# Hymn to Aphrodite Study Guide

## Hymn to Aphrodite by Sappho

# Contents

# Introduction

Sappho's "Hymn to Aphrodite" is the only poem from her many books of poetry to survive in its entirety. The actual text of the poem was quoted by Dionysus, an orator who lived in Rome about 30 b.c. He quoted Sappho's poem in full in one of his own works, which accounts for the poem's survival. Sappho's poem consists of a plea from a forlorn individual to help secure the ardor of a reluctant lover. Such requests were common for the period in which the poem was written, but Sappho's poem also provides a dialogue, since it provides the goddess's response to the poet's plea. Sappho's devotion to Aphrodite is reflected in this personal response, which suggests an intimacy, and thus a uniqueness, among such works. As is the case with "Hymn to Aphrodite," many of Sappho's poems focus on love and marriage, often addressing pleas to the goddess Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Sappho organized a group of her young female students into a *thiasos*, a cult that worshipped Aphrodite with songs and poetry, and "Hymn to Aphrodite" was most likely composed for performance within this cult.

The "Hymn to Aphrodite" has no specific date of composition but, like all Sappho's work, was composed in the sixth century b.c. After Sappho's death, her poems were preserved in an early third century b.c. library in Alexandria, Egypt, but eventually the texts disappeared and only fragments now remain. Recently, several translations of "Hymn to Aphrodite" were included in Margaret Reynolds's study of Sappho's poetry, *The Sappho Companion* (2001). Another scholarly translation is included in *Sappho: Poems and Fragments* (1992), by Josephine Balmer.

# Author Biography

There are few known facts about the Greek poet Sappho, but there has been much speculation in the efforts to account for her life. What is known is that Sappho was one of the great Greek lyrists and one of the few female poets of the ancient Greek world. Sappho was born around 625 b.c. and lived on the island of Lesvos (also spelled Lesbos). Much of what is thought to be known about Sappho has been taken from her poems, most of which exist only in fragments. In looking to the poem fragments for autobiographical information, what is read from her poems is little more than conjecture taken from a few shreds of papyrus. For instance, the fragments suggest that Sappho either committed suicide, jumping off a cliff after being rejected by a lover, or that she lived until an old age and died in bed, her beauty passed into a "thousand wrinkles." The first cause of death is much more romantic than the second and so is repeated most often. It is believed, however, that Sappho died sometime around 570 b.c. Some additional autobiographical information is taken from other texts of the period that may refer to Sappho, but these sources are generally believed to be unreliable. Except for those scholars who would read her poems as autobiography, the other remaining source of information about Sappho's life is found in the tenth-century-Byzantine encyclopedia, the *Suda*, whose entry on Sappho is filled with information that cannot be verified and which is thought to be speculation.

Traditionally, the limited biographical information suggests that Sappho was an aristocrat who married a prosperous merchant, with whom she had a daughter, Cleis. It is thought that Sappho made her primary residence on Lesbos, although she also traveled widely throughout Greece. Supposedly, Sappho was exiled from Greece on at least two occasions because of the political activities of her family. During her time of exile, she lived in Sicily, although there is no information about her life there. Since her husband was wealthy, Sappho was given the opportunity to live a life devoted to studying the arts. The isle of Lesbos was a cultural center in seventh century b.c. Greece and would have provided an ideal setting for such study. Although she is best known as a lyrical poet, Sappho is also credited with efforts to educate young girls. She founded a school in Mytilene, where she taught music, poetry, and etiquette. Young women of this period needed to be trained to fulfill their proper social positions, and Sappho's school provided an emphasis on poetry and music, which was considered the proper foundation for educating young women. Sappho was very well known as a poet and was the object of many honors. For example, the residents of Syracuse were so honored by her visit that they erected a statue to commemorate it. During Sappho's lifetime, coins of Lesbos were minted with her image on one side. Plato considered Sappho a muse and not merely a poet, and, in the period after her death, her poems were often copied and read, as she inspired the many poets who read her work. Sappho's reputation as an innovative lyrical poet directly led to the preservation of "Hymn to Aphrodite," which was quoted in its entirety by Dionysus in his text *On Literary Composition*, published in about 30 b.c.

# Plot Summary

## Overview

This only complete Sappho poem, "Hymn to Aphrodite," expresses the very human plea for help with a broken heart. The speaker, who is identified in stanza 5 as the poet Sappho, calls upon the goddess of love, Aphrodite, to come to her aid. The goddess has helped the speaker in the past and will leave her golden palace to come to Earth to help her faithful believer. The center of the poem recalls past visits in which the goddess has brought a reluctant lover back. The goddess promises that the lover will soon know love as intense as that suffered by the poet, and so the poem ends on a more hopeful recognition of the goddess's power to resolve the pain of love.

## Stanza 1

In the first stanza, the speaker calls upon the goddess Aphrodite to come to her aid. The speaker begins by acknowledging the power of the goddess, whom she calls "immortal," the daughter of the mighty Zeus, the greatest of all the Greek gods. After recognizing Aphrodite's power and lineage, the speaker mentions the goddess's skills at deception, using a Greek work that different translators have interpreted to mean guile-weaver, enchantress, one who twists lures, snare-knitter, cunning, wily, or love-perplexing. All of these translations suggest that the speaker is calling upon specific skills that Aphrodite employs to ensnare a reluctant lover. In the final line of the stanza, the speaker entreats the goddess not to ignore her pleadings and thereby break a heart already stricken with grief.

## Stanza 2

The second stanza continues the plea of the first stanza, again asking the goddess to come to the speaker's aid. She reminds the goddess of her devotion in the past, of the songs that have been sung to the goddess, and of how the goddess has heard the speaker's pleas in the past. The speaker asks the goddess to come again, reminding the goddess that she has heard her requests before and that she has responded to these earlier petitions. The speaker offers flattery and acknowledges that the goddess will once again need to leave the glory of Zeus's palace of gold.

## Stanza 3

In the third stanza, the writer recalls past visits from the goddess when she was needed. The speaker-poet provides a vision of how Aphrodite has previously made the trip from her father's palace to this mortal's more humble home. The goddess arrived in a chariot, a Greek word occasionally translated as a car drawn not by winged horses, as one might expect, but by a flock of sparrows, which represent fertility. The image of the

sparrows is one of wings beating furiously as they bring the goddess down from heaven and through the air until she arrives on the darkened earth. The stanza helps to reinforce the idea that the speaker and the goddess have a close relationship. This part also suggests that the poet can expect assistance this time, as well.

## Stanza 4

In this next stanza, the goddess arrives. She is variously described, depending on the translation, as sacred, blessed, heavenly, or immortal, and so once again the goddess's power is acknowledged, in this instance within a description of her features. In this fourth stanza, the goddess speaks, and so the dialogue begins between speaker and the object of the prayer. Aphrodite asks the speaker why she has been summoned. Whereas in many cases the translation offers only a variation on the word with similar meanings, as in the case with the differences in the first three stanzas, in stanza 4 the differences in translation do suggest different meanings. Some translators ask the cause of the speaker's "suffering"; others ask what new "complaints" the speaker has to make. Other translations inquire as to the cause of the speaker's "grief" or ask what the speaker's "distracted" heart might need. The images suggested by these varying translations are different, most notably in the connotative differences between a complaint and suffering, since in the former the goddess suggests a less tolerant response. However this line is interpreted, the result is the establishment of a dialogue to address the speaker's needs.

