Song: To Celia Study Guide

Song: To Celia by Ben Jonson

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Although Ben Jonson is best known for his plays, his poetry had a significant impact on seventeenth-century poets and has come to be as highly regarded as that of his contemporary William Shakespeare. Edmund Gosse, in *The Jacobean Poets*, concludes that Jonson was □rewarded by the passionate devotion of a tribe of wits and scholars . . . and he enjoys the perennial respect of all close students of poetry.□ Jonson's lyric ballad □Song: To Celia□ is his most beloved and anthologized poem. Soon after its publication, it was put to music by an anonymous composer, after which it became a popular song in public houses. □Song: To Celia□ was included in the book *The Forest*, published in 1616. It appears in the sixth edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (1993).

Jonson's □Song: To Celia□ is a short monologue in which a lover addresses his lady in an effort to encourage her to express her love for him. Jonson includes conventional imagery, such as eyes, roses, and wine, but employs them in inventive ways. As a result, the poem becomes a lively, expressive song extolling the immortality of love. John Addington Symonds, in his 1886 study of Jonson, calls the poem a masterpiece in its □purely lyric composition□ and individuality. He concludes that Jonson's lyrics □struck the key-note of the seventeenth century.□

Author Biography

Nationality 1: British

Birthdate: 1572

Deathdate: 1637

Ben Jonson was born in London during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, sometime between May 1572 and January 1573. His father, a clergyman, died one month before he was born. Two years after his birth, his mother married a bricklayer. Jonson attended Saint Martin's parish school and, later, Westminster School, where he was influenced by a teacher named William Camden, who taught him the classics. In 1589, Jonson left Westminster to work as a bricklayer with his stepfather, but his bricklaying career was short-lived. Jonson entered the army briefly and then joined a theater company run by Philip Henslowe, a theatrical entrepreneur. In 1594, he married Anne Lewis, with whom he had at least two children.

Jonson was able to support himself and his growing family through his dual career as an actor and a writer. His work, however, would frequently cause him problems. He was first arrested for co-authoring and acting in a satire called *The Isle of Dogs* in 1597. The Privy Council considered it to be lewd, seditious, and slanderous and ordered London theaters to ban the play. It was subsequently destroyed.

In 1598, Jonson killed Gabriel Spencer, an actor, in a duel and was arrested for the murder. Jonson escaped hanging by proving that he could read and write; this allowed him to be tried in a more lenient court, which sentenced him to imprisonment. During his incarceration, he asserted his independence in the predominantly Protestant era by converting to Catholicism, influenced by a priest who used to visit him in prison. Soon after his release that year, Jonson saw his first play performed at the Globe Theatre. *Every Man in His Humour* included William Shakespeare in its cast and was responsible for making Jonson a celebrity. His next plays were satirical comedies: *Every Man out of His Humour* (1599) and *Cynthia's Revels* (1600). He soon followed with the comedy *The Poetaster*, which satirized the works of his fellow playwrights Thomas Dekker and John Marston. They reciprocated with a play called *Satiromastix* that attacked Jonson and his work.

Jonson again came under attack, this time for his plays *Sejanus, His Fall* (1603) and *Eastward Ho*! (1605), which the Privy Council deemed treasonous. Ironically, in 1605, Jonson was appointed Court Poet. During this time he wrote *The Alchemist* (1610) and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), two of his most successful comedies. Jonson then became the nation's unofficial poet laureate in 1616. That same year, *The Forest*, a book of his poems including □Song: To Celia□ and □To Heaven,□ was published. His esteem and influence at court were reinforced when he received an honorary master's degree from Oxford University in 1620. Jonson was considered for a knighthood and was nominated to become the Master of the Revels, which would have made him supervisor of

dramatists and their manuscripts, but he died in 1637, before he could assume the post. He was buried at Westminster Abbey. The tombstone slab reads, □O rare Ben Jonson,□ an appropriate epigraph for one of the major dramatists and poets of the seventeenth century.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4

The speaker in □Song: To Celia□ opens with a plea for his lady to express her love by gazing upon him. His plea is assertive, in the form of a command to drink to him with her eyes. He wants more than an expression of her love, however; he wants a pledge. He notes this in the second line when he declares that he will return the pledge with his own eyes. The reference to the cup that is commonly filled with wine becomes an apt metaphor for what he is asking from his lady. One usually makes a toast, a pledge of some sort, when first sipping a cup of wine. The speaker wants his lady to make a pledge to him with her eyes rather than while drinking from a cup of wine. This pledge would be more personal and so more meaningful to him.

