On the Grasshopper and Cricket

POEM TEXT

The poetry of earth is never dead:
When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,
And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run
From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead;
That is the Grasshopper's—he takes the lead
In summer luxury,—he has never done
With his delights; for when tired out with fun
He rests at ease beneath some pleasant weed.
The poetry of earth is ceasing never:
On a lone winter evening, when the frost
Has wrought a silence, from the stove there shrills
The Cricket's song, in warmth increasing ever,
And seems to one in drowsiness half lost,
The Grasshopper's among some grassy hills.

SUMMARY

The poetic voice of the earth never dies. Even when all the birds are hiding from the sun in the cool shade of the trees, one voice still sings all through the hedges and the freshly mowed fields. That voice belongs to the grasshopper. He's a champion of summer's pleasures, and he's never tired of singing. When he's ready to rest, he just kicks back in the shade of a weed. The poetic voice of the earth never ends. On a lonely winter night, when the whole world is silent beneath the frost, the cricket still sings from beside the stove, its music always feeling warmer and warmer. To a person daydreaming by the stove, the cricket's voice sounds a lot like the grasshopper's in the summery hills.

THEMES

THE ENDURING BEAUTY OF NATURE

In this sonnet (which Keats dashed off in during a poetry competition with his friend and mentor Leigh Hunt), nature's consoling loveliness persists through all weathers and all seasons. Even when the summer is so hot that the birds can't chirp, and when the winter has frozen the land solid, the "Grasshopper" and "Cricket" keep on singing. Their constant song suggests that the "poetry of earth," the moving beauty of nature, never ends—and, symbolically, that such beauty might provide consolation even in tough times.

The natural world, the poem suggests, can be a harsh place. Summer or winter, one can run into trouble: the summer sun gets so hot that the "birds are faint" in the trees, and the winter can freeze and "silence" the whole world. Symbolically speaking, these pictures of exhausting heat, "lone" chilliness, and silence might suggest that people's inner lives can have moody, oppressive, and deadening weather, too.

Even in the least comfortable times, though, the "poetry of earth"—nature's profound beauty—never completely vanishes. In summer, the speaker observes, the grasshopper sings in "delight[]" even when the birds fall silent. In the winter, the cricket plays the same part, chirping away beside the fire. This reliable song, "ceasing never," offers not just hope and beauty, but a reassuring reminder of constancy: the cricket's song reminds a winter daydreamer of the voice of the grasshopper, and thus of the fact that beauty runs through all the seasons.

By presenting the "poetry of earth" as the steady song of a grasshopper or a cricket, constant even as the seasons change, the poem suggests that nature offers a reliable source of hope, beauty, and reassurance.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

The poetry of earth is never dead:
When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,
And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run
From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead;

"On the Grasshopper and Cricket" begins with a fervent declaration: "The poetry of earth is never dead." This idea might feel equal parts moving and mysterious at first. What, readers might ask, is the "poetry of earth"?

In the first quatrain, the answer (or at least part of it) is "a voice"—a constant voice, one that travels across the summer fields even when it's so blazingly hot that the birds are "faint" and fall silent in the shelter of the "cooling trees."

The imagery in these first lines makes this scene seem both comforting and oppressive. The "voice" the speaker describes travels "from hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead." In other words, it runs through the hedgerows that separate freshly shorn fields. This is a comfortable English countryside scene, a domestic spot of "earth," not some grand mountainous

vista.

If even the birds are "faint with the hot sun," though, this is a comfortable scene on a seriously uncomfortable day. The image of the birds withdrawing into the trees suggests that it's so hot out that the world has fallen almost silent: all the animals can do is rest and pant. (While the speaker isn't present in the scene, readers might imagine that the human population is sweating and suffering, too.)

All through this discomfort, though, the "voice will run." Notice the way the speaker confidently uses the future tense: the voice isn't just running now, it "will" run always. The sun can't burn it away; it's a constant thread that "run[s]" through even unpleasant times.

This sentiment might feel familiar to readers who've encountered the famous first words of Keats's later book-length poem *Endymion*: "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever." The "voice" that speaks of the "poetry of earth," too, is a thing of beauty that doesn't stop giving joy even when circumstances are tough.

The first quatrain of this sonnet is grounded in a familiar (and not altogether idyllic) landscape. But it's also full of a very Romantic faith in the enduring, consoling beauty of nature and poetry. Eternal loveliness runs right through the (sometimes uncomfortable) day-to-day world. In the second quatrain, Keats will hug that combination of the ordinary and the enchanted even closer when—perhaps unexpectedly—he identifies the *source* of the mysterious voice.

LINES 5-8

That is the Grasshopper's—he takes the lead
In summer luxury,—he has never done
With his delights; for when tired out with fun
He rests at ease beneath some pleasant weed.

The first quatrain of this sonnet introduced the idea that the natural world is threaded through with the eternal "poetry of earth"—a "voice" of beauty that never stops singing, even when it's so hot out that nothing else, not even the birds, can move. Readers might have been inclined to interpret this voice metaphorically, as a kind of spirit of natural loveliness.

But then, along comes the second quatrain, which matter-of-factly says who this "voice" belongs to: "This is the Grasshopper's." The "poetry of earth," in other words, is just a grasshopper's steady chirp.

This personified grasshopper, like a lot of his famous relations, is a pleasure-loving guy. "Never done / With his delights," he revels in "summer luxury" even when every other creature is panting and sweating. He himself, when he finally feels the need to relax, "rests at ease beneath some pleasant weed," a comical turn of phrase that suggests that a weed is as good as any leafy beech to a grasshopper.

Even while the Grasshopper is taking his ease, the poem suggests, he keeps right on singing: the assonant /ee/ sounds of "rests at ease beneath some pleasant weed" mimic the "ee ee ee" of chirping.

The tone of this quatrain, readers might observe, has taken a sharp turn. The first four lines of the poem painted an evocative picture of a summer day and made the passionate declaration that "the poetry of earth is never dead"; these lines read more like something from a fable, a tale of a personified bug enjoying himself.

These two ideas and feelings, the poem insists, go hand in hand: the cheerful, summery chirp of a grasshopper is the "poetry of earth" itself. Pausing to reflect on the poem's form, readers might see how that makes sense:

- This sonnet, as all traditional sonnets are, is written in iambic pentameter—that is, lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm ("He rests | at ease | beneath | some plea- | sant weed").
- In other words, just like a grasshopper's chirp, it has a steady pulse!

The Grasshopper might thus be read as a poet himself, indulging in a little sonneteering.

Keats wrote this poem in a sonnet competition with his friend Leigh Hunt—an exercise in which both poets had 15 minutes to write a sonnet to an agreed-upon title. (Find Hunt's entry linked in the Resources section.) As Keats hurried to fit his thoughts on "the Grasshopper and Cricket" into the shape of a sonnet, it only makes sense that he'd have been thinking about poetry itself, not just virtuosic bugs.

Keats chose the Petrarchan sonnet form here—a kind of sonnet traditionally divided into two parts: an opening octave (or eight-line introduction, rhymed ABBA ABBA) and a closing sestet (six lines, with variable rhyme possibilities—Keats chooses CDE CDE here). That means that, at the end of line 8, the poem hits its *volta*, or turning point. Watch what happens to the poem's landscape as its rhymes change.

LINES 9-12

The poetry of earth is ceasing never:
On a lone winter evening, when the frost
Has wrought a silence, from the stove there shrills
The Cricket's song, in warmth increasing ever,

The sestet (or six-line concluding section) of the sonnet begins with an echo:

The poetry of earth is ceasing never:

This almost-a-refrain returns to the language of the first line—a repetition that itself suggests ceaselessness.

Meanwhile, the inversion of "ceasing never"—which one would

more usually phrase "never ceasing"—introduces an inversion in the poem's scenery, a journey to the opposite spot on the wheel of the seasons. (Of course, that phrasing also gives the pressed-for-time poet a more useful rhyme to work with. Easier to find an elegant match for "never" than "ceasing"—"greasing"? "Leasing"? "Fleecing"? No, no, no.) In the first eight lines, the speaker described the height of a scorching summer; now, the poem moves into the winter.

The winter scene the poem paints is as quiet as the summer one, where all the birds had fallen silent in the heat. Here, the personified "frost has **wrought** a silence," as if it were an artisan crafting the world into a frozen, soundless statue.

Once again, this winter doesn't take place in a grand Romantic landscape, but in a cozy, domestic world. In the middle of all that silence, "the Cricket's song" radiates out from beside the "stove," its "warmth increasing ever"—as if the song and the heat from the kitchen hearth were all part of the same thing. The speaker, now, observes nature from the comfort of the fireside. (Perhaps the speaker is also satisfied to have found a nice internal rhyme—"**ceasing** never" / "**increasing** ever"! That's the stuff!)

The "Cricket's song," in other words, picks up where the Grasshopper's song left off; its "shrill[ing]" chirp catches the Grasshopper's beat. Not only that, the "warmth" of its song, "increasing ever," seems to offer a bottomless pleasure. This is a warmth that eternally gets warmer without seeming ever to get uncomfortably hot: an image of heavenly coziness, in which one is always enjoying the delicious process of getting toasty after coming in from the cold.

Here, readers might pause for a moment to think about the overarching metaphor here. Both the Grasshopper and the Cricket sing the "poetry of earth," the speaker has said; their rhythmic chirps form an eternal song. Perhaps it's also the kind of song that one only notices when other noises fall silent, a background noise that comes into the foreground only when distractions fade away.

LINES 13-14

And seems to one in drowsiness half lost,
The Grasshopper's among some grassy hills.

The songs of the Grasshopper and Cricket, this poem has suggested, are a "voice" for the "poetry of earth" itself: an everpresent source of joy and beauty, persisting through blazing summers and freezing winters. The poem closes with a quiet picture of the effects of such "poetry."

So far, the poem has depicted fields in summer and a fireside in winter. Now, a human character puts in an appearance for the first time. Sitting by that fireside "in drowsiness half lost," daydreaming, they hear the song of the Cricket as "the Grasshopper's among some grassy hills." The same constant chirp echoes through summer and winter alike.

Part of what the "poetry of earth" offers, then, is a sense of both continuity and change. Daydreaming by a winter fire, this figure can hear the song of the summer. As the seasons circle round, the pulsing chirp of joy persists.

Symbolically, the poem's images of winter and summer might suggest that the "poetry of earth" can be a reassuring touchstone in harsh *internal* weather, too. Finding that poetic pulse might be a way to get through the emotional seasons when all one's feelings seem oppressively hot or painfully cold.

The "poetry of earth," then, connects people to something beautiful and constant. Perhaps the closing polyptoton of "the **Grasshopper's** among some **grassy** hills" offers a last reminder: people and bugs alike are connected to the earth and its poetry, bound to its beauty by flowery bands.

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

The poem's personified creatures suggest that the natural world isn't just beautiful, but friendly—and artistic.

In the hottest part of the summer, when the birds are so "faint" they can't keep singing, one voice remains steady: the Grasshopper's. Like a lot of fictional grasshoppers, this one is a musician and a pleasure-lover; his delight in "summer luxury" persists even through the heat, which he sees as an excuse to relax under "some pleasant weed."

More than that, though, he's the voice of the "poetry of earth": it's his constant song that makes the speaker declare that such poetry is "never dead." If that's so, the "poetry of earth" isn't just about nature being lovely, but about nature enjoying itself—literally. The personified Grasshopper's sense of "fun" and pleasure suggests that the earth itself takes constant joy in its own being, even on the stillest, sweatiest summer day.