## Stanza 5

In this fifth stanza, the goddess asks the speaker what she needs this time. Again the repetitiveness of the speaker's request is recognized, and she is asked what her lover needs to be persuaded to return on this occasion. Because Aphrodite is the Greek goddess of love, she has the power to force a lover's return, usually through trickery and deception. The phrasing of the goddess's question "Who shall I persuade this time / to take you back, yet once again" establishes that the speaker has had this problem in the past and that the goddess has come to the forlorn lover's aid before. What was suggested in stanza 2, when the speaker petitioned the goddess's help, is confirmed in stanza 5. The problem is again love, as it has been in the past. The final line of stanza 5 provides two unusual pieces of information. Although the speaker has needed the goddess's assistance in the past, it is because she has been the injured party in love. The goddess asks, "who wrongs you," and with these words the reader learns that the speaker is deserving of Aphrodite's help. She is the injured party, whom love has pained. The final word, "Sappho," links the speaker and poet, and the speaker ceases to be an abstract entity and becomes the poet persona, Sappho.

## Stanza 6

In the sixth stanza, the speaker recalls how the goddess has always promised her aid when called upon. It becomes clear that the lover will not long escape. Aphrodite promises that the one being pursued will soon enough become the pursuer. There are two ways to read this section. In the first interpretation, the speaker will soon enough be the one receiving the lover's gifts, and if she is not loved now, the speaker will soon enough be the recipient of the love she desires. The final line makes clear that the speaker's love will be returned no matter what the lover desires. The lover cannot resist the goddess's power and will be unable to assert her own will against that of the goddess. The second possible meaning is based on the lack of specifics in Aphrodite's promise. It is possible that the lover will come to love another, someone who will not return her love, and thus she, too, will know the pain of unrequited love, just as the speaker has come to know such grief. It is also clear in this stanza that the desired lover is feminine. Early translations changed the feminine Greek word ending to masculine, in an attempt to protect the reader from possible homosexual allusions and in a desire to sanitize Sappho's work. Current scholarship has returned the meaning to the poem, and the identification of the object of love is now clearly defined as female.

## Stanza 7

In this final stanza, the speaker's voice again assumes control of the poem. The poem ends with the speaker's now calmer voice. The plea for help is still present, but the earlier anguish has been lessened since the speaker believes the promise of past help will certainly lead to help again. The reader is also reassured that the goddess's help will be forthcoming and the speaker's anguish will be assuaged. The goddess is recognized as the speaker's ally in love. Aphrodite will free the speaker of the pain of lost love and bring her all that she desires. The poem, which began with an anguished plea, now ends on a more optimistic tone. There is still pain and grief, but the speaker is no longer alone in her grief. Her ally, Aphrodite, will come to the speaker's aid.

# Themes

## Heartache

The content of "Hymn to Aphrodite" makes clear that the speaker has suffered romantic pain in the past and does so again. In the first stanza, the speaker implores the goddess not to ignore her pleas and thereby to burden her heart with anguish and grief. Many lines in the poem refer to the repetitive nature of the speaker's romantic unhappiness. She has requested the goddess's help in the past to secure a lover's affection. In the fifth stanza, the speaker refers to her "demented heart," and stanza 7 notes the speaker's "aching pain." Heartbreak from unrequited love was a common theme in Sappho's poems to Aphrodite. Many of the recovered fragments refer to love and to the pain it causes, as well as to the hope that relief of this heartache will be provided. This focus on love, especially the pain of love desired and love lost, continues to provide popular topics for poets even after more than twenty-seven hundred years.

## Lesbianism

Sappho's poem makes clear that the object of her affection is feminine. The reader knows that the poem's speaker is feminine because Aphrodite calls the poet-speaker by name in stanza 5. The lover is identified through the use of feminine pronouns. Many of Sappho's poems deal with her love for the female object. As a result, she is closely identified with lesbianism. The isle of Lesvos, Sappho's home, is often spelled Lesbos, and the word for its inhabitants, Lesbians, has emerged as a term that identifies sexual love between two women. There has been much controversy about Sappho's meaning, with some scholarly readers interpreting her poems to mean the more platonic love between mentor and student. But many other scholars assign the meaning of love to a more sexual passion. In "Hymn to Aphrodite," the speaker's love appears more in the nature of a consuming passion for a lover than the platonic affection between teacher and student would suggest. It is worth remembering that, in addition to Aphrodite being defined as the goddess of love, she was also designated the deity of abandoned sexuality.

## Passion

Sappho's poem is filled with the speaker's longing and desire for a loved one. The words used to describe her pain at her lover's abandonment indicate that this is a passionate love and that there is a desire for a union with a lover. The speaker-poet opens the poem with a lament that the goddess should not easily dismiss her need, since she speaks from a heart filled with anguish and grief. The choice of words, such as "anguish," "grief," "demented heart," and "aching pain," reflect the depth of love and pain that the speaker feels. She refers to past "pleas," in response to which the goddess has attended to her needs, and reiterates that now she is "begging" for the goddess to

come to her aid. In the final stanza, the speaker describes her lover as "everything that / my heart desires." These words suggest a passionate love, one that consumes the speaker. Passion is one of the most extreme and compelling of emotions and is often associated with a fervor that overrides reason. But passion is also closely aligned with the Greek term *pathos*, which asks the reader to sympathize with the pain that passion can cause in its victim. Sappho's choice of words to describe the poet-speaker's emotions surely evokes the reader's sympathy in response.

## Resolution

Ideally, a narrative poem should offer some sort of resolution at its conclusion. In Sappho's "Hymn to Aphrodite," the concluding stanza offers a suggestion that the writer's needs will be resolved. This resolution is created through the poet-speaker's recalling of past instances in which the goddess has come to her aid. In the second stanza, the speaker requests that the goddess come to her aid, as she has "ever in the past." In a specific instance that is recalled by the poet-speaker in stanza 4, the goddess has left her father's house and, after coming to the speaker's aid, has inquired, "what had gone wrong this time and this time / why was I begging." The repetition of "this time" within this short line suggests that such requests have been frequent. The speaker turns once again to the goddess for resolution because she has turned to her in the past and met with success. Resolution is also suggested by the change in tone from the first stanza to the seventh. The opening of the poem is frantic, with the speaker begging for the goddess's help and pleading that her heart's pain not be subjugated. By the final stanza, the tone is easier and lighter. Although the speaker is not happy, she is also no longer feeling so much anguish. She asks of the goddess that she "come to me." The desperate note is gone, and while the speaker is still hurting from the absence of her lover and still feeling an "aching pain," she is confident that the goddess "will be my ally." The speaker is reassured that everything that she desires will be fulfilled because she has recalled that previous experience has made it so. The resolution in the poem's final stanza results from the pattern of experience that is recounted.

