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## OSCAR WILDE

### Sonnet: On the Sale by Auction of Keats' Love Letters

These are the letters which Endymion<sup>1</sup> wrote  
 To one he loved in secret and apart,  
 And now the brawlers of the auction-mart  
 Bargain and bid for each tear-blotted note,  
 Aye! for each separate pulse of passion quote  
 The merchant's price! I think they love not art  
 Who break the crystal of a poet's heart,  
 That small and sickly eyes may glare or gloat.

Is it not said, that many years ago,  
 In a far Eastern town some soldiers ran  
 With torches through the midnight, and began  
 To wrangle for mean raiment, and to throw  
 Dice for the garments of a wretched man,  
 Not knowing the God's wonder, or His woe?

1886

### Symphony in Yellow<sup>1</sup>

An omnibus across the bridge  
 Crawls like a yellow butterfly,  
 And, here and there, a passerby  
 Shows like a little restless midge.

5 Big barges full of yellow hay  
 Are moored against the shadowy wharf,  
 And, like a yellow silken scarf,  
 The thick fog hangs along the quay.

10 The yellow leaves begin to fade  
 And flutter from the Temple<sup>2</sup> elms,  
 And at my feet the pale green Thames  
 Lies like a rod of rippled jade.

1889

1. Young hero of Keats's long poem *Endymion* (1817). The letters were to Fanny Brawne; most of them had been published in 1878.

1. Cf. the titles of Whistler's paintings *Symphony*

*in White* (1862) and *Symphony in Gray and Green* (1867).

2. Site of two of the Inns of Court, formerly occupied by the Knights Templars.

Hélas<sup>1</sup>

To drift with every passion till my soul  
 Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play,  
 Is it for this that I have given away  
 Mine ancient wisdom, and austere control?  
 5 Methinks my life is a twice-written scroll  
 Scrawled over on some boyish holiday  
 With idle songs for pipe and virelay,<sup>2</sup>  
 Which do but mar the secret of the whole.  
 Surely there was a time I might have trod  
 10 The sunlit heights, and from life's dissonance  
 Struck one clear chord to reach the ears of God.  
 Is that time dead? lo! with a little rod  
 I did but touch the honey of romance—  
 And must I lose a soul's inheritance?<sup>3</sup>

1881

E Tenebris<sup>1</sup>

Come down, O Christ, and help me! reach thy hand,  
 For I am drowning in a stormier sea  
 Than Simon on thy lake of Galilee:<sup>2</sup>  
 The wine of life is spilt upon the sand,  
 5 My heart is as some famine-murdered land  
 Whence all good things have perished utterly,  
 And well I know my soul in Hell must lie  
 If I this night before God's throne should stand.  
 "He sleeps perchance, or rideth to the chase,  
 10 Like Baal, when his prophets howled that name  
 From morn to noon on Carmel's smitten height."<sup>3</sup>  
 Nay, peace, I shall behold, before the night,  
 The feet of brass,<sup>4</sup> the robe more white than flame,  
 The wounded hands, the weary human face.

1881

1. "Alas!"

2. A song or short lyric in stanzas.

3. Perhaps referring to 1 Samuel 14:24–46. To ensure victory over the Philistines, King Saul orders his army to fast. His son Jonathan fails to hear the order and reaches out the tip of his staff to take some honey. Saul later discovers this and orders his son's death, but the people intervene to save him.

1. Out of darkness (Latin).

2. Simon Peter, one of the twelve apostles, came

close to drowning in a storm until rescued by Christ (Matthew 14.28–31).

3. The poet imagines an ironic voice discouraging him; it uses the language of Elijah when he mocked the priests of Baal for their god's impotence by suggesting that perhaps Baal was on a journey or asleep (1 Kings 18.19–40).

4. Cf. Revelation 1.13–16, where the "Son of man" is seen in a vision, "his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace."