Analysis of "Bright Star"

In the first line, the poet expresses his desire for an ideal--to be as steadfast *as a star*--an ideal which cannot be achieved by a human being in this world of change or flux, as he comes to realize by the end of the poem. In fact, he is unable to identify even briefly with the star; immediately, in line 2, he asserts a negative, "not." And lines 2-8 reject qualities of the star's steadfastness . Even the religious imagery is associated with coldness and aloneness; moreover, the star is cut off from the beauties of nature on earth.

Once the poet eliminates the non-human qualities of the star, he is left with just the quality of steadfastness. He can now define steadfastness in terms of human life on earth, in the world of love and movement. As in so many poems, Keats is grappling with the paradox of the desire for permanence and a world of timelessness and eternity (the star) while living in a world of time and flux. The paradox is resolved by the end of the poem: joy and fulfillment are to be found here, now; he needs no more. There is a possible ambiguity in the last line; is Keats saying that even if love doesn't enable him to live forever, he will die content in ecstasy and love?

The speaker in this poem is talking to a star. Weird, huh? Well, in poetry, you can get away with anything. So what does he tell the star? Well, he starts off by saying how he wishes he were as "stedfast" as it is. Because the star he's talking about doesn't move, it's likely that Keats means the North Star (a.k.a. Polaris). The North Star, of course, is the one star that doesn't move in the sky, because it is directly above the North Pole. Thus, sailors use it as a point of navigation.

All very interesting, but why is Keats's speaker talking to the star? Hard to say, because, then in the next line, he shifts gears, and starts talking about all the ways in which he *doesn't* want to be like the star. Now it seems he doesn't like the idea of spending all eternity in loneliness, watching the chill-inducing spectacle of water flowing endlessly around the earth, and snow falling on barren landscapes. Hm.

So what was up with all that wanting to be a star business? In the ninth line, we start to get a hint. The speaker wants to be like a star in the sense that the star doesn't move, and never changes. But he wants to take that whole never moving, never changing bit, and put it in a different context. He wants to spend all eternity with his head lying on his girlfriend's breast. And if he can't spend all eternity like that, he'd rather die, by swooning. So, basically, he'd like to be like the star, but...

Line 1

Bright Star, would I were stedfast as thou art—

- The speaker begins by calling by name the person he's talking to. Or, not the person, but the thing: the "Bright Star." But he's talking to it as if it were a person.
- Then he reveals why he's talking to the star: he wishes that he were as "stedfast" as the star is. (In case you didn't catch that, "would I were stedfast as thou art" is a shortened way of saying "would [that] I were [as] stedfast as thou art," which is an old-fashioned way of saying, "I wish I were as steadfast as you are." All cool?)
- From this, we can tell that he is talking to the North Star, also known as Polaris, which is the only star that remains motionless in the sky while the other stars appear to revolve around it (source). As a result, the North Star is often used for navigation.
- Because the North Star is often used for navigation, a person looking at it would typically be a traveler, especially a traveler by sea.
- Travelers are often homesick. If you're constantly on the move, you might start to think about settling down, becoming more "stedfast." Could this be why Keats's speaker is talking to the star, and saying he wants to be like it?

Line 2

Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night,

- Now Keats surprises us – instead of throwing a fastball like we were expecting, he's thrown a changeup. (You might think the baseball metaphor doesn't fit Keats, but he was actually an occasional cricket player, as he reveals in the beginning of this famous letter to his brother and sister-in-law. If our man had grown up in America, we think he would have been a baseball player all the way.)
- So, what makes Keats's second line a changeup? Simple. He started off in the first line by telling us that he wanted to be like the star he sees in the heavens. But now, in the very second line of the poem, he starts telling us how he *doesn't* want to be like the star. Huh?
- On the whole, the description of the star still sounds pretty nifty, what with fancy words like "splendor" and the idea of being "aloft" (i.e., "above," or "at the highest point of") the night.
- So what's not to like? We don't know…maybe that word