## Worship of Gods and Goddesses

Sappho's poem represents a common Greek practice□the desire for a god to intervene on a human's behalf. The Greeks of antiquity believed fervently in their gods' abilities to offer assistance, with different gods assigned qualities and functions to fit particular aspects and needs of human life. Aphrodite was designated the goddess of love and the protector of marriage, as well as the goddess of sexuality and passion. She was very beautiful and quite promiscuous, as were many of the gods. Sappho, with her students and companions, created a cult devoted to the worship of Aphrodite. Songs and poems were written to honor the goddess, and pleas for her help were also common. In "Hymn to Aphrodite," the speaker opens and closes the poem with stanzas that pray for the goddess's intervention with a romantic problem. The flattery of the goddess, which is represented in terms that acknowledge her cleverness and beauty, as well as her royal lineage, were common artifices of this type of plea. Gods or goddesses must first be

flattered and their greatness acknowledged if they are to supply the desired assistance. In this manner, Sappho's poem fulfills the expected formula.

# Style

## Catharsis

Catharsis is an ancient Greek device that suggests the purging or release of unwanted emotions, often through the use of poetry or drama. In Sappho's poem, the speaker uses the heartache of love to describe the array of emotions that the lover's abandonment has created. The poem easily describes the grief of the speaker through phrases such as "demented heart" and "aching pain." The use of "demented" implies a loss of mind, a derangement of the speaker's faculties that reveal the depth of her anguish. Sappho uses the language of poetry to express the emotions of rejected love, and in her descriptions of grief and heartache the reader is also able to acknowledge the universality of abandonment and love lost. The hopeful ending also suggests to the reader the possibility of resolution and a happy ending for all love affairs.

## Hymn

Sappho's poem is generally titled the "Hymn to Aphrodite," although it is occasionally listed in some texts as "Ode to Aphrodite." The hymn is a genre that expresses religious emotion and is most often designed to be sung. Sappho's poem almost certainly was performed in this manner. Later hymns, for example those created during the Middle Ages when the creation of hymns became an important expression of religious fervor, were the sole genre of Christian religious expression. In Sappho's time, the hymn was no less fervent. Greeks believed in their gods as fervently as do Christians, who believe in their god and church as an absolute power. Sappho's hymn is analogous to a prayer. She pleads with her goddess, Aphrodite, to intercede on her behalf. She opens the poem with a request for help, moves quickly into recalling past instances when the goddess has helped her, and concludes with an acknowledgement that she and her goddess are united as allies. A careful study of Sappho's "Hymn to Aphrodite" acknowledges its place as a forefather to the later hymns of the Christian church.

## Imagery

Simply put, imagery refers to the images in a poem. The relationships between images can suggest important meanings in a poem. With imagery, the poem uses language and specific words to create meaning. For instance, in Sappho's "Hymn to Aphrodite," the goddess is described as a "guile-weaver." This term suggests the goddess's cleverness with ruse and trickery. Later the speaker will recount a past experience when the goddess was able to force a lover's return even though she returned "against her will." Other images in the poem tell the reader even more about Aphrodite. She lives in her father's, Zeus's, "golden house," where she sits on a "patterned throne," whose image implies a rank equal to that of the most royal of personages. This image of aloofness is further supported by the notion that the goddess will approach Earth in a chariot pulled

by "beautiful swift sparrows." As a result of this image, the reader visualizes a magical entrance. The effect of all these word images is a picture of Aphrodite as powerful and strong, a goddess who is more than capable of helping the speaker.

## Lament

A lament is a poem that expresses grief and is usually very personal in tone. The lamentation allows the poet a way to grieve her loss and is a way to make her pain visible. In the Old Testament, the Book of Lamentations provides the Jews with a way to mourn the loss of that which they loved, their city and their people. Sappho's use of the lament in her poem provides a similar function. Her grief at her lover's abandonment is acute and not easily assuaged. She calls upon the goddess to help return her lover to her, since that is the only solution that will resolve her pain. The pain described by the speaker is very personal. She opens herself, revealing the intensity of her grief, in an attempt to convince the goddess not to reject this plea for help. The effect of the lament is to describe for the reader the depth of anguish felt, even as it convinces the goddess that the need is genuine.

## Lyric Poetry

Lyric poetry describes poems that are strongly associated with emotion, imagination, and a songlike resonance, especially when associated with an individual speaker or singer. Lyric poetry emerged during the Archaic Age and encompassed shorter poems than the previous narrative poetry of Homer or the didactic poetry of Hesiod. Since lyric poetry is so very individual and emotional in its content, it is, by its very nature, also subjective. Lyric poetry is also the most common form of poetry, especially since its attributes are also common to many other forms of poetry. Sappho is often acknowledged as one of the earliest poets to create lyric poetry. Her lyric poems were meant to be sung, as was all lyric poetry, and were accompanied by Sappho playing the lyre. In fact, Sappho is credited with the invention of the twenty-one-string lyre. Lyric poetry's focus on individual feeling represented a new genre in Greek literary output.

# Historical Context

## Early Greek Development

Sappho lived in a time of change, just after the end of the period known as the Dark Ages and just as the golden age of Greek life was beginning. At the beginning of the sixth century b.c. , Greek people were not called by that name. The Romans gave the people of the area the name "Greek." The actual name that the people of this area used translated into English as "Hellenes," hence the term "Hellenism." In one sense, this period of Greek history had many similarities to the origins of the United States. The area that became Greece was filled with immigrants from other countries, just as with the early establishment of the United States. As the Dark Ages ended, a diverse group of people came together into one area, where they began to share the same language. All of these people would become known as Greek because they now lived together in the same location and because they shared similar religious beliefs. The Greek colonization of this area had begun only two hundred years earlier, but by the time Sappho was writing in the sixth century b.c. , the unification of the Greek world was already well under way. One crucial aspect of this unification was the belief in myth as religion.

Greek religious life was based upon a complex grouping of gods and goddesses, whose existence governed every aspect of Greek life. Local superstitions were also important, as were some beliefs that had been imported from other cultures, but the centerpiece of religious life was the worship of Greek gods, who were remarkably human, in spite of their supernatural foundation. These gods were usually men or women, whose behaviors were governed by very humanlike passions. There were twelve Olympian gods, of which Aphrodite was one. There were many lesser gods as well, and many cities also had their own gods who served as protector. The Greek gods governed many aspects of daily life. For instance, the goddess Persephone is associated with a myth that explains the divisions of growing seasons and the creation of winter, while Aphrodite governed love and marriage. Many of these gods appeared in the poetry and drama of the period.

In addition to Sappho's use of Aphrodite, Homer used many of the Greek gods in his two major epic poems, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Although Homer's works had circulated orally for a long period of time, after they were written down in the sixth century b.c. , they became the authoritative account of early Greek life, recalling the greatness that had been Greece and offering the promise of a golden age to come. Homer's works also reinforced the role of the gods in Greek life and history.

## Greek Life on Lesvos

Sappho was thought to have been part of the aristocracy. Although exact information about her parentage is unknown, most scholars think that her parents were wealthy and

that she was brought up as part of a privileged class. In the sixth century b.c. , Greece was made up of many city-states, each of which operated as individual communities and not as a unified government. The island of Lesvos was more cosmopolitan than the city of Athens, which was still largely a farming community. Lesvos was an international trading center that shipped wine throughout the known world. This island was not the military center that Athens would become, since, unlike Athens, Lesvos was not involved in near constant warfare to defend its farmland. Lesvos was also farther east than the rest of Greece and so had been less affected by the Dark Ages, which had been brought about by the Dorian invasions five hundred years earlier. By the sixth century b.c. , Lesvos was far ahead of Athens in its emphasis on art and culture.