By suggesting that his lady could convey such a pledge through her gaze, he pays tribute to her expressive eyes. He suggests that their connection is so intimate that they do not need the words of a speech to communicate their feelings for each other. This act reflects medieval love conventions, which propose that love is received through the eyes.

When the speaker gives his lady an alternative way to express her love, he suggests that she may be reluctant to do so. Leaving a kiss in the cup would allow her to respond to him in a more modest manner. This alternative, he states, would be just as pleasing to him. When he insists that he will □not look for wine,□ he implies that her kiss will intoxicate him more than any alcohol could. Wine would be an inadequate replacement for her love.

Jonson smoothly integrates the images of eyes, drinking, and wine in these first lines, which reinforces and heightens his speaker's expression of love and longing. Initially, the metaphor of drinking with one's eyes seems too forced, yet eyes produce liquid and can □brim over□ with tears of sadness or joy. This liquidity, rather than that of wine, becomes the speaker's preferred method of demonstration. The image of the kiss also integrates smoothly with the others. □Kisses sweeter than wine□ has become a standard expression of love.

Lines 5-8

The next four lines extend the metaphor set up in the first four lines. The speaker insists that if his lady would leave a kiss for him in the cup, he would prize it more than nectar from the gods. He claims that his soul □thirsts□ for love and that only □a drink divine□ that transcends even Jove's nectar can quench it. □Jove□ refers to the god Jupiter, lord of the classical gods and a recurrent symbol of divinity in secular poetry. The gods drank a heavenly nectar far finer than any wine mortals drank.

According to Marshall Van Deusen, writing in □Criticism and Ben Jonson's 'To Celia,'□ in the book *Essays in Criticism* and citing the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition, the word □change□ in line 8 means □to make an exchange.□ Here the speaker is saying that he would not take Jove's nectar in exchange for that of his lady. By insisting that he values his lady's kiss more than the nectar of the gods, he elevates her to, or higher than, the status of a goddess. This type of extreme compliment is defined as □hyperbole.□

There has been some disagreement on the meaning of lines 7 and 8. The popular interpretation is the one provided in the previous paragraph. Some scholars, however, insist that a literal interpretation of the lines is that the speaker would not give up Jove's nectar for his lady's kiss.

Van Deusen also notes in his essay that one of the two quotations given as illustration of the definition of □change□ in the *Oxford English Dictionary* could suggest by analogy that the lines mean □if I were to have the chance offered me to sup of Jove's nectar, and if your wine were also available, I would not change for . . . yours.□ Van Deusen points out that defenders of this interpretation cite Jonson's □antipathy to hyperbole□ and argue that the lines are complimentary □precisely because they set the exact limits of legitimate praise and avoid irresponsible exaggeration.□ Van Deusen comments, however, that Jonson has elsewhere used hyperbole. He also cites the source of the poem, letters from the philosopher Philostratos, in support of the popular interpretation, translating the corresponding passage from Philostratos to □when I am thirsty, I refuse the cup, and take thee.□

Lines 9-12

In line 9, the speaker notes that he recently (□late□) sent his lady a wreath of roses, a flower traditionally associated with beauty. Jonson uses the rosy wreath, however, in an unconventional way. The speaker admits that his primary motive for sending it was not to honor her beauty, as any lover would with red roses, but for another purpose, which reflects her more intense charms. He does not discount her beauty, noting that he is sending the wreath □not so much□ for her honor, but insists that he has a greater purpose. When he claims that the wreath would not wither in his lady's presence, he suggests her power over it.

Lines 13-16

The last four lines of the poem focus on this power and his lady's active connection with nature. Traditionally in love lyrics, the lady's breath is always perfumed. When the speaker swears that his lady's breath transformed the wreath, he claims that her perfume transcended the perfume of the rose. Her power does not stop there. She also gives the gift of immortality to the wreath, which continues to grow and produce a pleasing scent.

The imagery here not only illustrates the endurance of love but also suggests the fertility of the lady. If readers combine the images of the first stanza with the second, they see the speaker's lady become a fertility goddess, whose divine charms convey immortality as she affects and becomes a part of the objects around her.

By continuing undaunted toward his goal, the speaker cleverly sidesteps the suggestion that his lady is rejecting his offers of love when she returns the wreath. Even if he does not have her physical presence, he has her essence, which has been transferred to the wreath.

