

# The Poetry of John Keats



*Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog, Caspar David Friedrich, 1818*

## Module: Close Study of Text

This module requires students to engage in detailed textual analysis of a text. It develops students' understanding of how the ideas, forms and language of a text interact within the text and may affect those responding to it.

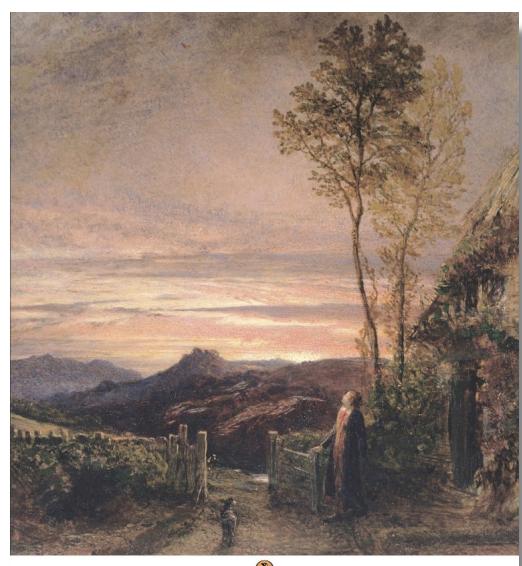
Students engage with the text to respond imaginatively, affectively and critically. They explore and analyse particular characteristics of the text, considering how these shape meaning. They also consider the ways in which these characteristics establish the text's distinctive qualities. Composition focuses on meaning shaped in and through the text. These comparisons may be realised in a variety of forms and media.



## Prescribed Text - *John Keats: The Complete Poems (Penguin Classics)*

Throughout this unit, students will study at least THREE of the following John Keats poems:

- Ode to a Nightingale
- Ode on a Grecian Urn
- La Belle Dame sans Merci, and
- 'Bright Star!



JOHN KEATS

*Selected Poems*

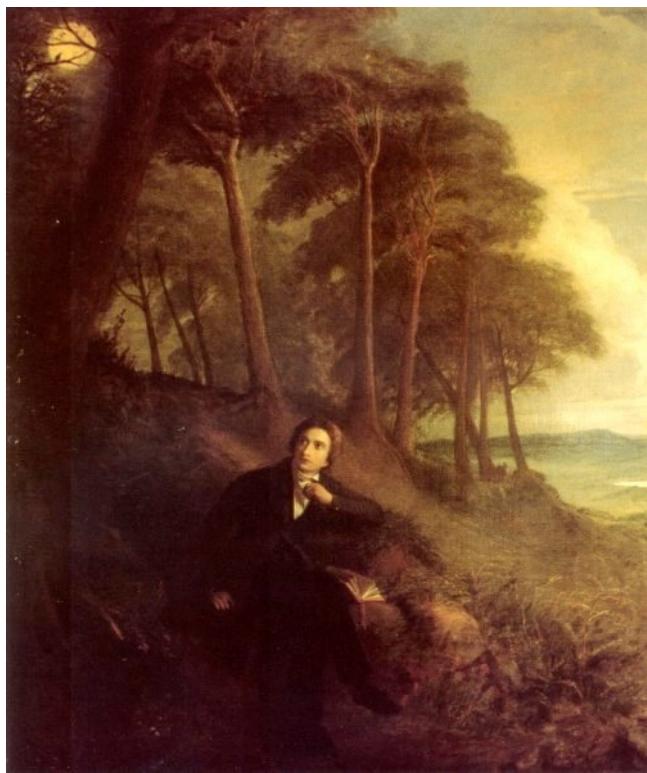


# Table of Contents

John Keats: Introduction	pg. 4
Romanticism: an Overview	pg. 5
Prescribed Poems:	
<i>Ode To A Nightingale</i>	pg. 10
<i>Ode To A Grecian Urn</i>	pg. 20
<i>La Belle Dame Sans Merci</i>	pg. 26
<i>Bright Star</i>	pg. 33

