The Satyr's Heart Study Guide

The Satyr's Heart by Brigit Pegeen Kelly

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Introduction

Brigit Pegeen Kelly's vivid, musical verse has impressed the literary community since the manuscript for her first collection, *To the Place of Trumpets*, was chosen for the 1987 Yale Series of Younger Poets competition. She has since published two additional volumes of successful poetry. *The Orchard* (2004), her third book, is a striking group of poems that takes place in a world of dream figures and contemplates themes ranging from fertility to death.

A key poem in *The Orchard*□and an excellent example of the "shocking and unfamiliar ferocity" that Stephen Burt finds characteristic of Kelly's book in his *New York Times* review□is "The Satyr's Heart," which was first published in the *Kenyon Review*. In this intriguing and mysterious poem, the speaker rests her head against the chest of a headless statue of a satyr, observing the teeming animal and plant life around her. Some of the poem's lavish descriptiveness is challenging and difficult to imagine, but this language is what makes the poem innovative and compelling, and it is an important part of Kelly's song-like rhythm. Her commentary on themes of sexual reproduction, bravery, and higher human principles shines through and provides a rewarding experience for an attentive reader.

Author Biography

Born in 1951 in Palo Alto, California, Kelly was raised Catholic. Her career as a poet was launched when the acclaimed poet James Merrill selected her manuscript *To the Place of Trumpets* as the 1987 winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets competition. Published thereafter as her debut collection, *To the Place of Trumpets* received a number of favorable reviews including that of Fred Muratori in *Library Journal*, in which Muratori writes that Kelly "constructs a sort of mythology of the real" in her "strange and uncommon" collection.

Kelly's second book of poems, *Song* (1995), uses music as a recurring theme and, like her first collection, frequently comments on religion and spirituality. It was also quite successful, winning the Lamont Poetry Prize from the Academy of American Poets, and receiving positive reviews, such as Mary Ann Samyn's in *Cross Currents*: "Kelly's combination of lyric and narrative, of image-making and storytelling, works to create poems that are as memorable for their songs as for their singing, the whole collection echoing with their strange, enchanting music."

Kelly published her third book, *The Orchard*, in 2004. This vibrant collection contains "The Satyr's Heart." In addition to publishing her poetry in books, Kelly is frequently published in magazines and journals, and she was included in the 1993 and 1994 volumes of *The Best American Poetry*. She has received many honors and awards, including the Discovery Award from the *Nation*, the Cecil Hemley Award from the Poetry Society of America, a Pushcart Prize, the Theodore Roethke Prize from Poetry Northwest, and a Whiting Writers Award. She has also been granted fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Illinois State Council on the Arts, and the New Jersey Council on the Arts. Kelly has also served as a professor of creative writing at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Plot Summary

Lines 1—3

"The Satyr's Heart" begins with a description of the speaker resting her head on the chest of a satyr, which refers to a creature that is part man, part animal. In ancient Greece, satyrs were usually depicted as men with the ears and tail of a horse, while ancient Romans portrayed them with the ears, tail, legs, and horns of a goat. In both cultures, satyrs were associated with the god of wine and with lustful, animalistic sexuality. In the poem, the speaker describes the satyr's chest as "carved," which suggests that it is a statue.

The second and third lines clarify that the satyr is a statue made of sandstone and that its chest is hollow, lacking a heart. In line 3, the reader wonders along with the speaker if the statue of a "headless goat man" might actually have a heart, particularly since the title suggests that there will be a satyr's heart in the poem. The reader pictures the speaker with her head on the chest of a satyr statue, perhaps leaning back on it while sitting at its feet. Although the poem does not specify a location, like many of the poems in Kelly's collection it seems to take place in a vaguely mythological orchard, teeming with natural life but absent of any humans except for the speaker.

Lines 4—7

Lines 4 and 5 describe the satyr's neck, which thins out until it reaches a dull point. The speaker, who must be looking up from the satyr's chest, says that it points "To something long gone, elusive." This key phrase primarily refers to the satyr's head, which is now missing. The fact that the satyr is only a body will become important later in the poem. Since the neck must be pointing to the sky, it is also possible that it is pointing toward some kind of god, or the speaker is at least subtly suggesting that religion and spirituality are what is "long gone" and "elusive."

By contrast, at the satyr's feet is a flurry of real and fertile activity. In line 6, the small flowers "swarm" and "breed" in the "sweating soil" as if they are bugs or other small, rapidly reproducing creatures. They are also "earnest and sweet," which seems to be a contradiction, and they make a "clamor," or noisy uproar, of "white" and "blue" within the "black" soil. It is difficult to picture exactly how these flowers must look, but they certainly seem to be involved in an active and urgent natural environment.

Lines 8—14

Line 8 contains a four-dot ellipsis that shifts the perspective back to the speaker, who sits without moving at the feet of the satyr statue. Using the poetic device of enjambment, which occurs when one line of poetry runs into the next, the speaker comments on "how quickly / Things change." Birds "[turn] tricks," which suggests that

they have sex, since "turning tricks" is a slang phrase used to describe prostitutes picking up men. The speaker then says "Colorless birds" as well as "those with color" are involved in this sexual intercourse, which seems quite strange because it is difficult to imagine colorless birds.

In the next line, the speaker portrays "the wind fingering / The twigs," which presumably means moving them around with the dexterity of human fingers, but also may have a sexual connotation. Across lines 11 and 12, the speaker says that furry creatures are "doing whatever" it is that furry creatures do. Although this could refer to anything from eating to sleeping, it likely refers to sex, considering the sexual imagery surrounding it. This reference is followed by the phrase "So, and so," which is an interesting poetic device. Because it reveals the speaker watching natural events unfold in the present time, it also allows the reader to experience these events as they are happening, while giving Kelly's verse a rhythmical, musical quality.

The end of line 12 notes that there is a "smell of fruit" in the air, which is an appropriate smell given that there is so much fertile, fruitful natural life around the satyr's statue. The speaker also notes in line 13 that there is a "smell of wet coins," which may connote the idea of a fountain into which people throw coins to make wishes. Then the speaker says that there is the sound of "a bird / Crying," although Kelly does not seem to hint at why this may be or to suggest how a bird would cry. This phrase is followed by yet another mysterious description, when the speaker says that there is "the sound of water that does not move." If it were not moving at all, water would not technically make any sound, so the speaker may be implying that she hears other sounds that she associates with the water, or that there is a paradox involved here, and that motionless water does, mysteriously, make a sound after all.

Lines 15—17

The four-dot ellipsis that ends line 14 marks a turning point in Kelly's poem. In line 15, the speaker poses the question "If I pick the dead iris?" wondering what will happen if she plucks up a dead flower and waves it above her head like "a blazoned flag." Irises are associated with faith and wisdom, as well as with royalty, since the fleur-de-lis, the symbol of the French monarchy, is a lily but is represented as a stylized iris. Lilies, in particular, are associated with whiteness, purity, and virginity. This symbol of royalty coheres with the idea that the iris will be a "blazoned" flag, since blazoned means painted or conspicuously displayed with signs of heraldry (a term for title, rank, or precedence). The speaker then asks whether this flag could be like her "fanfare" or her "little fare," which may refer to one of the "wet coins" mentioned in line 14 and with which, the speaker says, she could "buy my way, making things brave?"

Much of this imagery is somewhat mysterious, since it is not immediately clear how or where the speaker could "buy [her] way," and it is also unclear what "things" she would make brave. Kelly may be referring to the animals and plants that are actively breeding around her, as though her flag would inspire them to be brave in the face of a difficult world, and with the verb "buy" she may imply that she is purchasing her stake as their

leader or buying her way forward. Lines 15—17 may also suggest something about the speaker's character, however, such as the idea there is some difficulty in her life against which she needs to make herself brave and out of which she must buy her way.

Lines 18—21

In line 18, however, the speaker proclaims that waving the dead iris as a flag is not the way to accomplish her goal of making things brave. She says "Uncovering what is brave," suggesting that she does not need to make things brave or "buy [her] way," but merely reveal bravery that already exists. When she bends over and turns up a stone with her foot, she declares that she is doing it "Now," in the present, which contrasts with lines 14—17, phrased as questions without a specified time frame.

Lines 20 and 21 continue to stress that the speaker is acting in the immediate present because she says that "the armies of pale creatures" are "there," right beneath her while they "Without cease or doubt sew the sweet sad earth." These lines end the poem with a discovery, as the speaker uncovers the true bravery that has been beneath her all the time. It is important that there are "armies" of these brave creatures, instead of a more neutral term like "groups," because it highlights the fact that they are purposeful. They do their work constantly, without any questions or doubts. The phrase "sew the sweet sad earth" reveals that the creatures are productive as well as brave, creating the fabric of life despite the earth's sadness.

Themes

Sexual Reproduction

Breeding and sexual reproduction are recurring themes in "The Satyr's Heart," and the first indication that they will be central to Kelly's agenda is the fact that satyrs are mythological creatures associated with lust and animal sexuality. Satyrs were associated with the god of wine and revelry, Dionysus, and in ancient Greek and Roman mythology they were often depicted with erect penises. Kelly's imagery of flowers "breeding," birds "turning tricks," wind "fingering" twigs, furry creatures "doing whatever / Furred creatures do," and tiny creatures sewing the earth, all emphasize that her poem considers animal sexuality among its most important themes.

This kind of procreative sexuality seems to be a great virtue in the poem, since it is responsible for providing the life energy and the fabric of the "sweet sad earth." The idyllic atmosphere of the garden or orchard seems almost entirely due to this fertile procreation. There is even the implication that the headless satyr statue actually does have a heart, or is somehow brought to life and given a beating heart in its sandstone chest like the animal sexuality that sews the fabric of life underneath the stone. This sexuality is not necessarily characterized by pleasure, or at least pleasure is not its most important characteristic. The key to the poem's idea of sexuality is fertility and reproduction, and Kelly implies that the world's survival and fruitfulness depends on the ceaseless struggle of sexual procreation.

Bravery and Passion

In Kelly's poem, the speaker seems to be searching for what he or she calls "bravery," and by the end it becomes clear that she/he has found this in the creatures that "sew the sweet sad earth." The poem suggests that the flowers associated with the human virtues of faith and wisdom are not truly brave, and that their pomp and royal purity is somehow empty or absent. Instead, the basic, animalistic impulses of living creatures are responsible for sewing the fabric of life and creating the world.

This bravery is closely associated with the poem's title, because the heart is the traditional symbol for bravery, courage, and passion, and because the key example of bravery in the text, animalistic sexual reproduction, is perhaps the main thing for which satyrs are known. In a sense, the title "The Satyr's Heart" refers to the animalistic courage of the creatures that bravely sew the fabric of life. There is something squalid about the bravery of the creatures underneath the stone, however, and Kelly may also be implying that there is something perverse or discomforting about the fact that this is the only sort of bravery and passion left in the world. In fact, since the speaker says early in the poem that the satyr does not even have a heart, there is even the possibility that this bravery and passion do not exist at all, and Kelly is being ironic when she writes that the speaker is "Uncovering what is brave."