Themes

Courtly Love

Jonson borrowed the conventions of courtly love for the poem but manipulated them to create his unique voice. Traditionally, the lover in these poems is stricken by his lady's beauty, which causes him to idealize her. Ever obedient to her wishes, the humble lover strives to be worthy of her. His feelings of love ennoble him and lead him on the path to moral excellence.

Jonson expresses the cult of the beloved in his poem through his vision of the lady whose kisses are sweeter than the nectar of the gods and whose breath can grant immortality. Yet this speaker does not humble himself to his mistress. He has a calm assurance not found in conventional courtly love poems. In the first stanza, he subtly acknowledges that his lady might be reluctant to express her love for him when he suggests that she leave a kiss in the cup. Traditional lovers would prostrate themselves at their lady's feet, but Jonson's speaker calmly provides an alternative to drinking to him with her eyes.

In the second stanza the speaker alludes to the lady's rejection of his tokens of love when he notes that she sent the rosy wreath back to him. Traditionally, the ladies in courtly love lyrics appear immune to their lovers' terms of endearment. Jonson uses the traditional hyperbolic Petrarchan conceit□an elaborate, especially clever metaphor used to idolize a lady while lamenting her cruelty or indifference□in an innovative way. (Petrarch was a prominent Italian poet of the fourteenth century whose sonnet, with its distinctive construction and themes, became an important poetic model.) Jonson's speaker refuses to recognize the lady's indifference as he offers her signs of his love.

Power

This refusal alters the balance of power in the poem. In courtly love poems, the lady retains power over the speaker, who succumbs to her great beauty. He continually pays tribute to this beauty through the use of hyperbole. Jonson's speaker also uses this device as he praises his lady, but he does not flatter her physical attributes. He finds instead a potent essence within her that transfers kisses into wine and transfers immortality to a rosy wreath. The last four lines of the poem focus on this power and the lady's active connection with nature.

While the speaker acknowledges this force within his lady, he refuses to grant her complete control over him. He admits that his thirst for her would be quenched by drinking her kisses, but he will not openly acknowledge her seeming indifference to him. He maintains his calm composure when she returns the wreath to him and cleverly turns her action into a compliment, noting that the wreath continues to grow and that he

can smell her essence on it. Jonson's speaker shows no signs that he considers himself to be her inferior as he tries to find alternate ways for her to express her love for him.

Style

Sound

Repetition of sounds in a poem can emphasize key words and images and so create poetic structure. In addition, sounds can provide pleasure. Jonson uses alliteration, the repetition of initial consonant sounds, in line 6 in the words □drink□ and □divine□ to emphasize the value the speaker places on his mistress's kiss. He repeats this technique in line 9 with the words □rosy□ and □wreath,□ which highlights her connection with nature. Jonson makes a clever connection between the speaker and his mistress through examples of consonance, the repetition of final consonant sounds, as well as word placement. He ends lines 2, 4, 6, and 8 with the words □mine,□ □wine,□ □divine,□ and □thine,□ respectively, suggesting that the union of the two would be more divine than wine. The placement of these rhyming words at the ends of the lines reinforces his point.

Language

The poem's popularity is most likely due to its use of simple, direct language that is not difficult for the reader to understand. Robert C. Evans, in his article on Jonson for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, concludes that Jonson's □'plain style' was neither artless nor utterly clear□ and that it avoids the extremes of □sublimity and vulgarity.□ Evans argues that Jonson's style was □meant to communicate, to have an effect, and it gives his poetry a directness, practicality, seriousness, and force that loftier, lower, or more complicated phrasing would obscure.□

These qualities are clearly displayed in □Song: To Celia□ in that the lyrics appear more like rhymed prose than poetry. The speaker focuses on actions rather than elaborate metaphors as he describes his love for his lady. He does not effusively describe any distinguishing characteristics about his lady's eyes, for example, or her kisses or her breath. He concentrates instead on what his response would be to her pledges to him. This plain language of love contrasts to the elaborate conceits of John Donne's poetry as in his poem □A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning.□ Here, the speaker describes himself and his love's souls as □stiff twin compasses□: □Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show / To move, but doth, if th' other do.□

Historical Context

The Seventeenth-Century Court

The dominant forms of literature during the Elizabethan age and under James I and Charles I, the first two Stuart kings, were courtly. The literature read by the courtiers□members of the court and those who frequented it□were the sonnet sequence (a lyric poem of fourteen rhyming lines of equal length), as illustrated in Shakespeare's sonnets; the pastoral romance (which celebrates an idolized vision of love), as in Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*; the chivalric epic (a long poem presenting an idealized code of behavior), as in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*; the sermon; and the masque (a spectacular performance that combines drama, music, and dance), as in Jonson's □Pleasure Reconciled to Vertue.□ Authors like Jonson wrote almost exclusively for the court, since that is where they received their patronage and acclaim.