# John Keats

In an 1818 letter John Keats famously remarks that what shocks the virtuous philosopher ‘delights the chameleon Poet’. The nature of this particular chameleon lay, for Keats, in its ability to assimilate impressions and temporarily, but totally, to identify with external objects, both animate and inanimate. He felt himself, he adds, ‘a creature of impulse’. In some ways his development as a poet confirms his self-analysis, moving as he does from impulsive attraction to a dedicated absorption and adaptation of stimuli through a process of intellectualisation and poetic articulation. He draws his immediate experience into his verse, finding metaphors in the natural world, in his responses to architecture, painting, and sculpture or in his magpie reading. His ambition to be counted worthy of a place in the English poetic tradition drove him as much to a succession of creative experiments with form and metre as into the high-flown essays in sub-Shakespearean historic drama so favoured by his contemporaries. To the end of his short career he seems to have experienced a dissatisfaction with his own achievement which stretched beyond its lack of public and critical appreciation; it was a disappointment which inspired the notions of self-denigration and disintegration implicit in his choice of epitaph: ‘Here lies one whose name was writ in water’.



Joseph Severn's depiction of Keats listening to the nightingale (c.1845)

Andrew Sanders: *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*

## Negative Capability

In 1817, Keats fashioned the term ‘Negative Capability’. This refers to a condition in which man ‘is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’.



## Romanticism

Because the expression Romanticism is a phenomenon of immense scope, embracing as it does, literature, politics, history, philosophy and the arts in general, there has never been much agreement and much confusion as to what the word means. It has, in fact, been used in so many different ways that some scholars have argued that the best thing we could do with the expression is to abandon it once and for all. However, the phenomenon of Romanticism would not become less complex by simply throwing away its label of convenience.

Originally, Romanticism referred to the characteristics of romances, whose extravagance carried somewhat pejorative connotations. But in the 18th century the term came to designate a new kind of exotic landscape which evoked feelings of pleasant melancholy. The term Romantic as a designation for a school of literature opposed to the Classic was first used by the German critic Karl Wilhelm Friedrich von Schlegel (1772-1829) at the beginning of the 19th century. From Germany, this meaning was carried to England and France.



Since no single figure or literary school displays all the characteristics considered to be ‘Romantic’, any general definitions tend to be imprecise. In addition, these characteristics are often discerned in artists and cultural movements not usually so designated. They are not, in fact, the exclusive property of the Romantic period, but it is here that they are dominant and give identity to an era.

One of the fundamentals of Romanticism is the belief in the natural goodness of man, the idea that man in a state of nature would behave well but is hindered by civilisation (Rousseau – ‘man is born free and everywhere he is in chains’). The ‘savage’ is noble, childhood is good and the emotions inspired by both beliefs causes the heart to soar. On the contrary, urban life and the commitment to ‘getting and spending’, generates a fear and distrust of the world. If man is inherently sinful, reason must restrain his passions, but if he is naturally good, then in an appropriate environment, his emotions can be trusted (Blake – ‘bathe in the waters of life’).

The idea of man’s natural goodness and the stress on emotion also contributed to the development of Romantic individualism, that is, the belief that what is special in a man is to be valued over what is representative (the latter oftentimes



connected with the conventions imposed on man by ‘civilized society.’ If a man may properly express his unique emotional self because its essence is good, he is also likely to assume also that its conflicts and corruptions are a matter of great import and a source of fascination to himself and others. So, the Romantic delights in self-analysis. Both William Wordsworth (in *The Prelude*) and Lord Byron (in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*), poets very different from one another, felt the need to write lengthy poems of self-dramatization. The self that Byron dramatised, a projection not identical with his own personality, was especially dear to the Romantic mind: the outcast wanderer, heroic by accursed, often on some desperate quest, in the tradition of Cain or the Flying Dutchman. S. T. Coleridge's Mariner and Herman Melville's Ahab are similar Romantic pilgrims.