The weather, too, becomes an artist in lines 10-11, where the speaker describes how "the frost / Has wrought a silence." The word "wrought" here presents the frost as an artisan, crafting silence as one might craft a silver necklace. The Cricket's winter song, cutting across that silence, plays the same role as the Grasshopper's, suggesting a perpetual note of life and happiness running through "the frozen time" (as Keats called it in another poem).

All these personifications thus evoke a living world full of creative delight—a delight, the poem suggests, that remains constant even through uncomfortable times.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "That is the Grasshopper's—he takes the lead / In summer luxury,—he has never done / With his delights; for when tired out with fun / He rests at ease

beneath some pleasant weed."
- **Lines 10-11:** "when the frost / Has wrought a silence"

IMAGERY

Imagery of warmth helps the poem to evoke the sensations of the seasons.

In the first stanza, the speaker depicts a summer day so hot that even the birds can't stand it. The "hot sun" makes them so "faint" that they have to hide in the "cooling trees" (a turn of phrase that might equally suggest that the trees cool the birds down and that the trees are cooling down themselves, using their own shade for relief). Everything is wilting in this weather—everything but the Grasshopper, whose song persists even through this punishing heat.

The winter Cricket's song, too, is associated with heat, but a much more welcome kind. Sitting by the "stove," the Cricket's song "shrills" out, "in warmth increasing ever." The "warmth" of the cricket's song seems to mingle with the "warmth" of the stove, creating a cozy patch in the frosty "silence" of the winter night. What's more, it's "increasing ever": this sense of happy security expands and expands, seeming to fill the whole world.

Warmth thus connects the Grasshopper and the Cricket across the seasons: the Grasshopper doesn't let a blazing day stop him, and the Cricket chimes in with the comfortable warmth of the kitchen when the world outside is freezing. The poem's toasty imagery suggests that life and joy run through the world like warm blood.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "When all the birds are faint with the hot sun, / And hide in cooling trees"
- **Lines 11-12:** "from the stove there shrills / The Cricket's song, in warmth increasing ever"

METAPHOR

This sonnet is founded on a very Keatsian metaphor: the idea of a living "poetry of earth."

"The poetry of earth is never dead," the poem begins. It then explores that idea through two sounds that can be neither scorched nor frozen away: the chirp of the Grasshopper in summer and the Cricket in winter. Those friendly bugs make good poets. With its regular rhythm, their song evokes poetic meter, a steady beat that pulses all through the year.

But earth doesn't just have poetry because it has a chirped beat. The "poetry of earth" here is also the plain beauty and joy of life—and, in particular, the ability of earth's creatures to respond joyfully to that joy. The song of the Grasshopper and the Cricket is both a celebration and an expression of the world's beauty. Singing their "poetry," the insects are part of the world's beauty, and add to it.

In that, they're doing what Keats once wrote was his aim in "learn[ing] poetry": to be "able to add a mite to that mass of beauty which is harvested from these grand materials, by the finest spirits, and put into etherial existence for the relish of one's fellows." (In other words: poets are able to put the "grand" beauty of the world into words, thus honoring that beauty and enhancing its pleasure by letting people "relish" it twice over.)

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The poetry of earth is never dead:"
- **Line 9:** "The poetry of earth is ceasing never:"

REPETITION

The poem centers on a reassuring repetition. In the first line, the poem declares that "the poetry of earth is never dead"; in line 9, it repeats that "the poetry of earth is ceasing never." This refrain sounds like a declaration of faith and a consolation at once—the kind of thing one would only think to say if one had some fear that the "poetry of earth" *might* be gone forever.

Each of these two reassurances introduces a consoling bug: the Grasshopper who sings all summer, and the Cricket who sings all winter. The poem's portrait of a constant cheerful chirping that runs through the whole year suggests that something beautiful keeps on ticking even when the world feels like it might "faint" from the heat or be eternally "silence[d]" by the frosts.

Other moments of repetition underscore that sense of continuity. The Grasshopper's voice, for instance, runs "from hedge to hedge," a moment of diacope that carries readers across the countryside (and suggests the Grasshopper's chirp carrying across the still summer air, too).