The women on Lesvos enjoyed more freedom than the limited freedoms offered to other Greek women, especially the women of Athens. Women on Lesvos were more than appendages for their husbands. Women had more autonomy, spoke freely in public, and attended public gatherings. Their opinions were valued, and women could be educated and were encouraged to seek an education. Sappho's school for young girls was not the only school available to serve this purpose. Although the great age of drama and poetry would not emerge in Athens for another hundred years, in Lesvos, literary culture was already encouraged. Young women were expected to engage in the writing of poetry and songs, just as they did at Sappho's school. They were also encouraged to play musical instruments, most notably the lyre, which Sappho taught. Young girls were sent by their families to these schools, where they lived from about the age of twelve until age fifteen, when they left to marry. The freedom that women enjoyed was not absolute. Political strife could still interfere with life, even in the more relaxed atmosphere of Lesvos. For instance, although her family was wealthy and influential, Sappho was exiled twice during her lifetime.

# Critical Overview

There is a surprising amount of information about how Sappho's work was received in ancient Greece. This is surprising because she never wrote down any of her work. She performed her compositions to music, and so they were memorized and later sung. Sappho lived at the cusp between the ending of the oral tradition and the beginning of the written word. Shortly after her death, a Greek alphabet was devised, and her poems were written down, gathered together, and collected into nine papyrus books. For the next three hundred years, Sappho's work was studied and copied and passed around on papyrus, and it continued to inspire other poets, who both quoted from her and imitated her work. By the third century b.c. , Sappho was recognized as a great lyric poet. Then her work virtually disappeared. Sappho herself continued to be well known because she became the object of Greek comedy and satire, but her poems were no longer being read.

What happened to her work became the source of several literary legends. Some stories blame the destruction of the great library at Alexandria for the loss of Sappho's work, whereas other stories blame the loss of her work on the spread of Christianity and the church's disapproval of Sappho's celebration of female love. In *The Sappho Companion*, editor Margaret Reynolds attributes the loss of Sappho's work to more ordinary events than deliberate large-scale destruction. Reynolds argues that Sappho was merely a victim of changing fashions. The language of Athens became the classical Greek, with which scholars are familiar, while the language of Sappho, the Aeolic dialect, was regarded as provincial and no longer the language of art. Another change Reynolds notes is the change in writing materials. Papyrus was replaced by parchment codex, and many texts were rewritten on the new material. Reynolds suggests that perhaps "scribes and their employers thought Sappho an arcane taste, not worth the labour of retranscription." Within a short period of time, all of her nine books had disappeared.

What remained were scraps of Sappho's poems that had been preserved within the work of other writers who quoted from her songs and poems. The "Hymn of Aphrodite" is one of the few works that have survived in this manner after it was quoted in its entirety in Dionysus's work *On Literary Composition*, published in about 30 b.c.

The availability of Sappho's compositions changed late in the nineteenth century when farmers in Egypt discovered shreds of papyrus in an area that was being plowed for new fields. The areas being laid open had been a rubbish dump, and amongst the old pieces of papyrus were several fragments of poetry that were later identified as Sappho's work. Many of the fragments had been used to wrap mummies. To do this, the papyrus was torn from top to bottom in narrow bands. In result, sections of poems were missing□often the center part. The nine books of poetry that had been written and compiled some twenty-five hundred years earlier were reduced to only about two hundred lines of verse, most with gaps in the middle of the line.

After the discovery of Sappho's fragments, several translations of her work appeared. These were by writers who attempted to fill in the missing words with words that they thought fit the idea being expressed. It did not matter to these early translators that the archaic Greek that they were translating was exceedingly difficult to translate or that the word(s) chosen might not be correct. The idea of leaving a blank space in a line was unacceptable. Feminine pronouns that expressed Sappho's love for other women were also changed to masculine, both to protect the sensibilities of the reader and also to sanitize Sappho's reputation.

The tendency to rewrite Sappho has changed in recent years, and few readers of Sappho now read these early translations. A significant number of women literary scholars have become interested in Sappho's work, and several translations that reflect both the author's use of feminine pronouns and the gaps in verse have emerged and are being studied. The great irony about Sappho's work is that her work has been preserved, not through Sappho's own efforts, but through the work of admirers and scholars.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

# Critical Essay #1

*Metzger has a doctorate in English Renaissance literature and teaches literature and drama at the University of New Mexico. She is also a professional writer and the author of several reference texts on literature. In this essay, Metzger discusses the problems of translating Sappho's work and the resulting differences in meaning that result.*

During her lifetime, Sappho never wrote down a single poem. Her poetry was celebrated throughout the Greek world and often copied and passed around, but all of this occurred many years after her death. Her work was also the inspiration for other poets, so much so that Plato labeled her the "tenth muse." She was acknowledged to be as great a poetess as Homer had been a poet, and yet Sappho's songs and poems only survived by chance. After her death, the development of a Greek alphabet and writing materials allowed Sappho's admirers to finally preserve her work, which had previously been memorized, on papyrus. The result was at least nine volumes of poetry, most of which eventually disappeared from the written record. Most of this body of work has been lost in the period since Sappho's death, and the work that has survived did so in a manner that seems quite serendipitous now. Some of her works were quoted by other authors and have survived in the preserved texts of later writers, though some of Sappho's original texts survive only as papyrus fragments recovered from Egyptian rubbish heaps. A significant additional problem that has arisen from texts recovered in either fashion concerns the translations of these works. Sappho's poems were written in a rural and archaic form of Greek, the vernacular Aeolian dialect. Even scholars who are familiar with ancient Greek have problems with the more arcane dialects for which word meanings are uncertain. As a result, translations of Sappho's poems often offer significant variation among translators. Although the text of "Hymn to Aphrodite" was preserved in its entirety in Dionysus's *On Literary Composition*, translations of this poem can vary significantly, resulting in both loss of meaning and loss of integrity in Sappho's work. As a result, an examination of several of the different translations of these poems can provide important lessons about the integrity and responsibility of the translator to preserve meaning.

In her book *Sappho's Immortal Daughters*, Margaret Williamson explores the difficulties in translating poem 1, "Hymn to Aphrodite." Williamson points out that although this poem has survived intact, it has faced a set of unique problems in its preservation. The biggest problem, according to Williamson, is the centuries of recopying. Williamson notes that manuscripts of this poem provide for three variants, and modern translations are based on one of these earlier manuscripts, which provides for some important differences in translation. Other problems of translation are noted by Margaret Reynolds in her work *The Sappho Companion*. Reynolds mentions that another problem of translation was that "in early writing practice no punctuation was used and, worse still, no gaps between words." These issues make translating Sappho's work exceptionally difficult. Because there have been so many translations of this poem, it is important to establish a reliable source for comparison. For purposes of this study, the benchmark translation of "Hymn to Aphrodite" is that of Josephine Balmer, taken from *Sappho: Poems & Fragments* (revised and corrected, 1992). There have been several recent

translations of Sappho that attempt to stay close to the Greek and that resist the temptation either to clean up the poet's image by changing the focus of the poem from feminine to masculine or by protecting the sensibilities of readers who might be shocked by the references to a passionate love between women. Balmer's translation of Sappho is one that provides for the reader, as Williamson suggests, a translation, "whose unencumbered layout does more justice to their [the poems'] clarity and elegance." Accordingly, all comparisons of earlier translations that follow will be read against the Balmer translation.