For English literature the most significant expression of a Romantic commitment to emotion occurs in Wordsworth's preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), where he maintains that ‘all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.’ Although Wordsworth qualifies this assertion by



suggesting that the poet is a reflective man who recollects his emotion ‘in tranquility’, the emphasis on spontaneity, on feeling, and the use of the term overflow mark sharp diversions from the earlier ideals of judgment and restraint.

Searching for a fresh source of this spontaneous feeling, Wordsworth rejects the Neo-classic idea of the appropriate subject for serious verse and turns to the simplicities of rustic life ‘because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.’ That interaction with nature has for many of the Romantic poets mystical overtones. Nature is apprehended by them not only as an exemplar and source of vivid physical beauty but as a manifestation of spirit in the universe as well. In Tintern Abbey Wordsworth suggests that nature has gratified his physical being, excited his emotions, and ultimately allowed him ‘a sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused’, of a spiritual force immanent not only in the forms of nature but ‘in the mind of man.’ Though not necessarily in the same terms, a similar connection between the world of nature and the world of the spirit is also made by Blake, Coleridge, Byron and Shelley.

In his desire to identify with a spiritual force, the Romantic often expressed the Faustian aspiration after the sublime and the wonderful. Committed to change, flux rather than stasis, he longs to believe that man is perfectible, that moral as well as mechanical progress is possible. Although the burst of hope and enthusiasm that marked the early stages of the French Revolution was soon muted, its echoes lingered through much of the 19th century and even survive in the 20th century. If the Romantic often sees his enemy in the successful bourgeois, the Philistine with a vested interest in social stability, political revolution is not always his goal. His admiration for the natural, the organic, which in art leads to the overthrow of the Classical rules and the development of a unique form for each work, in politics may lead him to subordinate the individual to the state and insist that the needs of the whole govern the activities of the parts.

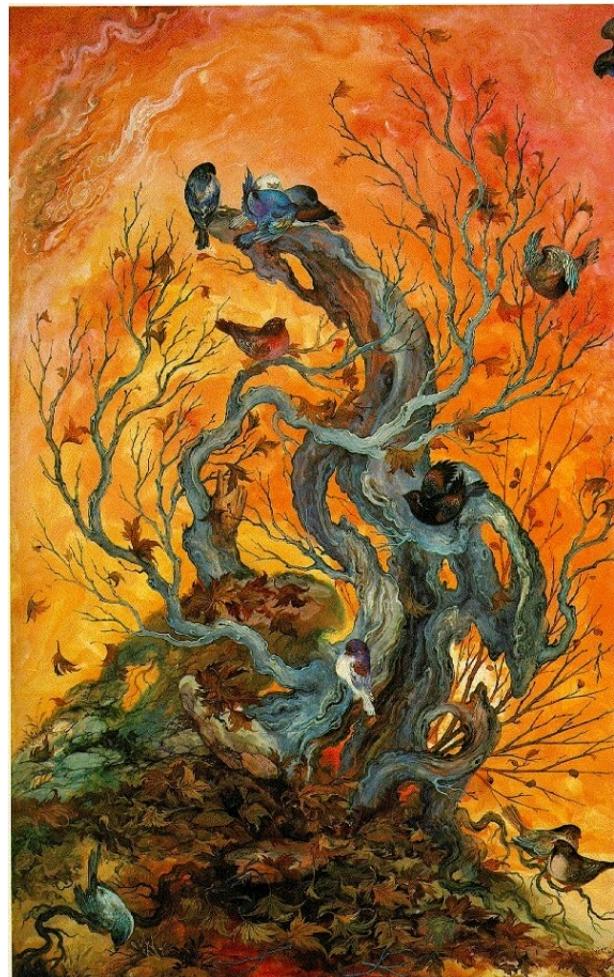
Although these characteristics of Romanticism suggest something of its nature, they are far from exhaustive. The phenomenon is too diverse and too contradictory to admit of an easy definition. As Lovejoy suggested, ‘typical manifestations of the spiritual essence of Romanticism have been variously conceived to be a passion for moonlight, for red waistcoats, for Gothic churches . . . for talking exclusively about oneself, for hero-worship, for losing oneself in an ecstatic contemplation of nature.’