"lone" has something to do with it? We guess we'll just have to wait and see…

Line 3

And watching, with eternal lids apart,

- It looks like "waiting and seeing" is the name of the game. That's because Keats is continuing his description of what the star does: it keeps an eye on stuff.
- And yes, we said "keeps an eye" on purpose. Sure, we know that the stars you learn about in astronomy class don't have eyeballs, or eyelids, but this is a poetic star, and if Keats says that it keeps its "lids" (i.e., "eyelids") "apart," then we've just got to take his word for it.
- OK, so the star spends its time watching, what's so bad about that? Could it have something to do with that word "eternal"? What's that word "eternal" doing there? What does Keats mean by "eternal lids"? That sounds pretty weird, doesn't it?
- To explain what's going on here, we have to bring in a little bit of fancy poetry terminology (sorry). The terminology we need is "transferred epithet." Now, we know that sounds really complicated, but it's actually really simple. Here's the deal:
- An "epithet" is basically just the same as an adjective: it's a word that gets stuck onto something else to describe it. A "transferred epithet," then, is an epithet that should be attached to one word in the sentence, but gets stuck on to another word just to mix things up a bit.
- In this case, you could say that the epithet "eternal" most naturally goes with the word "apart." Let's try rewriting the line to show what we mean here: "And watching, with lids eternally apart." That makes pretty good sense, right?
- So, the idea is that, not only does the star watch things and keep its eyelids open, but it does so eternally.
- Why did Keats transfer the epithet "eternal" from "apart" to "lids"? No one can know for sure, but we're guessing it has to do with sound. The way Keats ended up doing it works much better for technical metrical reasons (we will explain Keats's metrics in more detail in our "Form and Meter" and "Sound Check" sections). You can tell this just by sounding the two versions out: "And watching, with lids eternally apart" vs. "And watching, with eternal lids apart."
- Now, you certainly don't *have to* agree with us, but we're willing to bet that you *will* agree with us that the second version sounds better. (It's fine if you disagree, of course

– after all, we didn't actually bet anything.)
- So, the way Keats ended up doing works well as far as the sound is concerned. But does it make any sense?
- If you think about it, it actually does, even if it isn't quite as clear as it would be if he had kept the epithet stuck on "apart," where it seems to belong most naturally.
- Think about it: if the star keeps its eyelids apart, and if its eyelids are eternal, doesn't that kind of add up to the same thing as saying that it will keep its eyelids apart eternally? It may be a little less clear, but we still think it works out OK, so Keats gets away with this one.
- But let's get back to the main story. Line 3 continues the description of what the star does. Remember, that this is still in the category of stuff that the star does that the speaker of the poem *doesn't* want to do, following from the "Not" at the beginning of line 2.
- Oh yeah, and one last thing. What is the star watching? We still don't know.

Line 4

Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,

- Here Keats continues the description of the star. Now he mixes things up a little by throwing in a simile.
- What's that? A simile is when you explicitly compare something to something else: A is like B.
- Here, Keats is comparing the way in which the star is watching to the way "nature's patient, sleepless Eremite" might watch something. Makes things so much clearer, right? Uh, then again, maybe not.
- We're guessing that most of these words should be familiar to you, though there are one or two pitfalls. First of all, you should be aware that "patient" is here being used as an adjective (a word describing a noun), just as in the sentence "the patient poet took time in writing her poem." It *isn't* being used as a noun, as it would be in the sentence, "the poet took so long writing her poem that she ended up as a patient in an insane asylum."
- OK, so "patient" and "sleepless" are both adjectives modifying "Eremite," but this leaves a major elephant in the room. What the heck is an Eremite?
- Actually, it isn't that complicated. An "eremite" is just an old-fashioned way of saying "hermit." (If you look at the two words or say them one after the other, you can see how they are really just different ways of pronouncing the same word.)
- So why did Keats use this old-fashioned word "eremite" when he could have just said "hermit"? Was "eremite" just the normal way of saying it back in the early

nineteenth century, when this poem was written?

- Actually, no. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the pronunciation "hermit" was actually the more common pronunciation ever since the middle of the seventeenth century. After that, people who used it were being deliberately old-fashioned, using it for poetic or rhetorical effect.
- But what poetic or rhetorical effect might Keats have been going for?
- Well, one obvious one is the rhyme: "Eremite" rhymes with "night" and "hermit" doesn't. Score one for "Eremite."
- But wait – the *Oxford English Dictionary* actually tells us something more! It says that, after the middle of the seventeenth century, people also sometimes used the word "eremite" to emphasize the Greek origin of the word, "eremia," which means desert. That's because the first hermits were people who moved into the desert to be closer to God.
- Could this be relevant to Keats's poem? We don't know about you, but we're pretty tempted to connect up the idea of the "hermit" or "Eremite" with the description of the star in line 2 as "in LONE splendour hung aloft the night."
- So, by calling the star an "Eremite," Keats's is emphasizing the star's aloneness.
- As for the fact that he capitalizes the word "Eremite"… we're not so sure, and are open to suggestions.
- Still, nothing says we can't try to think it through together. The description of the Eremite in the beginning of the line, "Nature's patient, sleepless" kind of singles it out as a singular, special thing. Maybe it's this idea of singling the one eremite out as the super-important one that makes Keats capitalize this word. And that kind of connects with the singular importance of the North Star as the one that doesn't move, right?
- So, from line 4, we know that the star is like a solitary dweller in the desert, is extremely patient, and never sleeps. Keep in mind that this whole simile got introduced to explain the way in which the star is watching. What's it watching again? We still don't know.

Line 5

The moving waters at their priestlike task

- Aha! Now Keats shows his hand! We know what the star is watching. Or…do we?
- Once we start looking at this line carefully, it seems to raise more questions than it answers.

- The star is watching "moving waters" – but which moving waters?
- And the waters are performing a "priestlike task" – but what is this task?
- Clearly, we're going to have to keep reading.

Line 6

Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,

- Now we learn what the "priestlike task" of the "moving waters" is: it is a "task of pure ablution." We also learn where this task is performed "round earth's human shores." Huh?
- Let's take those parts one at a time.
- First of all: what the heck is "ablution"? The main meaning of "ablution" that Keats is using here is of a ritual cleansing. This matches up pretty well with the idea of the "priestlike" quality of the waters' task.
- OK, but what about the "earth's human shores"? Basically, the idea is that human activity has stretched all over the globe; the shores of a continent of land are the edges of human life – when the waters flow around these landforms, they are flowing around the boundaries of the human world.
- Now, we don't know if you're going to agree with this, but doesn't it kind of seem as if the ideas of the shores' being "human" and that of "ablution" are somehow connected, as if humanity's presence were some sort of pollution that had to be washed clean? Of course, we do know from contemporary life that humans are a great source of pollution, so the idea isn't crazy.
- But does this mean that Keats has a completely negative view of humanity? We don't think it does necessarily – but we'll just have to keep reading to see what happens.

Line 7

Or gazing on the new soft-fallen masque

- Now we see Keats mixing things up once again. Instead of continuing with his description of the waters mysteriously cleansing or purifying the shores of the human world, he hits us up with an "Or" – we are going to learn about something else that the star does, instead of more about the first thing.
- Not to say that there aren't similarities between the first thing the star does and the second. Before, we're told that the star was "watching" something, and now we're

told that it is "gazing on" something. These activities are pretty similar to each other. Did Keats just mix up the verbs to keep things interesting? What's the difference between "watching" something and "gazing on it"? We're not sure either, we just think it's worth thinking about.
- Something else is different in this second of the star's activities. The first time, when we learned that the star was "watching" something (in line 3), we had to wait until line 5 to find out what it was watching. This time, we're told immediately what it is "gazing on": the "new soft-fallen mask."
- But wait, is that any clearer? What the heck is a "new soft-fallen masque"? Don't worry about the weird spelling – "masque" here is just an old-fashioned, slightly fancy way of spelling "mask." But that's the least of our worries: the speaker still isn't really giving us much of a clue to what's going on here. It looks like Keats has cleverly forced us to keep reading once again.