God and Reason

There is no direct mention of God or spirituality in Kelly's poem, nor is there any direct reference to reason or philosophy, but the phrase "His neck rises to a dull point, points upward / To something long gone, elusive" likely refers to some combination of these ideas. The word "elusive" is the key hint that Kelly is not simply referring to the satyr's head here, but to something associated either with the head and brain or the sky, since the long lost head of a statue would not be elusive, but simply absent. Since the elements below the satyr's neck, on the ground, are the real, unthinking plants and animals that breed and create the earth, the vague and elusive elements associated with the sky and the head are likely to refer to the opposite, the abstract principles of consciousness and human thought. This evidence suggests that Kelly is contrasting higher human ideals like God and reason with the basic animalistic impulse of procreation.

The most important characteristic of God and reason in "The Satyr's Heart," if Kelly is referring to them in line 5, is that they seem to be absent from the world. The satyr does not have a head or a brain, and the creatures around the speaker reveal a lack of abstract thought since they work "Without cease or doubt." This is perhaps why the iris that the speaker proposes to use as a flag□a flower associated with the abstractions of faith and wisdom as well as the French symbol for the divine right of kings□is "dead"; it suggests that these philosophical and religious notions are long gone, debunked, and outdated.

Style

Enjambment and Musicality

Many of Kelly's lines run-on across the line break without any pause in sense or meaning, and this technique is called enjambment, which comes from the French verb for striding over, encroaching on, or straddling. There are a number of reasons that poets choose to employ enjambment, and perhaps the most basic is that the technique keeps the reader moving through the lines, connecting the meaning across the text and making the poem flow together. Enjambment also provides a more varied rhythm in poems such as "The Satyr's Heart," which, like many of Kelly's poems, is musical and has some of the characteristics of a song. This musicality involves a rhythm that is often difficult to describe, but it often includes alliteration (repetition of initial consonant sounds), such as in line 16 ("flag," "flag," "fanfare," "fare,") or in line 21 ("cease," "sew," "sweet," "sad"). "So, and so," from line 12, is an example of a phrase that does not seem to be important for its meaning, but which resonates musically, as though it were a backup phrase in a popular song.

Also, enjambment allows Kelly to bring out the meaning of her lines, and she chooses her line breaks carefully. The best example of this comes in the enjambment of lines 8 and 9, of the phrase "how quickly / Things change." Since the location of the words changes quickly down to the next line, Kelly is reinforcing the meaning of the text and also suggesting that things are changing quickly in the poem as the creatures around the speaker are actively breeding and procreating. Another example of how Kelly relates enjambment to her thematic goals is at the end of line 4, which ends "points upward." Since it ends without a punctuation mark, the phrase sends the reader's eyes off into the visually blank space to the right of the line, as if to emphasize that the speaker is looking up into the blank, "long gone, elusive" space where the satyr's head used to be.

Elusive Description

Kelly is not always a straightforward poet, and her language can sometimes appear quite mysterious. For example, she writes that the small flowers at the satyr's feet "swarm" and "breed" with a "clamor," or a loud noise, and that they are "earnest and sweet." This imagery has a surreal quality, it is difficult to picture, and it uses words that would not normally be associated with flowers. Other examples of Kelly's elusive description include the contradiction "Colorless birds and those with color"; the unclear references to the "smell of wet coins" as well as the sounds "of a bird / Crying" and of "water that does not move"; and the seemingly out-of-place phrase "buy my way." Although this style can be confusing to the reader, it also asks him/her to imagine the world of the poem in a new and striking manner, and Kelly uses it, in part, to challenge the reader's expectations and render her poems memorable and vivid.

Historical Context

When *The Orchard* was published in 2004, the American poetry scene was diverse and varied, with many poetic schools and no single dominant movement. However, one of the most influential literary theories at the time was that of postmodernism, which began in the years following World War II and has continued to influence American poetry through the initial years of the twenty-first century. Postmodernism is perhaps best known for challenging traditional understandings of reality and contending that the world is composed of infinite layers of meaning. Psychoanalysts such as Jacques Lacan began to challenge previous standards in psychological, philosophical, and linguistic thought by questioning the commonly held belief that human psychology operates in a structured symbolic universe. Innovative theorists like Lacan have inspired a variety of new literary movements and have moved many poets to be skeptical of straightforward depictions of reality.

Postmodern philosophies and linguistic theories have influenced poets in a variety of ways in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Poetry from this period often pictures reality as endless, and it tends to not take for granted that people experience and remember events in a straightforward symbolic universe. Since the 1980s, some poets have started to use new techniques that reflect advances in computer and film technology, and some have continued surreal and abstract impressionist traditions. American poetry has also become increasingly interested in voices from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, especially groups that were marginalized in the past, and many poets who were born outside of the United States, such as Seamus Heaney and Li Young Li, have been successful in the United States. Some contemporary poets, such as Billy Collins, have attempted to capture the dialect or style of a particular region or culture within the United States, using a voice that connects with readers as though the poem were a conversation.

Recently, some poets have begun to think about history from different, more subjective perspectives, and some have used references to mythology or religion in new and evocative ways in order to bring out contemporary moral issues. For example, Louise Glück, the American poet laureate when "The Satyr's Heart" was published, frequently reinterprets classical mythology to address themes such as feminism. Kelly is another poet who uses classical mythology and religion, particularly Catholicism, to bring out contemporary themes. Like many poets of her period, she approaches ancient writings not as sources for universal symbolism, but as historical texts to reinterpret based on her particular thematic goals. Thus, a satyr is a symbol that means something unique in Kelly's poem, and although she draws on historical perceptions of the satyr, she does not necessarily stick to the predominant or traditional views of its meaning.

Critical Overview

Kelly is a prominent contemporary American poet who has an excellent reputation in the critical community. She has received numerous awards since her first collection, *To the Place of Trumpets*, won the prestigious Yale Series of Younger Poets competition. She has also been published in *Best American Poetry* and has received several generous fellowships. Perhaps the most influential critic to praise her early work was James Merrill, a well-known poet who selected Kelly's first work for publication. Kelly's work has since received favorable reviews in periodicals such as *Library Journal*, *Cross Currents*, *Southern Review*, and *Booklist*.