In the final line, meanwhile, a person daydreaming by the winter fire hears the Cricket chirping and dreams that it's actually the "Grasshopper's [song] among some grassy hills." Just as the chirping song links the Cricket to the Grasshopper, the polyptoton here suggests the connection between the Grasshopper and the landscape it lives in, stressing the idea that this song is the "poetry of earth" itself, the voice of nature.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The poetry of earth is never dead:"
- **Line 4:** "hedge to hedge"
- **Line 9:** "The poetry of earth is ceasing never:"
- **Line 14:** "Grasshopper's," "grassy"

VOCABULARY

Faint (Line 2) - Tired, exhausted.

New-mown mead (Line 4) - Freshly-mowed meadow.

At ease (Line 8) - Calmly, peacefully.

Ceasing never (Line 9) - Never ending.

Wrought (Line 11) - Created.

Wrought (Line 11) - Created (with connotations of "fashioned," like a work of art).

Shrills (Line 11) - Makes a piercing noise.

Warmth increasing ever (Line 12) - Always getting warmer.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Keats wrote "On the Grasshopper and Cricket" in one 15-minute shot during an impromptu sonnet-writing competition with his friend and mentor Leigh Hunt. Keats chose the Petrarchan (or Italian) sonnet form for his entry. That means:

- It's written in iambic pentameter (five da-DUM feet in a row: "He rests | at ease | beneath | some plea- | sant weed").
- And its 14 lines are divided into an octave (eight lines) rhymed ABBA ABBA and a sestet (six lines) rhymed CDE CDE.

The two-part Italian sonnet structure (as opposed to the three quatrains and concluding couplet of an English sonnet) suits the poem's story: the octave describes the grasshopper's song in summer, and the sestet the cricket's song in winter.

METER

"On the Grasshopper and Cricket," like the traditional sonnet it is, uses iambic pentameter. That means that each of its lines is built from five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in line 8:

He rests | at ease | beneath | some plea- | sant weed.

Iambic pentameter is a nicely flexible and natural-sounding meter, offering the poet plenty of room to shift stresses around for emphasis. Listen to the difference in line 2, for instance:

When all | the birds | are faint | with the | hot sun,

The last two stresses of this line get pushed into the final foot, creating a spondee (two strong beats in a row—DUM-DUM) and making the "hot sun" sound even more oppressive.

RHYME SCHEME

Since this is a Petrarchan sonnet, it uses one of several possible variations on a traditional rhyme scheme. (The English sonnet form is a little stricter.) All Petrarchan sonnets start with the same rhymes in the first eight lines (or octave):

ABBA ABBA

(Note, though that the very first rhyme of the poem is not like its partners! "Dead" is a slant rhyme with "mead," "lead," and "weed.")

The rhymes in the remaining six lines are a little more flexible. Keats chooses this pattern:

CDECDE

Keats has fitted the story of his poem to the divisions of the rhyme scheme, here: the ABBA section describes the grasshopper in summer, while the CDE section describes the cricket in winter. By describing the quiet, constant chirp of these bugs across both seasons and sections of the poem, Keats underscores the idea that "the poetry of earth is never dead."

SPEAKER

The speaker is more an observer than a presence in this poem. Besides a mention of "one in drowsiness half lost," keeping warm at a winter fireside, there's no source for the voice that observes the song of the "Grasshopper" and "Cricket." This vagueness makes the poem's picture of natural beauty feel like a timeless observation rather than one guy's perspective (though readers might be tempted to interpret the drowsing fellow by the winter fire as the dreamy young Keats himself).

SETTING

The poem's setting is both timeless and specific. In its picture of the cycling seasons and the constant chirp of grasshopper and cricket, the poem could take place just about anywhere and anywhen: not only is the "poetry of earth" deathless, but it's also universal. However, the specific pictures of "hedge[s]," "new-mown mead[s]," and keeping warm by the "stove" in winter also suggest Keats's own 19th-century English stomping grounds. This poem doesn't take place in a wilderness but in a cozy domestic landscape. Perhaps that's part of the poem's point, too. People don't need grand mountains or sublime seas to hear the "poetry of earth," the speaker seems to suggest; it's as near as one's own fireside.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Keats (1795-1821) is often seen as an archetypal Romantic poet: a dreamy, sensuous soul who died tragically

young. But Keats was also a vigorous, funny writer, a working-class kid making inroads into a literary scene dominated by aristocratic figures like Lord Byron. He died obscure and poor, never knowing that he would become one of the world's best-loved poets. But he had a quiet faith in his own genius: in an early letter, he once declared, "I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death."

"On the Grasshopper and Cricket" appeared in Keats's 1817 collection *Poems*, his first book. (Like all of his work, it didn't meet with much success during his lifetime.) In its portrait of a world strung together by a constant note of beauty, the poem draws on a grand old Romantic tradition of finding wisdom and consolation in nature.

Keats met or corresponded with most of his fellow Romantics, but never got too close to any of them. As a young writer, for instance, he was inspired by William Wordsworth, the granddaddy of English Romanticism—but was dismayed to find him pompous and conservative in person. ("Mr. Wordsworth," Wordsworth's wife Mary reprimanded the enthusiastic young Keats, "is never interrupted.") He had just one conversation with Samuel Taylor Coleridge (which seems to have felt more like an inspiring whirlwind than a friendly chat). And while Percy Shelley admired Keats's work, Keats never quite fell in with him and his elite clique; Byron, Shelley's close friend, was actively contemptuous of Keats. Keats's real circle was instead built from earthier London artists like Charles Lamb, Leigh Hunt, and Benjamin Haydon.

In spite of being something of an outsider in his time, Keats has indeed landed "among the English Poets" since his death. Ever since later Victorian writers like Tennyson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning resurrected his reputation, he's been one of the most beloved and influential of poets.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Keats wrote this poem in 1816, he was only 21: a young poet at the beginning of what would turn out to be a tragically short career. During this period, he was spending a lot of time with Leigh Hunt, an influential (and controversial) poet and journalist. Hunt was a key figure in what some stuffy critics called the "Cockney School" of poetry, a group of London-based writers with lefty political leanings and a taste for nature poetry. Hunt welcomed the young Keats enthusiastically and became one of his important early mentors, encouraging his poetry and introducing him to other big literary names like Percy Shelley.

This poem was the product of one of Hunt's favorite party games: a sonnet competition. In these contests, poets would be given a title and a time limit—only 15 minutes, in this case—to produce a complete sonnet. (Find a link to Hunt's entry in this contest in the Resources section.) This friendly test of poets' technical skill and inventiveness also made poetry into a social act, something shared among friends rather than locked away in a wind-whipped garret.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Brief Biography — Learn about Keats's life and work via the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/john-keats)
- The Keats-Shelley Museum — Visit the website of the Keats-Shelley House in Rome to learn more about Keats's short, brilliant life. (https://ksh.roma.it/)
- The Keats Letters Project — Learn more about Keats's life as a writer at the Keats Letters Project, which publishes Keats's lively letters alongside short exploratory essays. (https://keatslettersproject.com/)
- The Sonnet Competition — Read this poem in conversation with Hunt's entry in the sonnet-writing competition (along with some opinons from the internet peanut gallery on who won!). (http://www.sonnets.org/slam-3.htm)
- Keats and Leigh Hunt — Read about Keats's important (if sometimes troubled) relationship with Leigh Hunt. (http://people.loyno.edu/~history/journal/1984-5/byrnes-j.htm)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN KEATS POEMS

- Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art
- La Belle Dame sans Merci
- Ode on a Grecian Urn
- Ode on Melancholy
- Ode to a Nightingale
- Ode to Psyche
- On First Looking into Chapman's Homer
- On Seeing the Elgin Marbles
- On the Sea
- The Eve of St. Agnes
- To Autumn
- When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be

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