Line 8

Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—

- Now Keats lets the other shoe drop: the mask that the star "gazes upon" (line 7) is actually a "mask / Of snow" that is falling upon "the mountains and the moors."
- Learning this new detail in line 8 actually forces us to reinterpret line 7. Why? Because now we know that the mask that the star was watching wasn't a real mask, but instead a metaphorical mask. Literally speaking, the star is watching a layer of snow falling; Keats, in writing the poem, just chose to describe this layer of snow as a "mask."
- Why might he have done so? What is the effect of this image? Well, a mask is a covering, right? And in this case, the layer of snow is indeed covering something else. What's it covering? The "mountains and the moors."
- Of these two words, we're pretty sure you know what a "mountain" is, but a "moor" might be a little more unfamiliar – at least if you come from somewhere other than England.
- A "moor," according to Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary, is "an expanse of open rolling infertile land" or "a boggy area; *especially*: one that is peaty and dominated by grasses and sedges" (source). If you have read Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Hound of the Baskervilles*, or Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, or William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, you will have

encountered moors before.

- The basic idea of a "moor," then, is that it is a barren, lonely, uninhabited place. And so are mountains, usually.
- So, really, Keats is talking about one blank, cold, barren substance, "snow," landing on, and creating a mask over, two blank, cold, barren, lonely landscapes: "the mountains and the moors." This is laying it on a little thick, isn't it?
- Either way, we don't know about you, but we're definitely getting a chilly feeling from these lines – one that echoes the mournful image of the waves washing the earth (lines 5-6) and the loneliness of the star (lines 2-4) earlier in the poem.
- Do all these sensations help explain why Keats doesn't want to be like the star? We sure think so. But what about why he wants to be *like* the star? Didn't he start off the whole poem by telling the star how he wishes he "were stedfast as thou art"? What about that? Did he just forget about it? What's going on here?

Line 9

No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable

- Hm…was Keats listening to us a moment ago? Just when we thought he was forgetting what he was talking about, he shows us that he was in control all along.
- The "No" at the beginning of this line is kind of like an exclamation, the speaker's final comment on just about everything that has come before. After spinning out that whole long description of what he doesn't want (everything about the star beginning in line 2), it now looks like he's washing his hands of the whole thing… but does he?
- No: the speaker of this poem isn't an either/or kind of guy. He doesn't have to either be entirely like the star or entirely unlike the star. Instead, because it's his poem, he gets to pick and choose which aspects of the star he wants to be like and which he doesn't want to be like.
- Which aspects does he want to be like? He tells us: "still stedfast, still unchangeable." Even though the general idea of this line is probably pretty clear, to have a full understanding of it, it helps to know that Keats is using "still" in an old-fashioned way, where it means "always." So the idea is really that he will be "always steadfast, always unchangeable."
- This matches up perfectly with what we learned in line 1: "Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art." It's starting to look like the speaker definitely admires the fact that the star is so dependable, he just doesn't like

where the star hangs out (way up in the sky), and he doesn't like what the star looks at (lonely images of waters and snow falling on barren landscapes).
- OK, fair enough Mr. Poetic-Speaker-Man, you've told us what you like about the star and what you don't like about it. But do you have any constructive criticism to make things better?

Line 10

Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,

- Ahh, that does sound better. Now the speaker starts making a bit more sense: sure, he'd love to be as "stedfast" as the star, but he isn't jazzed about sitting up in the high heavens taking in all those dreary sights. Instead, he'd like to be just as "stedfast" in resting his head on his girlfriend's breast.
- Everything in this line seems pretty self-explanatory… maybe except for the word "ripening." What do you think the poet could have been going for here?
- Our best guess is that the speaker's girlfriend is still fairly young and so is still in the process of "filling out," so to speak.
- Do you think it's possible that the word "ripening" also gives a feeling of sweetness and warmth that contrasts with the cold images of the waters and the snow falling on barren landscapes?
- We think this is certainly possible, especially since so many poets describe the skin of their (female) objects of affection as "snow-white" or "snowy." So, the stereotypical thing for Keats to do here would be to follow suit. In fact, if you've read enough Romantic poetry, you might automatically visualize the love's breast as "snow" colored, even without Keats telling you (as in fact he doesn't).
- Thus, you could almost say that Keats is counting on his readers having this expectation, so that they then get a surprise when he doesn't follow the playbook. This heightens the contrast between this image and the images that have come before, and might lead to an even stronger sense of sweetness and warmth at this point.