Reynolds's *The Sappho Companion* includes reprints of several of the earliest translations of the "Hymn to Aphrodite," beginning with those published early in the eighteenth century when new interest in Sappho's work first flourished. The earliest translation included in Reynolds's study was taken from Ambrose Phillips's book *The Works of Anacreon and Sappho, Done from the Greek, by several hands* (1715). Phillips has used the Roman name for Aphrodite and so changed the title to "An Hymn to Venus." An examination of just the first stanza quickly illustrates some of the problems in this work. The text itself remains consistent in its pleadings to the goddess, although with some embellishment that is not seen in the more recent translations of the poem. For instance, Phillips's translation adds to the flattery that the speaker directs toward the goddess. For example, Balmer translates the first line to read: "Immortal Aphrodite, on your patterned throne," whereas Phillips writes "O *Venus*, Beauty of the Skies, / To whom a thousand Temples rise." Phillips's version, in addition to being considerably more ornate, also creates a more significant degree of flattery, which the writer has adopted in her quest for help. This flattery continues in the next lines when Balmer's simple rendition of "guile-weaver" is transformed into "Gayly false in gentle Smiles, / Full of Love-perplexing Wiles." However, the most significant changes are not just those of flowery embellishment but the differences of poetic structure. Sappho's pleading words have been changed to rhyming couplets, a favorite genre of the Renaissance poets but not a poetic device used by early Greek writers. The stanza and meter have also been changed from four lines to six. Williamson explains the Sapphic meter has four lines of eleven syllables, followed by a fourth line of five syllables. In contrast, Phillips provides for an iambic eight syllables in each line, with alternating stressed and unstressed syllables. Reading the poem aloud illustrates the monotony of both the rhyming couplets and the eight-syllable line, whereas reading Balmer's translation of Sappho's poem aloud clearly illustrates how the variation in stressed and unstressed syllables helps to create a tension and an interest in the flow of her poem. Obviously, Phillips did not intend for his translation to be sung, as did Sappho, but ignoring the purpose of the original work causes Phillips's translation to have a much more dated sound. His work clearly fails to escape its early-eighteenth-century origins, unlike Sappho's original work, which is timeless in its appeal.

Another problem with Phillips's translation is one that reoccurs frequently over the next two hundred years. In stanza 6, Phillips has translated the feminine word endings to masculine, and so the goddess reassures the poet-speaker that "Tho' now he Shuns thy longing Arms, / He soon shall court thy slighted Charms." Sappho's love is now directed toward a man, and so it becomes heterosexual and more acceptable to both its translator and, presumably, his audience. Of course, Phillips is not alone in his reliance

on heterosexual love to define the poet-speaker's longing. In John Addison's 1735 translation of "Hymn to Aphrodite" for his collection of Greek verse, *The Works of Anacreon translated into English Verse; with Notes explanatory and poetical. To which are added the Odes, Fragments, and Epigrams of Sappho*, Addison has translated the sixth stanza as "Tho' thy Gifts and Thee he slight, / He shall soon with Gifts invite." Like Phillips, Addison relies upon rhyming couplets, although he uses the seven-syllable iambic line, instead of eight. Both Phillips and Addison ignore the last line of stanza six, the promise by the goddess that the object of Sappho's love shall soon experience love, "even / against her own will" (Balmer's translation). Williamson points out that this line is especially important since "In the Greek this is the only point in the poem at which it is made explicit that the speaker's beloved is a woman and not a man." If this line is translated, it becomes clear that the preceding lines of stanza 6 are meant to refer to a woman. By ignoring the words "even / against her own will," Phillips and Addison become free to change the pronouns to masculine, and the meaning and intent of Sappho's poem is transformed into something entirely different.

The propensity to change the feminine to masculine finally changed in the late nineteenth century. In John Addington Symonds's translation, which was included in Henry Thornton Wharton's *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings and a Literal Translation*, Symonds restores both the missing line and the transformed feminine pronouns. In his sixth stanza, Symonds also reverts to the Sapphic stanza. The artificiality of rhyming couplets has disappeared, as has the alternating iambic meter. Symonds verse now reads:

Yea, for though she flies, she shall quickly chase thee;

Yea, though gifts she spurns, she shall soon bestow them;

Yea, though now she loves not, she shall soon love thee,

Yea, though she will not!

While Symonds remains true to meter, he substitutes parallelism to create additional interest. There is the repetition of the first word in each line, followed by the inverted thought from the first half of each line into the converse thought of the second half of the line. Symonds partners "flies" with "chase," "spurns" with "bestow," and "loves not" with "love." He does not quite trust Sappho's words to stand on their own, and so he uses the device of oration and clergy, the parallelism of thought, to keep the reader focused on the words. And yet, in spite of the continued reliance on poetic artifice, Symonds does include the often missing final line and the feminine pronoun to define the lover. Williamson credits the work of German editor Theodor Bergk for the change that resulted in the acknowledgement that Sappho's poem was intended to be a pleading for a female lover. Williamson relates that it was Bergk's 1843 *Poetae Lyrici Graeci* that first proposed that the gender of the beloved was female. Bergk later defended his choice in an 1882 edition of his earlier work. The effect of his work can be seen almost immediately in Symonds's translation, which appeared only three years later.

In the translations that followed those of Bergk and Symonds, most translators have chosen to retain the feminine endings. A notable exception was the widely read anthology *Greek Poets in English Verse*, whose editor, William Hyde Appleton, chose to include his own translation. Like the writers of nearly two hundred years earlier, Appleton ignored the recent scholarship on Sappho and retained the masculine gender designation:

For, though now he flies, he soon shall follow,

Soon shall be giving gifts who now rejects them.

Even though now he love not, soon he love thee

Even though thou wouldst not.

Although Appleton has rejected the rhyming couplets and tried to eliminate some of the pronouns, especially in line 2, he does not acknowledge the female lover. Another important point is clear in the last line of stanza 6. The phrase "even against her own will" has been completely altered with the inclusion of the word "thou." The inclusion of this word changes the meaning completely. Instead of the lover being forced to love even when she (or he, as Appleton insists) would not wish to, Appleton's version implies that the poet-speaker may no longer want the lover. This change drastically alters one of the most important ideas of the poem: that Aphrodite had both the power and the trickery to force a lover to do what she does not wish to do.

In virtually all of the translations of the twentieth century, Sappho's meaning in "Hymn to Aphrodite" has been kept intact. Many of the translations have altered meter and stanza, but they have stayed true to the integrity of meaning. A study of the many different translations of Sappho that exist, whether those of the eighteenth, nineteenth, or twentieth century, will reveal much about the preferences in poetic form of that period, and thus all are worth the time spent in study. Additionally, these many differing translations only indicate how important it is for readers not to limit themselves to only one translation of Sappho's work.

**Source:** Sheri E. Metzger, Critical Essay on "Hymn to Aphrodite," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2004.

