in his 1992 collection *In the Blood*.

Li Po's name is often associated with that of Tu Fu (712—790); not only were they friends, but they are considered two of the greatest poets of China's considerable literary history. Of particular interest to fans of Li Po's life and times is the poem "The Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup." Tu Fu's poetry is available today in the collection *Selected Poems of Tu Fu*, translated with an introduction by David Hinton.

Paula M. Varsano's *Tracking the Banished Mortal: The Poetry of Li Bo and Its Criticism* (2003) examines the way that the poet's legend has been built over the centuries.

Not much is known about Li Po's actual life, giving Simon Elegant the opportunity to give a fictionalized version of it in his 1997 historical novel *A Floating Life: The Adventures of Li Po*, published by Ecco Press.

Further Study

Lancashire, Douglas *Li Po-Yuan*, Twayne's World Authors Series, No. 607, Twayne Publishers, 1981.

Lancashire's text is a book-length study of Li Po, written for American students. Though it is dated, the relevance of much of what Lancashire has to say has not changed much.

Obata, Shigeyoshi, Introduction to *The Works of Li Po, the Chinese Poet*, Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1965, pp. 1—23.

This book was for a long time the only collection of Li Po's poems available. This introduction, originally written in 1922, gives a comprehensive overview of the poet's life and works.

Owen, Stephen, *The End of the Chinese 'Middle Ages': Essays in Mid-tang Literary Culture*, Stanford University Press, 1996.

Owens's book covers the period that begins late in Li Po's life, but it gives readers a good cultural context for how he and his peers left their mark on their world.

Varsano, Paula M., "Immediacy and Allusion in the Poetry of Li Bo," in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 1, June 1992, pp. 225—61.

A scholarly examination of Li Po's method and the ways his poetry refers to other works his readers would have known.

Bibliography

Li Po, *The Selected Poems of Li Po*, translated by David Hinton, New Directions Press, 1996.

Watson, Burton, *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*, Columbia University Press, 1984, p. 205.

BOOKRAGS

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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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