Line 11

To feel for ever its soft swell and fall,

- The speaker continues his description of what he would like to be able to do. Now we learn that, while resting his

head on his girlfriend's breast, he would also get to feel her breathing.
- By bringing in the idea of "for ever," Keats continues to emphasize the main aspect of the star's existence the speaker would like to have: its permanence.
- Note that, in some editions of this poem, depending on which of Keats's manuscript versions they were taking as their starting point, the words "swell" and "fall" appear in the opposite order. For an example of this, check out this version of the poem, which reproduces the text as it appeared when the poem was first printed in 1848 (27 years after Keats's death).
- What difference do you think the order of the words makes? Which order do you prefer? Why?

Line 12

Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,

- Here the speaker spins out his description of what he'd like to do even further.
- Even though he would be resting his face on his girlfriend's breast like a pillow, he doesn't want to fall asleep there and miss out on all the action. Instead, he would rather remain awake forever.
- This is another parallel between the speaker and the star, which keeps its eyes open forever (as we learned from Keats's reference to its "eternal lids apart" in line 3). Once again, context is everything. It's a lot better to be forever awake with your head resting on your girlfriend than in is to be high up in the barren cosmos with nothing but equally barren sights to feast your eyes on.
- This line is also interesting because it takes an idea that might normally be a bad thing ("unrest"), and makes it a good thing, by sticking the adjective "sweet" in front of it.

Line 13

Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,

- More description of what the speaker would like to do. This description seems pretty similar to what he said back in line 11, when he said he wanted to "feel for ever its soft swell and fall." Is he just repeating himself for effect? Are we learning anything new here?
- Well, we think that, in one way, the speaker is repeating himself – and that there's kind of a point to that. After all, he *is* saying that he would like to do the

same thing forever and ever and ever for the rest of all eternity, and so it makes sense for him to repeat words to give you a sense of that.
- But, in another way, we also think that he isn't repeating himself, but is introducing new information. That's because, the first time that he talked about his girlfriend's breathing, it was in the context of the sense of touch: he would "feel" her chest rising and falling. Now, it is in the context of the sense of hearing: he wants to "hear" her breathing, too.
- Before we forget: one other notable thing about this line, of course, is the repetition of the word "still" at the beginning. Have we heard this word in the poem before? Yes we have, back in line 9: "yet still stedfast, still unchangeable." Why do you think he chose to emphasize the word at this point?
- Does "still" even still (hehe) mean the same thing it did before? Could it now mean "still" in the sense of "motionless"? Could it mean both? If so, which of the two meanings is the "main" meaning here, and which is the secondary meaning? These are all things you should be thinking about here. Remember though: because this is a poem, it's perfectly possible for multiple meanings of a word to be present at the same time.

Line 14

And so live ever—or else swoon to death—

- Now Keats comes to the punchline, if you want to call it that, the line that takes us from the cosmic perspective to the human perspective, that says what we've been thinking all along, but haven't had the guts to say…
- Sorry, we were just imitating Keats in taking our sweet time before coming to the point. The point? Ah yes, the point: the speaker now says that, if he can't live forever in the way he has just described, he would rather "swoon to death."
- But here's the question: is this a *real* set of alternatives? Let's put it another way: let's say Keats's parents (who unfortunately died when he was a child, long before they would have had the chance to read this poem) were having a talk with him about his future, and he said, "You know, what I really want to do with my future is either (a) live forever with my head on my girlfriend's breast or (b) swoon to death." Would they think he was being very realistic?
- We would say no. Hate to break it to you, but you can't live forever with your head delicately resting on your girlfriend's rack. You would probably get a mean crick in your neck, she would end up with bruises, and one of you would have to go to the bathroom sometime.
- As for option (b), that doesn't seem too realistic either. How many people do you know that have "swooned" to death? Probably not many, and, if they did, it was probably because they did there swooning in some inconvenient location, like, say, at the top of a really tall cliff. And even then, they probably didn't swoon to death purely because they were missing out on some bosom-pillow action.
- So, it's clear that neither of these is a realistic option. Does that mean Keats isn't being serious? We wouldn't say so. That's because both options reflect a serious *desire*, even if the desire is for something completely unrealistic.