The literature of the age reflected the distinctive values of court society. Literary works centered on the promotion of a hierarchical order, which necessitated allegiance to the Church of England and the monarch. Robert M. Adams, in his overview of the age, notes that the Elizabethan monarchy and the Church gained such elevated and powerful status owing to the firm belief in □the inevitable structure of things, the natural pattern of the world.□ This hierarchical form focused on the great chain of being, Adams concludes, where □every creature had his place in the great order of divine appointments; and the different families of being were bound together by a chain of universal analogy.□

These values, which were carried over into the reign of James I, promoted literature that was intricate, ornate, and allusive (making reference to important events, literature, or people). Favored subjects included the heroic passions: love, which may or may not be accompanied by marriage; aggression, which often led to a war that lacked a specific political context; and a yearning for a closer relationship with God, expressed as devotional piety. Honor became the paramount principle that governed the works.

Seventeenth-Century Poetry

One of the most significant events of the seventeenth century was the Puritan Revolution of 1640-1660. The Puritans criticized literary works that did not address religious themes and that expressed too much emotion. None of the literature of the age, with the exception of works by John Milton, expressed evident sympathy with Puritan doctrine, which began to emerge in the decades before the revolution. Yet a challenge to tradition and a desire for social and political change began to appear, reflecting the revolutionary spirit of the age. Two distinct poetic groups formed during this period: the metaphysical poets led by Donne, including George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan, Abraham Cowley, and John Cleveland, and Jonson and □Ben's Sons,□ the Cavalier poets Thomas Carew, Robert Herrick, Sir John Suckling,

Edmund Waller, and Sir William Davenant. Although some crossover occurred, these two school were defined by distinct characteristics.

According to J. A. Cuddon in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, the metaphysical poets, who wrote deeply intellectual and philosophical poems, incorporated striking and □original images and conceits . . . , wit, ingenuity, dexterous use of colloquial speech, [and] considerable flexibility of rhythm and meter.□ Their □complex themes (both sacred and profane)□ were conveyed through □a liking for paradox [contradictions] . . . a direct manner, a caustic [biting] humour, a keenly felt awareness of mortality . . . and . . . compact expression.□

In contrast, Jonson and the Cavalier poets altered the traditional sonnet form, creating works that employed direct, often colloquial, or everyday, language. The term □Cavalier□ comes from these poets' rejection of earnestness or intensity. These poets continued to promote the ideal of the Renaissance man□lover, wit, soldier, poet□but ignored traditional religious themes. Robert C. Evans, in his article on Jonson for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, writes of Jonson's influence on this school of poetry. Evans notes that Jonson's □'plain style' made him a crucial figure in a central tradition, but his deceptively complex works reward close reading.□ Evans deems Jonson's work to be □sophisticated, self-conscious, and strongly influenced by the Greek and Roman classics,□ yet it □nonetheless rarely seems foreign or artificial. His vigorous and colloquial style exemplifies both wide reading and a deep interest in 'reality.'□

The sonnet, the most popular poetic form at the close of the Elizabethan age and the beginning of the Jacobean age (early 1600s), faded from view in the latter half of the seventeenth century. Blank verse (unrhymed verse) was replaced by the couplet (a pair of rhyming verse lines), which provided a skillful meter for the expression of alternate points of view, a popular technique in John Dryden's work. By the end of the century, satiric poetry, which ridicules vices, follies, and abuses, came into vogue. The poetic satirist's favorite form was the closed or heroic couplet, a verse couplet that comes to a strong conclusion. The latter form was developed by Sir John Denham and Edmund Waller and perfected by Andrew Marvell, Dryden, and Alexander Pope. Dryden emerged as the reigning satirist of the age with the publication of *Absalom and Achitophel* in 1681, *The Medal* in 1682, *Mac Flecknoe* in 1682, and *The Hind and the Panther* in 1687.