# Critical Essay #2

*Blevins published a full-length collection of poems,* The Brass Girl Brouhaha*, with Ausable Press in 2003. In this essay, Blevins uses Sappho's "Hymn to Aphrodite" to expose the importance of archetypal forms in the Western poetic tradition.*

Many contemporary poets, critics, and scholars associate poetic form with metrical formalism, or almost exclusively associate verse itself with the most common, rhythm-based verse formulas in English (such as the sonnet). Such an attitude fails to recognize the importance of other, perhaps less obvious, structures or rhetorical stratagems for establishing patterns. Some important examples are the narrative, the catalogue, and the prayer. Without these, there could be no poetry in any language. As Joseph Campbell and other scholars have pointed out, human history is imbued with forms and structures that contemporary poets and other artists must rely on (as they need not the sonnet): even the descent and ascent depicted in Jesus' birth and resurrection is anticipated—and potentially *informed*—by the Greek myth in which Persephone descends into the underworld with Hades each winter and returns each spring. This pattern of falling and rising, which comes out of the prehistorical human experience of the death of one season and the birth of the next, is so archetypal, or fundamental to the human understanding of form in nature, that it is virtually impossible to conceive of art without it.

The two most relevant strands of contemporary American poetry, the narrative and the lyric, derive their shapes from forms far more ancient than most contemporary poets and readers are willing to admit. It would be difficult to imagine the novel being invented without the literary culture having absorbed the quest forms of the Iliad, the Odyssey, and Beowulf. That is, while contemporary writers are obliged in some ways to "make it new," as the modernist Ezra Pound advised at the beginning of the twentieth century, every story—even every TV sitcom—owes its shape, which is often described in terms of the conflict, the crisis, and the resolution, to the first storytellers of the literate world. The same is true for lyric poetry, which meditates, usually in the first person, on a single topic. Lyric poetry is associated with heightened language (in a way that narrative or epic poetry is not) because the first lyrics (Sappho's poems are among the first known lyrics in the Western tradition) were usually accompanied by music.

Despite the fact that many of her poems and lines have been lost, Sappho is among the most interesting of the lyric poets not only because her work precedes much of the most important lyric poetry in the tradition but also because it communicates a wise and self-aware understanding of female sexual experience that many contemporary lyric poets have yet to achieve.

"Hymn to Aphrodite" is the best one to study in Balmer's translation, in part because it is the only complete poem that scholars have found. It is the ultimate lyric plea, addressing Aphrodite, the Greek Goddess of Love, in a heightened, or highly musical, address or request. The poem uses the direct address to stop time and fill the universe with Sappho's plea. It is thus able to remind all readers not only of other prayers in the

tradition but of the ways in which humans always implore the gods to help them. Sappho's poem records female sexual desire in a language that honors and celebrates yearning so expertly that it is able to transcend its intimate aspects and become an impersonal, or universal, record of human need.

The poem's first lines address Aphrodite with the praise that is traditional in the prayer, though even by the second line Sappho's sense of irony comes into play. That is, when Sappho calls Aphrodite a "guile-weaver," she is potentially criticizing her goddess for causing trouble (evidently, the gods were expert troublemakers), and this advances our appreciation of Sappho as a character, or speaker, by revealing her courage. The reference is also powerful because it communicates a speaker who understands the goddess she is addressing well enough to challenge her.

In the poem's second stanza, Sappho moves backward in time to remind Aphrodite that she has visited the poet previously, and this control of time happens swiftly, revealing Sappho's great skill as a poet. The shift in time in the poem's second and third stanzas is also visually appealing, or imbued with images that make Aphrodite's movement from her "father's golden house" to "the dark earth" filled with the mystery and wonder of a "whirl of wings." It is important to note that the pattern of descent in these lines, in which Aphrodite is said to come to the speaker "from heaven / down through the mid-air" pulled by "beautiful swift sparrows," takes the shape of Persephone's descent mentioned earlier, or recalls the sensation of all things falling. It can thus be said to be an archetypal, formalized, imagistic movement in the poem: a moment of passage in the middle of a lyric that stills time while continuing to swirl in time. By illustrating the miracle or phenomenon of yet another god descending in lines that swell with music, these lines also illustrate Sappho's poetic mastery.

Yet, the poem's most interesting turn begins in its fourth stanza, when Sappho criticizes herself for asking for Aphrodite's help again and again. She claims that Aphrodite would want to know "what had gone wrong this time and this time / why was [Sappho] begging." This turn in the poem also reveals Sappho's wisdom and her sense of humor: it establishes her authority as a speaker by revealing her intelligence, which comes out of an understanding of the failures of the past. In the poem's fifth stanza, Sappho admits to having a "demented heart," and then moves into Aphrodite's voice, speculating in that voice on what Aphrodite might say to Sappho in her time of need and "aching pain." It is difficult to move in time in lyric poems and almost impossible to move in voice and time without losing the intensity that is the lyric's greatest power, but Sappho does it, and, in this translation, quite seamlessly.

In the poem's final stanza, Sappho repeats the poem's initial plea. The final lines reiterate the argument that was introduced in the poem's first stanza. Sappho thus closes the poem in the formal shape of the circle, which might be called the formal shape of the return (which is also one of the main purposes of rhyme). By finishing where she started, Sappho closes her poem the way it began, and so recalls the forms of nature (the cycle of the seasons, of menstruation, and of the movement from birth to death) that have more to do with forms in art than formulas (like the sonnet) do.

As Josephine Balmer points out in her introduction to *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*, many critics have been unable to talk about Sappho as a lyric poet of great skill because of their obsession with her potential lesbianism, which some critics have even suggested came, in Sappho's case, out of a "clinically commonplace female castration complex." Aside from the fact that too much time has passed for any critic to prove Sappho's homosexuality as an irrefutable factor in the making of her poems, it must be stated that Sappho's sexual practice is far beyond the point in light of her contribution to lyric poetry.

That is, just as it is impossible to say whether or not Sappho's poems are autobiographical, it is impossible to infer personal intentions from poems whose main purpose is to formalize human experience into shapes that all readers will recognize. When one reads the most beautiful poems in the Bible, one does not speculate about their authors' lives and intentions. When the author of King Solomon's song in "The Song of Songs" tells his unnamed beloved that "the joints of her thighs are like jewels" and "her navel . . . like a round goblet," one does not wonder who is *literally* speaking or even what woman he might be addressing because the prayer is, though seemingly a single-minded plea from a single-minded speaker, about the human urges all men and women (in all periods of history) share.

As is said sometimes of statistics, literary criticism can be too often like a bikini, which reveals the interesting while covering up the vital. The vital in the case of Sappho's poems is not what she did or did not do in her own life with women, but the ways in which she has been able to transform her understanding of human experience into forms that one can immediately recognize as the forms of nature from which the greatest art always derives.

**Source:** Adrian Blevins, Critical Essay on "Hymn to Aphrodite," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2004.

# Critical Essay #3

*Guyette is a longtime journalist. He received a bachelor's degree in English writing from the University of Pittsburgh. In this essay, Guyette discusses how Sappho was able to produce poetry that still speaks to readers after twenty-six centuries.*

The Greek poet Sappho created her "Hymn to Aphrodite" more than 2,600 years ago, yet it and her other pieces of work have done much more than simply survive the long span of history between then and now. Her poetry has transcended time and cultural differences by speaking to readers in a way that still remains vibrant and vital at the beginning of the twenty-first century. How was she able to do that? Much has obviously changed since Sappho issued her prayer to Aphrodite, but the human condition remains largely the same. Then, as now, people fell hopelessly in love and had their hearts broken when that love went unrequited. Longing, lust, and infidelity□the stuff of soap operas and country music ballads□are not modern phenomena. Rended hearts needed mending every bit as much at the dawn of civilization as they do today. Throughout time, it has been the job of poets and other artists to illuminate the way for others by baring their souls, creating works of enduring beauty in the process. In that respect, Sappho helped set a standard others have followed ever since.