- Or is it completely unrealistic? Is it possible that, even if the process of "swooning" comes a bit out of left field, Keats's mention of death can't help but remind us of the fate of all humans?
- Doesn't this inevitably make us realize that the speaker will, in fact die, and that his desire to lie with his beloved forever won't come true?
- How to think about this ending is, of course, a matter of personal taste. But we at Shmoop think it's highly likely that ending with the word "death" is Keats's way of giving us the "nudge-nudge, wink-wink" that his speaker is also doomed. This draws the ultimate contrast between the frailty of human mortals and the unchanging immortality of the Bright Star from line 1.
- One final thing: note than, in the text of the poem we're using (the Oxford World's Classics edition edited by Elizabeth Cook), the poem ends with a dash: "—". This follows the punctuation of one of Keats's own manuscript versions of the poem. Other modern editors (probably most of them) prefer to add a period at the end. Is there a different mood created by the two forms of punctuation? If so, what is it? If you were the editor, would you have followed Keats's manuscript punctuation, or would you have modernized it? Why?

BRIGHT STAR, WOULD I WERE STEDFAST AS THOU ART THEMES

Bright Star, would I were stedfast as thou art Themes

Love

The clearest picture we get of love in "Bright Star" comes after line 9, when the speaker describes how he wishes he could spend all eternity with his head resting on his "fair love's ripening brea...

Loyalty

The theme of loyalty is a very important one in "Bright Star," because it is so closely wrapped up with the idea of "stedfastness," the quality that the speaker admires most about the star. It quic...

Isolation

Isolation is a very important theme in "Bright Star" because it is the deal-breaker. How so? Well, in the first line, the speaker says he wants to be like a star. But then, in the second line, he c...

Time

Keats's "Bright Star" gives us the perspective of somebody on earth looking up at a single, extremely special star in the heavens. This is the North Star, the one star that stays fixed in its place...

Man and the Natural World

The speaker of Keats's "Bright Star" takes a very mixed attitude toward nature. At the beginning of the poem, he says that he wants to be like a part of the natural world: the Bright Star. But the.

HOW TO READ A POEM

There's really only one reason that poetry has gotten a reputation for being so darned "difficult": it demands your full attention and won't settle for less. Unlike a novel, where you can drift in and out and still follow the plot, poems are generally shorter and more intense, with less of a conventional story to follow. If you don't make room for the *experience*, you probably won't have one.

But the rewards can be high. To make an analogy with rock and roll, it's the difference between a two and a half minute pop song with a hook that you get sick of after the third listen, and a slow-building tour de force that sounds fresh and different every time you hear it. Once you've gotten a taste of the really rich stuff, you just want to listen to it over and over again and figure out: how'd they do that?

Aside from its demands on your attention, there's nothing too tricky about reading a poem. Like anything, it's a matter of practice. But in case you haven't read much (or any) poetry before, we've put together a short list of tips that will make it a whole lot more enjoyable.

- **Follow Your Ears.** It's okay to ask, "What does it mean?" when reading a poem. But it's even better to ask, "How does it sound?" If all else fails, treat it like a song. Even if you can't understand a single thing about a poem's "subject" or "theme," you can always say something – anything – about the sound of the words. Does the poem move fast or slow? Does it sound awkward in sections or does it have an even flow? Do certain words stick out more than others? Trust your inner ear: if the poem sounds strange, it doesn't mean you're reading it wrong. In fact, you probably just discovered one of the poem's secret tricks! If you get stuck at any point, just look for Shmoop's "Sound Check" section. We'll help you listen!
- **Read It Aloud.** OK, we're not saying you have to shout it from the rooftops. If you're embarrassed and want to lock yourself in the attic and read the poem in the faintest whisper possible, go ahead. Do whatever it takes, because reading even part of poem aloud can totally change your perspective on how it works.
- **Become an Archaeologist.** When you've drunk in the poem enough times, experiencing the sound and images found there, it is sometimes fun to switch gears and to become an archaeologist (you know -- someone who digs up the