Seventeenth-Century Song

Some poems, such as William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, are called songs even though they are not set to music; the term usually refers to a poem that is intended to be sung or chanted, with or without musical accompaniment. The form became popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, along with its two most famous composers, Thomas Campion (□There is a Garden in Her Face□) and John Dowland (□Weep you no more, sad fountains□). In the seventeenth century, the poets Herrick, Richard Lovelace, Jonson, Milton, and Dryden wrote highly acclaimed songs in plays and masques and as nondramatic verse.

Jonson focused more than his predecessors on the value of rhyme in his lyric verses, highlighting a sense of proportion and structural beauty. His songs showed classical restraint and conciseness of style in their rejection of extravagance and mannerism (the excessive use of a distinctive style). Jonson's □sons□ carried on the style of his songs, as seen in the lyrics of Herrick and Carew, as well as in those by William Cartwright, Thomas Randolph, and Waller. The orderly structure and grace of their lyrics were reinforced by their substitution of the language of courtly gallantry for the Petrarchan language of prostrate adoration.

Critical Overview

When *The Forest*, containing □Song: To Celia,□ was published in 1616, it affirmed Jonson's position as one of the court's most distinguished poets. That same year, Jonson was appointed poet laureate of England. In addition, his nearly two decades of celebrated writing were capped that year with the appearance of his massive folio *Workes*, a fitting testimony to his illustrious reputation and his marked influence on other poets of the age.

□Song: To Celia,□ Jonson's favorite of all of his lyrics, quickly became his most admired poem. It was put to music later in the century by an anonymous composer, after which it became a popular song in public houses. The poem has continued to enjoy a reputation as one of Jonson's finest lyrics.

John Addington Symonds, in his 1886 study of Jonson, argues that the poem, one of five by Jonson that he names, is a masterpiece □in purely lyric composition□ and has □a quality which is definite and individual. No one before him wrote pieces of the sort so terse, so marked by dominant intelligence, so aptly fitted for their purpose.□ He concludes that, along with those of Shakespeare, Jonson's lyrics □struck the key-note of the seventeenth century.□

Claude J. Summers, in his *Classic and Cavalier: Celebrating Jonson and the Sons of Ben*, addresses current opinion when he writes that the □recent quickening of critical interest in Jonson's nondramatic poetry has led to a new appreciation of his 'subtle sport' and to a new willingness to read him on his own terms.□ This appreciation is echoed by Marchette Chute in *Ben Jonson of Westminster*, who writes, □Song: To Celia□ □is an almost perfect example of a classical poem, achieving the balanced Greek harmony and the lucid singing line in which each word fulfills its purpose and there is not one too many.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of American and English literature and film. In this essay, she examines Jonson's craftsmanship and the way he reworked borrowed material in the poem.

In □Jonson's Poetry, Prose and Criticism,□ J. B. Bamborough writes that while Jonson placed a high value on poetry, he regarded it as □essentially an Art, rather than as the expression of personality or a way of conveying a unique perception of Truth. Skill was the quality most inescapably demanded of the poet.□ Bamborough says that Jonson makes this point when he writes □For to Nature, Exercise. Imitation, and Studie, *Art* must be added, to make all these perfect.□ Jonson's neoclassical position states that writing well necessitates first mastering the subject and then examining how other writers have expressed it. Thus, according to Bamborough, □Originality and Inspiration, as the Romantics understood them, do not, or need not, enter into this.□

Jonson's policy of studying other writers' work led him to incorporate some of that work into his own. G. A. E. Parfitt, in □The Nature of Translation in Ben Jonson's Poetry,□ notes that Jonson's practice of borrowing material from other sources and incorporating it into his own work was □not theoretically a departure from ordinary renaissance principles: it conformed to standard educational doctrine and, viewed broadly, it is an activity similar to that of many other authors of the period.□ Parfitt states that □only in Jonson does the use of classical material seem a natural and essential aspect of the poet's creativity.□ He adds that this use appears □to have become a central habit of his mind when that mind was at its most creative.□ Jonson's creative reworking of borrowed materials is well illustrated in the evolution of his poem □Song: To Celia.□