The daily reality confronting Sappho was obviously very different from our modern day in many ways. She inhabited a world without mass communication; the written word was only in its earliest stages when her poems were created. It was a world largely unexplored, a world people believed was ruled by mercurial gods rather than the laws of science. Sappho's earth was a circular disk, round and flat. At its center was Mount Olympus, "the abode of the gods," writes Thomas Bulfinch in his *Bulfinch's Mythology*, describing a place where an assortment of deities "feasted each day on ambrosia and nectar" and "conversed of the affairs of heaven and earth." But the society that worshipped this pantheon was, in many ways, far from primitive. This is especially true when it came to the arts, which the ancient Greeks exalted. Sappho occupied a central role in that celebration, taking on the status of what today would be called a superstar. "If you wanted to be glib you could say she was a cross between Madonna and Sylvia Plath□like Madonna in her huge fame and like Plath in her ferocious truthfulness," writes Erica Jong in the afterword to her novel *Sappho's Leap*. Jong continues by saying that Sappho "became an inspiration to the singers who followed her. She has remained a muse in our own time."

What makes this achievement all the more remarkable is that Sappho's influence has been based upon a relatively small body of work. Most of Sappho's poetry has been lost to time. Only fragments of work remain, stray lines that were part of larger pieces. Her "Hymn to Aphrodite" is an exception, offering readers the rare chance to experience a Sappho poem in full. It is fitting that this poem was directed to Aphrodite, the goddess of love who was frequently found in Sappho's work. However, the special relationship existing between Sappho and Aphrodite was not always heavenly. The residents of Mount Olympus were often less than benevolent beings. Writing seven centuries before the birth of Christ, Sappho worshipped deities that were a capricious lot, capable of

making much mischief and toys with mortals' lives as a form of amusement. They could be jealous, deceitful, and unfaithful. Affronts were met with revenge. The goddess of love was no exception. "She is Sappho's presiding deity," explains Margaret Reynolds in her book *The Sappho Companion*. Reynolds continues by saying that Aphrodite is also "sometimes her ally, sometimes her rival, occasionally her enemy."

As if a reflection of the gods who ruled her world, Sappho, too, was imperfect. Willis Barnstone, a literature professor who has translated her work into English for a book titled, simply, *Sappho*, notes that the poet was "far from being a woman of unfailingly noble sentiments." Instead, she was "a common mortal concerned with common matters of love and jealousy." And constant fidelity to one person was not a matter of great concern to her. She reveals as much in this poem when she quotes Aphrodite saying, "Who shall I persuade this time / to take you back, yet once again, to her love." Obviously, this is not the first time Sappho has turned her face skyward and implored Aphrodite to assist in matters of the heart. It is easy enough to imagine Sappho kneeling in prayer, beseeching the goddess for assistance. The poet's heart is filled with anguish and grief. And Aphrodite responds. As with all of Greek mythology, the deity portrayed is not simply carved stone. Aphrodite is depicted as a tangible presence in Sappho's life, capable of speaking directly to her supplicant and able to take action that would influence the hearts of others□if the goddess was so moved. People of faith still do the same thing today when facing troubled times. When falling ill, they pray to be made better. When catastrophe strikes, they seek divine assistance. In that sense, as revealed in this poem, Sappho is no different.

There was another facet of sexuality concerning Sappho that has remained unchanged throughout time. Although some would like to pretend otherwise, people falling in love with members of the same sex has occurred as long as mankind has existed. That was certainly true during Sappho's era, when homosexuality was easily accepted. There is some debate among scholars whether Sappho was a lesbian. Jong, who studied Sappho intensely before writing a novel that featured her as its heroine, writes

She is associated with women's sexuality and gay rights□but she may not have been homosexual at all; or she may have loved both men and women, as was common in the ancient world□and in ours.

In "Hymn to Aphrodite," the object of Sappho's desire is clearly a woman. It is that way with much of Sappho's work. Barnstone notes that

The majority are love poems to women. They are passionate poems, self-critical, self-revealing, detached and intense. If we are to believe what they say, we will conclude that the speaker in the poems experienced a physical passion for her beloved, with all the sexual implications that similar poems between men and women normally imply.

Not surprisingly, this honesty from the woman who, according to the Roman poet Ovid, "taught how to love girls," generated an angry backlash at various points in history. According to Barnstone, her "writings were publicly burned in Rome and Constantinople by order of Pope Gregory VII." Despite this and other assaults, the power of her poetry

prevailed, and with good reason. What matters ultimately is not Sappho's sexuality, but rather her art. In *Sappho Poems and Fragments*, translator Guy Davenport describes her work this way: "Her words are simple and piercing in their sincerity, her lines melodically clean . . . Never has poetry been this clear and bright." Who Sappho loved, be it man or woman, is really irrelevant. What touches the reader is her passion, and the powerful simplicity with which it is expressed.

The power of that raw but eloquent emotion is evident in "Hymn to Aphrodite" when she pleads to the goddess: "So come to me now, free me from this aching pain." Anyone who has longed to have their love returned by another has felt the intensity of that pain and sees it reflected by Sappho, no matter what age they inhabit. "Her words, used masterfully, make the reader one with the poet, so that he may share her vision of herself," writes Barnstone. He continues by stating that "There is no veil between poet and reader." That observation captures the essence of Sappho's poetic power; it also captures the reason for her extreme longevity as an artist. Sappho has been able to touch readers throughout these many centuries by fearlessly revealing herself and her emotions, exploring the sentiments of love and desire using language that is at once beautiful and intense, delicate and direct. And in doing so, she reveals what makes great art truly timeless: the ability to bare human emotion in a way that helps others understand themselves.

**Source:** Curt Guyette, Critical Essay on "Hymn to Aphrodite," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2004.

# Topics for Further Study

Select at least two or three other translations of Sappho's poem "Hymn to Aphrodite" and compare the translations. Note the differences in word choice and discuss the varying connotations that are created with different translations.

Select a poem by any twentieth-century female author and compare it to Sappho's "Hymn to Aphrodite." Compare such elements as content, theme, tone, and word choice. In your evaluation of these two works, consider the modernity of Sappho's poem. Do you think it modern in tone and content? Support your answer with lines from the poem. How does "Hymn to Aphrodite" compare to the more obviously modern poetry of a twentieth-century author?

Research the role of Greek gods and goddesses in early Greek life. In what ways was the Greek worship of these gods similar to or different from the Judeo-Christian worship of just one god?

A careful reading of Sappho's poems reveals some very clear ideas about love and marriage. After you have completed some research into early women's lives and marriage, write a paper explaining what you think Sappho is saying about love and marriage and how her ideas either support or contradict what your research has shown.

One of the best ways to learn about poetic form is to write poetry. Place yourself in Sappho's life and, using her work as a guide, write one or two poems that imitate her style, meter, and content. When you have completed your poems, write a brief evaluation of your work, comparing it to Sappho's poetry. Describe what you have learned about the difficulty of writing lyrical poetry.