past and uncovers layers of history). Treat the poem like a room you have just entered. Perhaps it's a strange room that you've never seen before, filled with objects or people that you don't really recognize. Maybe you feel a bit like Alice in Wonderland. Assume your role as an archaeologist and take some measurements. What's the weather like? Are there people there? What kind of objects do you find? Are there more verbs than adjectives? Do you detect a rhythm? Can you hear music? Is there furniture? Are there portraits of past poets on the walls? Are there traces of other poems or historical references to be found? Check out Shmoop's "Setting," "Symbols, Imagery, Wordplay," and "Speaker" sections to help you get started.

- **Don't Skim.** Unlike the newspaper or a textbook, the point of poetry isn't to cram information into your brain. We can't repeat it enough: poetry is an experience. If you don't have the patience to get through a long poem, no worries, just start with a really short poem. Understanding poetry is like getting a suntan: you have to let it sink in. When you glance at Shmoop's "Detailed Summary," you'll see just how loaded each line of poetry can be.
- **Memorize!** "Memorize" is such a scary word, isn't it? It reminds us of multiplication tables. Maybe we should have said: "Tuck the poem into your snuggly memory-space." Or maybe not. At any rate, don't tax yourself: if you memorize one or two lines of a poem, or even just a single cool-sounding phrase, it will start to work on you in ways you didn't know possible. You'll be walking through the mall one day, and all of a sudden, you'll shout, "I get it!" Just not too loud, or you'll get mall security on your case.
- **Be Patient.** You can't really understand a poem that you've only read once. You just can't. So if you don't get it, set the poem aside and come back to it later. And by "later" we mean days, months, or even years. Don't rush it. It's a much bigger accomplishment to actually *enjoy* a poem than it is to be able to explain every line of it. Treat the first reading as an investment – your effort might not pay off until well into the future, but when it does, it will totally be worth it. Trust us.
- **Read in Crazy Places.** Just like music, the experience of poetry changes depending on your mood and the environment. Read in as many different places as possible: at the beach, on a mountain, in the subway. Sometimes all it takes is a change of scenery for a poem to really come alive.
- **Think Like a Poet.** Here's a fun exercise. Go through the poem one line at a time, covering up the next line with your hand so you can't see it. Put yourself in the poet's shoes: If I had to write a line to come after this line, what would I put? If you start to think like this, you'll be able to appreciate all the different choices that go into making a poem. It can also be pretty humbling – at least we think so. Shmoop's "Calling Card" section will help you become acquainted with a poet's particular, unique style. Soon, you'll be able to decipher a T.S. Elliot poem from a Wallace Stevens poem, sight unseen. Everyone will be so jealous.
- **"Look Who's Talking."** Ask the most basic questions possible of the poem. Two of the most important are: "Who's talking?" and "Who are they talking to?" If it's a Shakespeare sonnet, don't just assume that the speaker is Shakespeare. The speaker of every poem is kind of fictional creation, and so is the audience. Ask yourself: what would it be like to meet this person? What would they look like? What's their "deal," anyway? Shmoop will help you get

to know a poem's speaker through the "Speaker" section found in each study guide.

- And, most importantly, **Never Be Intimidated.** Regardless of what your experience with poetry in the classroom has been, no poet wants to make his or her audience feel stupid. It's just not good business, if you know what we mean. Sure, there might be tricky parts, but it's not like you're trying to unlock the secrets of the universe. Heck, if you want to ignore the "meaning" entirely, then go ahead. Why not? If you're still feeling a little timid, let Shmoop's "Why Should I Care" section help you realize just how much you have to bring to the poetry table.

Poetry is about freedom and exposing yourself to new things. In fact, if you find yourself stuck in a poem, just remember that the poet, 9 times out of 10, was a bit of a rebel and was trying to make his friends look at life in a completely different way. Find your inner rebel too. There isn't a single poem out there that's "too difficult" to try out – right now, today. So hop to it. As you'll discover here at Shmoop, there's plenty to choose from.