In his study of Jonson, John Addington Symonds comments that Jonson's □wholesale and indiscriminate translation[s]□ of other writers' work was □managed with admirable freedom□ as Jonson made the work his own. Symonds notes, □This kind of looting from classical treasuries of wit and wisdom was accounted no robbery in that age□ and was, in fact, praised by Jonson's contemporaries. Symonds quotes John Dryden, who, while admitting that there were □few serious thoughts which are new□ in Jonson's poetry, praises the poet's willingness □to give place to the classics in all things.□ Dryden claims that Jonson □invades authors like a monarch; and what would be theft in other poets is only victory in him.□

Bamborough quotes Jonson's comments on the assimilation process: those who study □the best authors□ will discover □somewhat of them in themselves, and in the expression of their minds, even when they feele it not, be able to utter something like theirs, which hath an Authoritie above their owne.□ Parfitt concludes that Jonson's □familiarity with 'the best authors' made the dividing line between original and borrowed material disappear stylistically.□ In □Song: To Celia,□ Jonson crafts a poem that □utter[s] something□ from one of these authors, but he makes it uniquely his own.

Scholars have agreed that Jonson used certain letters of Philostratos, a philosopher of the third century a.d., as the source material for "Song: To Celia." Parfitt argues that in the poem, Jonson "takes over the bantering tone of the original and something of Philostratos's ingenuity but shows no sign of subservience to his material." Jonson retains but fine-tunes the classical style of the original, as expressed in the poem's economy, carefully structured statement, and sense of harmony.

J. Gwyn Griffiths, in her article on Philostratos's letters, cites translations from the excerpts that Jonson borrowed for "Song: To Celia." The first stanza of the poem is a reworking of two letters, numbered XXXII and XXXIII. In the first letter, Philostratos writes "I, as soon as I see thee, am thirsty, and stand unwilling to drink, though holding the cup; I do not lift the cup to my lips, but I know that I am drinking thee." In the second letter, he writes

Drink to me only with thine eyes, which even Zeus tasted, and then procured for himself a handsome cup-bearer. Or if thou wilt, do not rashly use up the wine, but pour in some water only, and putting the cup to thy lips, fill it with kisses, and so give it to the needy. For no one is so unloving as to desire the gift of Dionysos after the vines of Aphrodite.

Jonson takes the first phrase of the second letter, along with some of the ideas of both, and crafts a self-contained unit in the first stanza of his poem. Here Jonson presents a much clearer and more lyrical depiction of the situation: the speaker's request to his lady that she give him an expression of her love. In the letter, the speaker dilutes his main focus by including the figures of Zeus, a "handsome" cup bearer, Dionysos, and Aphrodite. Jonson instead keeps our attention on the speaker's request, which expresses his own feelings for his lady. He evokes the name of only one god and only in a passing reference to the god's nectar, employing it as a clever expression of his lady's charms.

Jonson also establishes a clear structure that is absent in the letters. Marshall Van Deusen, in his article on the poem for *Essays in Criticism*, points out the logical connection between the statements in the first stanza. He notes that "as the lady's kiss in the cup satisfied physical thirst better than wine, so her nectar should satisfy the thirst of the soul better than Jove's drink could."

The relationship between the speaker and thirst is not made clear in the first letter, when he declares that he becomes thirsty when he sees his lady. It is also not evident how the essence of the lady appears in the cup. The second letter adds some clarification, but together the two pieces are disjointed. Jonson elucidates the connection between lady and cup in the first four lines of the poem and extends the image into the next four, where the speaker uses it to offer a high compliment to his lady.

Jonson's speaker asserts a calm assurance in his monologue to his lady through his sparse, precise imagery and avoidance of elevated language. Bamborough places Jonson alongside Sidney and other writers who insisted on "'dignifying the vernacular' [everyday speech] by 'purifying' it, freeing it from obscurity, rusticity, clumsiness and affectation, whether this last took the form of . . . importation from ancient or modern

languages.□ Jonson, Bamborough insists, believed that English should be □transformed into an expressive and worthy literary language by revealing its true genius, not by divorcing it from the actual speech of men.□

The poem moves between the abstract and the concrete, smoothly integrating in the first stanza the dominant images of eyes, wine, kisses, and the act of drinking into an expression of the speaker's love for his lady. The harmonious interplay of the imagery is reinforced with the musicality of the lyric in its alliteration and structured rhyme scheme. Energy is generated through the rhythm of the lines as well as the exactness of the imagery, aided by Jonson's use of active verbs like □drink,□ □rise,□ □sup,□ and □breathe.□

The poem's short length and tight structure provide an appropriate venue for intimate thoughts; single, simple ideas; and extended metaphors. The second stanza complements the first with its extension of the focus on the lady's extraordinary powers. In the first, she transforms kisses into nectar, and, in the second, she transfers her essence to a rosy wreath, granting it immortality.