Critics tend to highlight Kelly's commentary on religion and her musicality of verse in their reviews of her three collections. Stephen Yenser comments in the *Yale Review*, "The religious imagination is part and parcel of Kelly's work," and other critics have discussed Kelly's talent for creating songlike verse. Most of the negative criticism Kelly has received concentrates on her tendency to leave her poems somewhat vague and unexplained. In *Georgia Review*, for example, Judith Kitchen remarks, "I keep wanting more of the hidden narrative." In the same article, however, Kitchen praises Kelly's first collection as "promising" and "filled with a language that is both private and transcendent."

A key early review by Stephen Burt of Kelly's *The Orchard* appears in the *New York Times*. Burt characterizes the style of this collection as having "a shocked, shocking, and unfamiliar ferocity." Noting that Kelly's poems portray her as "the only live human being in a sanguinary landscape," Burt writes, "At times the whole book seems to mourn, and to gain its power by mourning, the same dead child."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Trudell is an independent scholar with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, Trudell discusses the dichotomy between the head and the heart, or reason and passion, in Kelly's poem.

A satyr is a mythological creature characterized chiefly by a duality; it is divided between a human and an animal, with some attributes of each. One might expect a poem such as Kelly's, which uses a satyr as its central image, to be about a duality in theme, and certainly there is one in "The Satyr's Heart" between human and animal, head and heart. The "dull point" of the satyr's neck points upward toward the human, cerebral themes in the poem, while the satyr's brave and animalistic heart is associated with the "armies of pale creatures who / Without cease or doubt sew the sweet sad earth."

This is, of course, one of the classic dualities of literature and philosophy: the struggle between reason and passion, or the abstract principles of the head versus the animalistic sexuality of the heart and body. Kelly's version of the dichotomy is unique in the sense that it also represents a division between weakness and bravery, as well as between some kind of God or spirituality and real, practical, earthly existence. Perhaps the most important fact to realize about the struggle between head and heart in "The Satyr's Heart," however, is that Kelly's chief symbol, the statue of a satyr, actually has neither a head nor a heart. Instead of its head, the satyr's neck points upwards to "something long gone, elusive," while the speaker rests her head next to "The hollow where the heart would have been."

The fact that the satyr's head and heart do not seem to exist is vital to Kelly's thematic commentary on the dichotomy of reason and passion. As far as the head is concerned, the speaker says that it is "long gone," which suggests that it used to be there and has disappeared, but she also says that it is "elusive," which contradicts the idea that it is gone forever and implies that it may be possible to find it. Since the speaker is looking toward the sky when she describes where the neck is pointing, there is the implication that Kelly is referring not just to the head, the most human part of the satyr, but also to God and religion. Kelly is known for alluding to religion, particularly Catholicism, in her poems, so it is no surprise that God plays a key role in "The Satyr's Heart." It is also important to note that the reason so many statues of figures from classical mythology are missing their heads is that Christians lopped them off during the Middle Ages because they considered them sacrilegious. This would support the claim that the absence of the satyr's head is somehow related to the absence of religion, although it is unclear whether this would be an ancient pagan religion or a Christian religion.

Kelly does not distinguish her reference to spirituality from all "long gone, elusive" aspects of the human mind; instead, she bundles them together as abstract principles of the higher thought, all of which are absent from the poem. Her other reference to these ideas comes in lines 15—17, when the speaker contemplates waving a dead iris through the air like a "blazoned flag." The iris is associated with abstract virtues of faith and wisdom, as well as a symbol of royalty, and the fact that the speaker considers

waving it around like a heraldic banner as well as a monetary "fare" associates it with human and cerebral, not animal, ideas. Also, the iris reminds the reader of the "long gone, elusive" God and reason of the sky because it is dead and it would be waved in the air instead of left in the ground to procreate along with the poem's brave creatures.

On the surface, it appears that the satyr's heart is just as absent as its head, and the speaker is resting against hollow sandstone. In fact, however, the absence of the satyr's heart is characterized in entirely different terms, and Kelly's treatment of this symbol, which is clearly central to the poem since it is the title phrase, provides a vital hint to her commentary on the dichotomy between reason and passion. The first important evidence that the satyr's heart is not, like its head, entirely absent, is the exuberance and liveliness of the teeming creatures around the statue. The satyr's heart is inevitably associated with animalistic sexuality, lust, and breeding because this is the satyr's function in mythology and because the heart is the symbolic center of passion. Therefore, when the flowers breed, the birds turn tricks, and the furry creatures have sex with each other, it is as though the satyr's heart is alive and well in the nature around him.

Kelly reinforces the idea that there is a beating satyr's heart with the phrase "So, and so," which is important not for its literal meaning but for its sound and rhythm, which are actually quite similar to the thumping of a heartbeat. The next two phrases of the poem echo this rhythm, repeating the words "smell" and "sound" in two beats, the second of which is slightly longer. Similarly, the final line includes four words that begin with an "s" sound in order to emphasize the discovery of the brave creatures that resonate with the satyr's heartbeat: "Without cease or doubt sew the sweet sad earth." All of these examples skillfully echo the two-part rhythm of a heartbeat, in which the second beat is slightly louder and longer.

The idea of a hollow statue of a creature containing some living essence is not confined to "The Satyr's Heart"; several other poems in *The Orchard* refer to similar versions of this phenomenon, and the idea of life in a statue seems to be an important image for Kelly. For example, the lion, a creature that often appears in *The Orchard*, is portrayed as a similar figure to the satyr in poems such as "Lion": "Of hollow steel the lion is made"□and "The South Gate": "How can a stone lion / Bear a living child? Because still in the corner / Of her deformed head a dream lodges." This latter image is even more explicit than "The Satyr's Heart" in envisioning the source of fertility within lifeless stone, and it resonates strongly with the image of the speaker uncovering the stone to find it teeming with brave, procreating creatures.

