Omar Khayyam and His Poetry

Omar Khayyam’s last name means “tentmaker,” which may indicate the trade of his father. Omar himself received a strong education in science and quickly became famous for his work in mathematics. In fact, in the late 1000s, the Seljuk sultan commissioned Khayyam to help revise the Muslim calendar. This calendar exceeds our own calendar in its accuracy.

1. Identify from the text the reasons Omar Khayyam is remembered in history?

Although Khayyam’s poetry does not seem to have been well-known or well-regarded during his own day, several manuscripts that include these poems survived for centuries. In the mid-1800s, British scholar Edward FitzGerald learned Persian and translated a number of these poems into English. The poetry of Omar Khayyam quickly became popular in Europe and the United States. FitzGerald compared the rhyming pattern of the four-line poems, with all lines rhyming except the third, to a wave. To FitzGerald’s ear, each poem crested at the third line, with the language falling gently to the fourth line. He also noticed the mood pattern, with sad poems followed by happier ones.

2. How did the poetry of Omar Khayyam become known?

3. What unique characteristics did FitzGerald discover about the poetry of Omar Khayyam?

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyám is the title that Edward FitzGerald gave to his translation of a selection of poems, originally written in Persian and numbering about a thousand, attributed to Omar Khayyám (1048–1131). A ruba‘i is a two-line stanza with two parts per line, hence the word rubAYOT (derived from the Arabic language root for "a million"), meaning "quatrain".

4. Explain from the text the definition of a ruba‘i. How many of these poems were written?

Read these two poems from the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyám and answer the questions below.

The Worldly Hope men set their Hearts upon
Turns Ashes—or it prospers; and anon (soon),
Like Snow upon the Desert’s dusty Face,
Lighting a little hour or two—is gone.

Of threats of Hell and Hopes of Paradise!
One thing at least is certain—This Life flies;
One thing is certain and the rest is Lies;
The Flower that once has blown (bloomed) for ever dies.

5. How would you sum up in a sentence the sentiments expressed in these poems?

6. Omar Khayyam lived in a time of political turmoil. What does the tone of the poems suggest about the uncertainty and instability of life? Cite an example from each poem.