In the second stanza, Jonson translates Philostratos's Letters II and XLVI. In the first letter, the speaker writes, □I have sent thee a wreath of roses, not so much honouring thee, though that too was my intent, as bestowing a favour upon the roses themselves, that they might not be withered.□ In the second, he writes, □If thou wouldst gratify thy lover, send back the remnants of the roses, no longer smelling of themselves only, but also of thee.□

The speaker includes a clumsy contradiction in the last line of the second letter when he insists that the roses no longer smell of themselves alone but □also□ of thee. □Also□ should have been □only□ if the intention was to declare that the lady transformed the roses. Jonson makes that intention clear in his last stanza and reveals how the transformation is made. The second stanza focuses on the lady's power over nature, much in the same way that the first suggested her power over her lover. In the first, she quenches her lover's □thirst□; in the second, she grants immortality to the wreath through her breath, which is not identified in the letter. This more active connection between lady and wreath suggests a heightening of her power; it also adds to the harmonious structure of the lyric.

An examination of the development of □Song: To Celia□ centers on the poet as craftsman, providing evidence to support Jonson's reputation as a master of his art. In this carefully designed lyric, Jonson has wedded a classical sensibility with his unique voice, producing one of the finest love poems of the age.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on □Song: To Celia,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Read one of Shakespeare's sonnets. Compare the sonnet's theme and structure to those of □Song: To Celia.□

Investigate the development of the ballad. How does the poem □Song: To Celia□ follow the conventions of the ballad form?

Read Jonson's *Volpone*, focusing on the character of Celia. Do you see parallels between the Celia in the play and the Celia in the poem? What are the similarities or differences in the two characters named Celia?

Many poems of the Elizabethan era have a clear rhythm that would make them easy to set to music. How do you think Jonson's poem would sound put to music? Do you think it would be fast or slow? Try reciting Jonson's poem to music you hear on the radio, such as pop, rock, jazz, or hip-hop. What musical category do you think best suits this poem? Explain why. What instruments were popular during the Elizabethan era? Which Elizabethan instruments do you think would work best to accompany Jonson's poem if it were set to music?

Compare and Contrast

1600s: Men who wanted to gain the affection of their lovers would sing them lyrics written by poets like Jonson and Campion.

Today: Valentine's Day has made fortunes for companies like Hallmark, since the preferred token of affection has become a card, often containing a verse that expresses an artificial sentiment.

1600s: Love sonnets and songs had distinctive styles and forms that employed measured rhythm and rhyme schemes.

Today: Modern poetry is often characterized by its free verse and unregulated style.

1600s: While the Church of England was the dominant religious body in Britain, poets often evoked Greek and Roman gods in their poetry, as Jonson does when his speaker compares his lady's kisses to Jove's nectar.

Today: Most modern poetry is secular, or worldly, reflecting the gradual decline of the influence of religion on the arts. Religious groups, however, are becoming more politically active as the country is split between conservative and liberal sensibilities.

What Do I Read Next?

Shakespeare's songs from his plays illustrate the Elizabethan forms of the song. Spanning the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, these songs include □When Daises Pied□ from *Love's Labour's Lost* (1598).

In his famous poem □To Penthurst□ (1616), Jonson celebrates the values of serenity and good humor in a setting reminiscent of the Garden of Eden.

Jonson's classic satire *Volpone* (1606) focuses on the consequences of greed.

For a comparative study of the love poetry of the age, read Anne Ferry's *All in War with Time: Love Poetry of Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson, Marvell* (1975).

Further Study

Bentley, Gerald Eades, *Shakespeare and Jonson. Their Reputations in the Seventeenth Century Compared*, 2 vols., University of Chicago Press, 1945.

In this comparative study, Bentley focuses on the poetic skills of the two masters.

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This work explores Jonson's expression of self in his works within the context of Elizabethan literature.

Levin, Harry, □An Introduction to Ben Jonson,□ in *Ben Jonson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Jonas A. Barish, Prentice Hall, 1963, pp. 40-59.

Levin's introduction exposes some of the notable misunderstandings surrounding Jonson's work.

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Riggs offers a comprehensive look at Jonson and the age in which he wrote.

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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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