Although Kelly's poem seems to deny the presence of both the head and the heart, it is only the ideas associated with the satyr's head□reason, God, and abstract principles□that are absent from the dichotomy. Kelly's poem seems to be skeptical of all abstractions, putting its faith in the "bravery" of the heart and commending the animals that procreate "Without cease or doubt," or without the consciousness of the human mind. This is likely the cause of the despair in the poem: the reason that the soil is "black and sweating," the bird is "Crying," and the earth, in the last line, is "sad." There is a sense in which the speaker would like the iris to be alive, and that she would love to

wave it as a blazoning fanfare, but she cannot because she recognizes that God, spirituality, and human bravery are absent from the poem. In a sense, she is mourning the loss of the satyr's head due to the passage of time and the erosion of human belief and purpose.

At the same time, however, the world of "The Satyr's Heart" is an affirmation of the brave, creative, and animalistic passion that is still very much alive even in a world in which the symbol of lust and procreation, the satyr, has been reduced to a headless, inanimate sandstone statue. Kelly is expressing the courage and nobility of the satyr's heart, which is portrayed as the engine of the earth's creativity and one of its greatest virtues. There is something mildly disturbing about the fact that the speaker uncovers "armies" of creatures that work without "cease or doubt," as though they are mindless automatons that lack any higher virtues whatsoever. It is also somewhat imposing that they are characterized as "pale," since there seems to be no reason that they would lack color. Nevertheless, the image of the creatures "sew[ing]" the earth is positive and affirming, as though they are mending the earth from the decay that has taken the satyr's head. Regenerating the world like a beating heart, they reinforce the idea that brave, fertile passion is the vital and important element in its classic duality with reason and higher thought.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on "The Satyr's Heart," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Donnelly is a poet, editor, and teacher. His first book of poems is The Charge*. In this essay, Donnelly interprets "The Satyr's Heart" in the context of the collection* The Orchard *as a whole.*

"The Satyr's Heart" demonstrates every characteristic of a lyric poem, the mode of poetry whose purpose is primarily to express strong feeling:

language and sensual images that are emotionally resonant;implications which gesture toward meaning, without spelling everything out;associative leaps that may not make logical sense, but are linked by a through-line of language, image, or feeling;"musical" language: that is, sounds and rhythms that pitch their appeal primarily to human faculties other than the intellect or the logical mind.

It's the lyric strategy of "implications which gesture toward meaning" that usually presents the biggest challenge to beginning students of poetry. Why does not Kelly (or her "speaker") come right out and *say* exactly what she means? Why is not there one "correct" way to interpret the poem? One can sympathize with such questions, and some poetry is in fact difficult to read and understand for reasons that actually are the author's fault. Kelly's poem□especially in the context of the book in which it appears as a whole□actually does a very good job of pointing the reader in the direction of what it really "means."

The Orchard, in which "The Satyr's Heart" appears, is a completely unified sequence of poems, as many books of poetry are not. All of its poems are spoken by the same speaker, who experiences in each poem some variation of the same strange, troubled, and ecstatic state. Each poem casts light on the other poems and adds to what we understand about the speaker. So the key to reading "The Satyr's Heart" most skillfully is not in that poem alone□though it certainly can be understood to some degree and enjoyed on its own□but also in other poems of the book. In particular, a passage in "The Orchard," the title poem of the book, gives the reader a way to understand "The Satyr's Heart" and all the other poems:

I thought the scene might have been staged

For me. By my mind. Or by someone

Who could read my mind. Someone

Who was having a good laugh

At my expense. Or testing me

In some way I could not understand.

It should not be altogether unexpected that Kelly would provide a key to reading the poems in this book in the title poem: one purpose of titles is to point the reader toward important information. In this passage in "The Orchard," Kelly suggests several plausible interpretations of the bizarre goings-on in "The Satyr's Heart" and other poems of *The Orchard*.

In lyric poems, the significance of gestures, motivations, and feelings are complex, layered, and sometimes cannot be understood without investigation and speculation. This being the case, the most helpful questions a reader can ask encountering a lyric poem like Kelly's are: "What kind of person thinks and feels as this speaker does?" and "What life experiences might cause a person to think and feel this way, and express herself in this tone of voice?" These kinds of speculations put the reader in an advantageous relationship to the poem, with a good chance of penetrating its mysteries.

So what *can* the reader notice and speculate about Kelly's speaker, and in what other ways might the poems in *The Orchard* as a whole help the reader understand "The Satyr's Heart?"

One might characterize the speaker's actions, and her speech and personality, in these ways:

Though she has acute powers of observation and description (like those she shows in the passage "There is a smell of fruit / And the smell of wet coins"), she often experiences a confusion or mixing of the senses, a condition called synesthesia. She describes, for example, color in terms of sound: "a clamor / Of white, a clamor of blue." Frequently in the book the speaker seems to experience the flood of incoming sensory data with a kind of exalted hyper-awareness that is painfully close to panic.

One notices that the speaker often reacts with a contradictory mix of horror and attraction to what she experiences, as in the passage "the small flowers swarm, earnest and sweet," in which the negative associations of the verb "swarm" are at odds with the positive associations of "earnest and sweet."

In passages like this:

If I pick the dead iris? If I wave it above me like a flag, like a blazoned flag? My fanfare? Little fare With which I buy my way, making things brave?

one sees how passionately and associatively the speaker poses questions□questions that have no answers, or no clear answers. She is also committed to great precision in her thinking and speech. At several points in "The Satyr's Heart" she seems to argue with and correct herself: "Little fare / With which I buy my way, making things brave? / No, that is not it. Uncovering what is brave."

One notices that the landscape the speaker inhabits in *The Orchard* is never a neutral background but animate, active, highly allegorical and *emotionalized*. (This makes perfect sense if the landscape is, at least in part, a projection of the speaker's imagination.) The surroundings seem to have, in different poems in the book, aspects of

an abandoned pleasure garden, a grand estate or palace, a graveyard, or a temple precinct. In addition to the speaker, this landscape is populated by stone beasts and gods, and by a young boy or boys who appear mysteriously and then disappear or die violently. In various poems, there are other vague human figures on the periphery, for whom the speaker experiences occasional flashes of interest, sympathy, or attraction, but from whom she seems mysteriously separate. The speaker seems at home in this unhealthy cloister□perhaps in a sense privileged to be here□but without a clear purpose or role. Like Tamino and Pamina (characters in Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, who endure purifying trials of fire and water), she may have been put into this environment to be tested emotionally and spiritually, though by what agency is not clear. Nor is it clear, by the end of the book, that the speaker is in fact enlightened, liberated or purified, though she does *endure*. The final image in the book is hopeful: two women□each potentially an aspect or projection of the speaker□enter the garden laughing and "carrying on" (an expression which could mean both "surviving" and "amorous play").

Throughout *The Orchard* as a whole the reader may notice subtle allusions:

to stories from Greek and Roman mythology (about Leda impregnated by Zeus in the form of a swan; about satyrs);to the Bible, especially the mix of erotic and spiritual language in the Song of Solomon, the visionary images of the Books of Ezekiel and Revelation, and the story of the finding of the infant Moses by Pharoah's daughter (Exodus 2: 1—6);to magical transformations like those in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*;to a "shadow-self," the dark side of human nature that psychologist Carl Jung (1875—1961) theorized that each person possesses and must acknowledge or be overwhelmed by.

One notices that in many passages like "the smell of fruit, / And the smell of wet coins . . . the sound of a bird / Crying, and the sound of water" the speaker is as obsessively repetitious as a religious litany, echoing words and phrases again and again. Throughout the book, themes and images also recur: of difficult or unusual births; of breasts, milk, and maternity; of grotesque or monstrous combinations of animals; of things which are only half seen or partly understood; of danger, decay, ruin, sourness, abandonment; of preciousness and beauty hidden among rankness; of physical, emotional, and spiritual injury. In the midst of this network of repetitions, the speaker sometimes pauses mysteriously and rhetorically, as though to gather her thoughts or master her feelings before she can go on. Midway through "The Satyr's Heart" readers observe one such caesura: "So, and so."

One notices that the speaker describes dreamlike interactions with the phenomena in her environment, as when in "The Satyr's Heart" she rests her head on the chest of what the reader may presume to be a statue of a satyr.

The satyr is one example of many images and words in *The Orchard* that have sexual associations. Satyrs were creatures (from Greek and Roman myth) who were half man and half goat. Followers of the god of wine□called Dionysus or Dionysos by the Greeks, and Bacchus by the Romans□they were associated with disorderly drunkenness and uncontrollable sexual desire. Many other words and phrases in "The Satyr's Heart" have

subtle sexual or reproductive associations: "swarm," "sweating," "breed," "birds turning tricks," "the wind fingering / the twigs," "furred creatures doing whatever / furred creatures do." The recurrent sexual motif indicates interest, and a general state of arousal, on the part of the speaker, but she seems to have no obvious or appropriate partner.

Or perhaps the speaker has lost her partner in some traumatic way. There is an unnamed "you" to whom some of the poems in *The Orchard* refer or are occasionally, obliquely, directed. There may be a subtle reference to this person in the speaker's interaction with the stone satyr: the statue is missing a head, and whether he has or ever had a heart is also in doubt. Missing these organs that are symbolic of reason and compassion, the stone goat-man could only be expected to act from his baser self (and satyrs were never associated with selfless action, even *with* heads and hearts). This makes him a potentially dangerous partner for the speaker, though he causes her no explicit harm in the poem. (Indeed, the speaker's attention wanders away from the satyr a third of the way through the poem, though the sensual arousal he symbolizes remains.) If the satyr's presence is a reference to the hidden "you" to whom some of the poems refer, the reader may infer that this person hurt the speaker in some way.

Not that the speaker represents herself as a saint. In many poems of *The Orchard* she demonstrates an inflamed or irritated emotional sensibility, making admissions or showing instances of character defects like selfishness, pettiness, or encouraging violence in others□only partly balanced by attractive traits like intelligence, sympathy, and endurance of troubles. The "lower" nature that the satyr represents is fully present in the speaker as well. In fact, *The Orchard* may be read as one long acknowledgment, or embrace, of the speaker's shadow-self, as Jung insisted was necessary.

The actions the speaker describes herself making in "The Satyr's Heart" are emblematic, in miniature, of her actions in *The Orchard* as a whole: she rests her head on a stone satyr but finds no love or comfort there. She documents precisely the disturbing vigor of the natural and supernatural environment. She questions everything ceaselessly. Perhaps with the purpose to uncover "what is brave" in herself and the world, she turns over a stone, a gesture symbolic of a difficult journey to the underworld of the self, a refusal to settle for surface appearances. What she finds under the stone is both ugly and hopeful: "the armies of pale creatures who / Without cease or doubt sew the sweet sad earth." The speaker may feel doubt, but her searching and questioning reveals a network of connections capable of sustaining the self and the earth.

Not since Theodore Roethke's *The Lost Son* (1948) has an American poet attempted a sequence of poems so interior, so dramatic, so stubbornly dead-set against objectivity, distance, orderliness, logic, intellectual analysis, directness, and prosiness as *The Orchard*. American literature in the first decade of the 21st century is awash in opaque poetry that is a collage of unrelated hyper-ironical statements, and sentimental poetry of mild, flat, prosy musings. Kelly's book triumphs over both these from-the-neck-up "schools" of poetry, with language of extreme clarity, precision, music, and emotional engagement, and with the quality of electric strangeness that is characteristic of all great works of art.

Source: Patrick Donnelly, Critical Essay on "The Satyr's Heart," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #3

Blevins's first book of poems, The Brass Girl Brouhaha*, was published by Ausable Press in 2003 and won the Kate Tufts Discovery Award. She is Assistant Professor of English at Colby College in Waterville, Maine. In this essay, Blevins argues that Kelly's poem explores how intertwined human consciousness is with its own animal instincts.*

"The Satyr's Heart" opens the second section of Kelly's third collection, *The Orchard*. Because the collection is a sequence of lyric poems that rely on one another for the ultimate narrative of the speaker's quest through an imagined garden of invented, archetypal, mythological, and allegorical demons, "The Satyr's Heart" is difficult to read out of context. In fact, readers might find the speaker's confrontation with herself atop the statue of a sandstone "headless goat man" absurd or worse. For this reason, it is important to read at least the opening lines of "The Black Swan," the collection's first poem:

I told the boy I found him under a bush. What was the harm? I told him he was sleeping And that a black swan slept beside him, The swan's feathers hot, the scent of the hot feathers And of the bush's hot white flowers As rank and sweet as the stewed milk of a goat. The bush was in a strange garden, a place So old it seemed to exist outside of time.

These lines suggest that the satyr in "The Satyr's Heart" is not an actual monument or statue, but a figure out of the speaker's imagination. In fact, everything that happens in *The Orchard* happens entirely in that most abstract of abstract landscapes. Because the very little that happens in "The Satyr's Heart" happens "outside of time," it is concerned with the most psychological, spiritual, and philosophical of battles. *The Orchard*'s speaker is on a quest to come to terms with "the unshaped and chaotic element of nature," which Northrop Frye, writing in *The Great Code: The Bible as Literature*, says is creative work's most essential task. Since, according to Frye, the traditional purpose of such quests is to "[transform] the amorphous natural environment into the pastoral, cultivated, civilized world of human shape and meaning," Kelly's vision, which is to merge the cultivated, often-in-ruins human world with the grotesque, life-giving and life-removing force of nature, is exceedingly strange.

That is, *The Orchard* is no pastoral. It is no idealized garden in which the poet can walk at peace among a flock of wild birds. Instead, it is a book in which a riot of grotesque images swirl together so that Kelly might explore not only how animal the human world is, but also, and far more notably, how intertwined human consciousness is with its own animal instincts. In poem after poem in *The Orchard*, Kelly's speaker must confront a series of demons and monsters□sandstone satyrs, black swans, a four-head lion□in order to reveal humankind's most horrible truth, which is that it "is out of nature and hopeless in it," as the psychologist Earnest Becker pointed out in *The Denial of Death* (1973). As a result, as Stephen Burt says in the *New York Times*, it is a book in which "fertility and loyalty are inseparable from predation and death."

"The Satyr's Heart" marries "fertility and loyalty" with "predation and death" by enacting the speaker in the middle of an argument with herself. In the poem's first line, the speaker rests her head on the satyr's carved chest. Because the satyr is associated with the cult of Dionysus, it is a representative of sex and debauchery. Because this satyr has been decapitated, he also represents death. The speaker weighs the satyr's potential or power against the more natural "small flowers" and the "sweating soil / They breed in," which as a fertility image implicates sex and as a natural image implicates the insects that feed on corpses. The speaker notices "the smell of fruit / And the smell of wet coins," which again merges the natural world with the world of human-made objects. Because there is also "the sound of a bird / Crying, and the sound of water that does not move," death does not dissipate just because the speaker recognizes the sexual nature of the animals in the orchard. In fact, though the headless goat man appears to be rejected for "the armies of pale creatures who / Without cease or doubt sew the sweet sad earth," the poem's form would suggest that Kelly's goal is more to blend than to choose.

After the speaker recognizes the pain and suffering in the idea of sex, she continues to wonder what she might do to resolve the paradox the decapitated satyr statue represents. She wonders if she should "pick up the dead iris," which again symbolizes death in and of the natural world. The idea of acting upon the truth of the natural world by waving it around "like a flag" is also rejected when Kelly says, "No, that is not it. Uncovering what is brave." So, although "the armies of pale creatures" appear to have the final word in the argument between the human world of ruined ideas and symbols and the animal world of crying birds, in actual fact the problem of how to live and die in a dual world is *suspended* in "The Satyr's Heart."

The poem's brilliance is not only in the way in which its content intertwines life and death, but also in the poem's form, which also marries opposing forces. First, one of Kelly's most favored syntactical methods is a catalogue of phrases and clauses that negate one another. For example, following the poem's first line are the *deducting* clauses, "The hollow where the heart would have been, if sandstone / Had a heart, if a headless goat man could have a heart." One effect of this method is to place the speaker of the poem in a kind of syntactical no-man's land, where the speaker appears to be in a place where nothing can happen or change because all sides are being considered (and nothing is real). In addition, the self-correcting syntax enacts the process of thought. This gives the poem its sense of immediacy and depth while generating a somewhat sardonic or mocking tone. This technique also risks the speaker's credibility in that it suggests she might be too vacillating to be reliable. Kelly solves this problem with her many word repetitions, which serve to save the poem from disintegration into chaos by producing a pattern within which the actual chaos of the poem's content can be contained.