# Compare and Contrast

**Sixth century b.c.** : Solon establishes a timocracy in Athens, a form of government controlled by the richest members of society. Prior to Solon's reforms, Athenian law permits the rich to own the best lands and monopolize government. Solon quickly begins constitutional reforms in Athens that bring about more moderation. Solon believes in reform, not revolution.

**Today:** Although ownership of property is no longer a requirement for a voice in government, in a very real sense, economic power still remains an important determinant of political rule. Greek ideas of democracy were influential in the establishment of the ideals of democracy established in the United States, but, just as it was in ancient Greece, financial power continues to exercise a disproportionate voice in government politics.

**Sixth Century b.c.** : The first suggestion of the origins of Greek theatre are thought to have begun in the late sixth century b.c. , when a man named Thespis first adds speaking actors to performances of choral song and dance. The word *thespian* derives from his creation. Plays are performed outside during daylight, before large audiences, and at festivals that honor the god Dionysus.

**Today:** Greek theatre is still performed and still provides valuable lessons about human expression.

**Sixth Century b.c.** : A movement away from traditional mythology leads some Greeks to explore natural cosmology, in which there are no gods.

**Today:** The study of the origin and evolution of the universe continues to fascinate mankind. In the world today, this study has moved away from the metaphysical perspective of the ancient Greeks and instead focuses on scientific explanations.

**Sixth Century b.c.** : The first Parthenon, built on the Acropolis next to the Erechtheum, is built to honor the god Pallas Athena, a more militant persona of the god Athena. The goddess dresses in full armor and reflects the nature of Athenian life during this period. After the battle of Marathon, a second Parthenon is built during the fifth century b.c. , which still stands today.

**Today:** Remains of the Parthenon are in ruin. Because it has been whitewashed by hundreds of years of sun, most visitors do not realize that the building was not always white. The decor and statuary that inhabited this building were at one time painted in vivid colors. The color is now gone, as is the roof and much of the decor, but even in its ruined state the Parthenon continues to attract visitors.

**Sixth Century b.c.** : Greek citizenship is open to free adult males but not to women, slaves, or foreigners.

**Today:** Greek citizenship is open to both genders, but citizenship to foreigners is less available. Citizenship brings with it many responsibilities, as the early Greeks recognized. The biggest difference today is that women are now acknowledged to have attributes of value that contribute to a country's economic and political success.

**Sixth Century b.c.** : Greek sculpture from this period displays the influences of Egyptian art. Marble statues from this period depict men standing in a rigid pose, with arms carefully lined up next to the body. The pose is very singular in dimension, with a full frontal view and no sense of movement.

**Today:** Art is much more relaxed and natural. Nudes are no longer depicted as if standing at attention, with hands rigidly pulled into fists. Although a study of ancient Greek sculptures can relay information about art, their very rigidity offers less information about Greek life. The more natural art of today, on the other hand, provides a clearer window into the social culture in which it is created.

# What Do I Read Next?

*The Songs of Sappho* (1998) is what author Paul Roche labels a "restored" translation of Sappho's poems. The texts are also accompanied by drawings that compliment the poems.

*If Not Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (2003) contains Greek renditions of the poems, with the English translations on the facing page. Anne Carson, who translated these fragments, makes no attempt to restore the missing lines or to rewrite the feminine into masculine form.

*Sappho* (1958), translated by Mary Barnard, is most often quoted by scholars. Barnard made no attempt to replace lost words with words of her own choosing.

Peggy Ullman Bell's *Psappha: A Novel of Sappho* (2000) is an imaginary historical novel about Sappho's life that, while it cannot purport to know what no scholar knows, still manages to capture the images of classical Greek life.

# Further Study

Cantarella, Eva, et. al., *Pandora's Daughters: The Role and Status of Women in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

This book uses literary, judicial, and anecdotal sources to help readers distinguish accurate information about women's lives during the classical period.

Deuel, Leo, *Testaments of Time: The Search for Lost Manuscripts and Records*, Knopf, 1965.

This book includes a very interesting discussion of the papyrus discoveries in Egypt. Of particular interest is Chapter 8, "Pearls from Rubbish Heaps: Grenfell and Hunt."

Dillon, Matthew, *Girls and Women in Classical Greek Religion*, Routledge, 2003.

This text offers an examination of the different ways in which girls and women participated in Greek religious life, especially with reference to feminine participation in the cults that existed in this period.

Lardinois, Andre, and Laura McClure, eds., *Making Silence Speak: Women's Voices in Greek Literature and Society*, Princeton University Press, 2001.

This book is a collection of essays that examine women's literary creations and includes both Sappho's poems and the letters written by other Hellenistic women.

Lefkowitz, Mary R., and Maureen B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece & Rome: A Source Book in Translation*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.

This book is a fascinating collection of legal, medical, and social commentary that relates what early Greek and Roman men thought of the role that women played in men's lives.

Martin, Thomas R., *Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times*, Yale University Press, 1996.

This book is a compact, easy-to-understand social and cultural history that is designed for the nonacademic reader.

Neils, Jenifer, et. al., *Coming of Age in Ancient Greece: Images of Childhood from the Classical Past*, Yale University Past, 2003.

This text offers some interesting comparisons between childhood in the Greek world and childhood today. The book examines religious and educational life, as well as coming-of-age rituals.

Pomeroy, Sarah B., *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, Dorset Press, 1975.

Although an older text, this is one of the first books to use a feminist approach to the study of early women's lives.

# Bibliography

Appleton, William Hyde, ed., *Greek Poets in English Verse*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1893, pp. 118—19.

Barnard, Mary, *Sappho: A New Translation*, University of California Press, No. 38., 1958.

Barnstone, Willis, "Translator's Introduction," in *Sappho*, translated by Willis Barnstone, Anchor Books, 1965, p. xxv—xxvi.

Bulfinch, Thomas, "Introduction," in *Bulfinch's Mythology*, Crown Publishers, 1979, p. 3

Davenport, Guy, "Translator's Preface," in *Sappho Poems and Fragments*, translated by Guy Davenport, University of Michigan Press, 1965, pp. vii—viii.

Jong, Erica, "Author's Afterword," in *Sappho's Leap*, W. W. Norton, 2003, pp. 294—95.

Reynolds, Margaret, ed., *The Sappho Companion*, Palgrave, 2001, pp. 3, 15—32, 373—74.

Sappho, *If Not Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, translated by Anne Carson, Alfred A. Knopf, 2002, pp. 3—5.

□□□, *Sappho: Poems & Fragments*, translated by Josephine Balmer, Bloodaxe Books, 1992, p. 66.

Wharton, Henry Thornton, *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings and a Literal Translation*, J. Lane, 1885.

Williamson, Margaret, *Sappho's Immortal Daughters*, Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 49—52, 160—66, 171—74.

Wilson, Lyn Hathherly, "Aphrodite," in *Sappho's Sweetbitter Songs*, Routledge, 1996, pp. 21—42.

BOOKRAGS

# Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Poetry for Students*.

**Project Editor**
David Galens

**Editorial**
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

**Research**
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

**Data Capture**
Beverly Jendrowski

**Permissions**
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

**Imaging and Multimedia**
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

**Product Design**
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

**Manufacturing**
Stacy Melson



*For more information, contact*
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

**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:

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535