In the poem's first three lines, "heart" is repeated three times and "head" twice. In lines 6 and 7, "clamor" is repeated twice. This pattern of exact repetition is maintained until the last three lines of the poem. When words are not repeated exactly, there are often just slight variations, as when "point" shifts just slightly to "points," "colorless" becomes "color," and "fanfare" "fare." Less obvious might be the way the poem's first lines are

tied to the poem's last lines with repetitions, as well. For example, the "now" that initiates the poem also ends its closing movement in the line "Now I bend over and with my foot turn up a stone." The "sweet" in line 6 is repeated in the poem's last phrase. The effect of these repetitions is to undercut the tone of immediate thought by establishing a pattern that moves the poem away from speech and into song.

The music of "The Satyr's Heart" is produced by sound repetitions that are almost too numerous to believe. They are the glue that holds the poem together. For example, the "h" sound in the poem's first line is repeated not only in "heart" but in "hollow," "had," and "headless." The short "e" vowel sound in "rest" is repeated in "head" and "chest," which repeats the "s" sound that was first introduced in "satyr." This sound is then repeated in "sandstone" and in the "less" of "headless." It is woven into the line 4 in "rises" and gathers intensity in line 5 in "elusive." In line 6, the "s" sound has grown to sound like an actual hiss, which is why the "sweating soil" at the end of line 7 seems to actually sweat (and why the "So and so" of line 12 sounds so familiar). It is important to understand that the entire poem not only uses but also rides sound and in so doing undermines its syntactical speech effects with an unbelievably complex music.

The poem's rhythm is not only a consequence of Kelly's syntactical choices, which make full use of the powers of sentence structure and type, but also of a rhythmical method that verges on syllabics. Although there is no pattern to the number of syllables per line in the poem, most lines are eleven, twelve, and thirteen syllables long. The most energetic moments in the poem occur when this number shifts, as for instance in line 9, which is only nine syllables long. In contrast, line 15 is, somewhat ironically, fifteen syllables long. It is interesting that this line, which contains the highest number of syllables, sounds so much shorter than many of the other lines in the poem. This is the result of Kelly's word choice in this line, which is completely monosyllabic. Combined with the ways in which the clauses and phrases wind up the poem until they crash into very short sentences (such as "So and so") and lines that often end in sounds that contrast or negate the sounds that precede them, this odd rhythmical system helps to produce the poem's incantatory tone. It is worth noting that "The Satyr's Heart" begins by alluding to the child's prayer "Now I lay me down to sleep," reinforcing not only its incantatory tone, but also the reconciliation of death-in-life ultimately underlining the poem.

Source: Adrian Blevins, Critical Essay on "The Saytr's Heart," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Research the mythological creature of the satyr. What did it mean in ancient Greek times and how was it portrayed? How was the satyr adapted and changed by Roman culture? What was its significance during this period? How were satyrs then depicted in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and later periods?

Read *The Orchard* and compare "The Satyr's Heart" to the other poems in the collection. What makes the poem unique? How are its themes developed in other contexts? How would you describe its place within the rest of the collection? Choose one poem that you feel resonates strongly with "The Satyr's Heart" and compare the two poems in style and theme.

Critics view Kelly as a master of songlike verse, and the musicality of her poems is generally considered one of their most important stylistic qualities. Think of a few topics related to Kelly's musicality and discuss them. For example, how do you think "The Satyr's Heart" is a musical poem? How does Kelly approach the musicality of poetry in her previous collection *Song*? What makes a poem like a song? What type of music is similar to Kelly's poetry, and why?

Research the contemporary poetry scene in the United States. What are the most important poetic schools and which theories and movements are most influential over today's critically acclaimed American poets? Read one or two poems by Louise Glück, Billy Collins, Edward Hirsch, and/or other famous poets that you come across in your research. Discuss where you think American poetry is heading and which types of poems you find most innovative. How does Kelly compare with these poets? How does she fit into the contemporary scene?

What Do I Read Next?

Kelly's *To the Place of Trumpets* (1988) is a unique and startling collection that launched her career. Often tantalizing and ambiguous, its poems examine themes such as religion, death, and the natural world.

October (2004), by Louise Glück, who was the American poet laureate in 2003 and 2004, is a stark and direct collection of poems that often uses mythology to develop its themes.

Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* (1942) is one of the best available overviews of ancient Greek and Roman myth, and it is world-renowned because of Hamilton's flair for the subject.

Subterranean (2001), by Jill Bialosky, is a carefully crafted book of poetry about motherhood, grief, and desire that often makes reference to classical mythology in order to bring out its themes.

Further Study

Adcock, Betty, "Six Soloists," in *Southern Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4, Autumn 1996, pp. 761—78.

Adcock discusses Kelly's *Song*, comparing its themes and style to five other contemporary poetry collections.

Clarence, Judy, Review of *Song*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 120, No. 1, 1995, p. 107.

Clarence provides a brief positive review of Kelly's second collection.

Williams, Lisa, "The Necessity of Song: The Poetry of Brigit Pegeen Kelly," in *Hollins Critic*, Vol. 39, No. 3, June 2002, p. 1.

Williams's essay is a thorough and insightful analysis of Kelly's first two poetry collections, concentrating on the songlike quality of Kelly's verse.

Wilner, Eleanor, Review of *Song*, in *Prairie Schooner*, Vol. 70, No. 1, Spring 1996, pp. 179—85.

This favorable review of *Song* explicates Kelly's stylistic and thematic accomplishments.

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Kitchen, Judith, "Speaking Passions," in *Georgia Review*, Summer 1988, pp. 407—22.

Muratori, Fred, Review of *To the Place of Trumpets*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 113, No. 9, May 15, 1988, p. 84.

Samyn, Mary Ann, Review of *Song*, in *Cross Currents*, Vol. 45, No. 3, Fall 1995, pp. 424—26.

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