# Ode To A Nightingale

A major concern in "Ode to a Nightingale" is Keats's perception of the conflicted nature of human life, i.e., the interconnection or mixture of pain/joy, intensity of feeling/numbness or lack of feeling, life/death, mortal/immortal, the actual/the ideal, and separation/connection.

In this ode, Keats focuses on immediate, concrete sensations and emotions, from which the reader can draw a conclusion or abstraction. Does the experience which Keats describes change the dreamer? As reader, you must follow the dreamer's development or his lack of development from his initial response to the nightingale to his final statement about the experience.



## Stanza I

The poet falls into a reverie while listening to an actual nightingale sing. He feels joy and pain, an ambivalent response. As you read, pick out which words express his pleasure and which ones express his pain and which words express his intense feeling and which his numbed feeling. Consider whether pleasure can be so intense that, paradoxically, it either numbs us or causes pain.

What qualities does the poet ascribe to the nightingale? In the beginning the bird is presented as a real bird, but as the poem progresses, the bird becomes a symbol. As you read the poem, think about what the bird comes to symbolize. The bird may symbolize more than one thing. Possible meanings include



- pure or unmixed joy,
- the artist, with the bird's voice being self expression or the song being poetry,
- the music (beauties) of nature
- the ideal.

Think of the quality or qualities attributed to the nightingale in deciding on the bird's symbolic meaning.

## Stanza II

Wanting to escape from the pain of a joy-pain reality, the poet begins to move into a world of imagination or fantasy. He calls for wine. His purpose is clearly not to get drunk. Rather he associates wine with some quality or state he is seeking. Think about the effects alcohol has; which one or ones is the poet seeking? Since his goal is to join the bird, what quality or qualities of the bird does he want to experience? How might alcohol enable him to achieve that desire?

The description of drinking and of the world associated with wine is idealized. What is the effect of the images associating the wine with summer, country pleasure, and romantic Provence? The word "vintage" refers to a fine or prime wine; why does he use this word? (Would the effect differ if the poet-dreamer imagined drinking a rotgut wine?) Why does Keats describe the country as "green"? Would the effect be different if the countryside were brown or yellowed? The activities in line 4 follow one another naturally: dance is associated with song; together they produce pleasure ("mirth"), which is sunburnt because the country dances are held outdoors. "Sunburnt mirth" is an excellent example of synesthesia in Keats' imagery, since Flora, the green countryside, etc. are being experienced by Keats through drinking wine in his imagination.

The image of the "beaded bubbles winking at the brim" is much admired. Does it capture the action of sparkling wine? What sounds are repeated? What is the effect of this alliteration? Do any of the sounds





duplicate the bubbles breaking? Say the words and notice the action of your lips. This image of the bubbles is concrete; in contrast, the preceding imagery in the stanza is abstract. Can you see the difference?

Does the wine resemble the nightingale in being associated with summer, song, and happiness?

### **Stanza III**

His awareness of the real world pulls him back from the imagined world of drink-joy. Does he still perceive the real world as a world of joy-pain? Does thinking of the human condition intensify, diminish, or have no effect on the poet's desire to escape the world?

The poet uses the word "fade" in the last line of stanza II and in the first line of this stanza to tie the stanzas together and to move easily into his next thought. What is the effect of the words "fade" and "dissolve"? why "far away"?

What is the relationship of the bird to the world the poet describes? See line 2. Characterise the real world which the poet describes. By implication, what kind of world does the nightingale live in? (Is it the same as or different from the poet's?)

Lead is a heavy metal; why is despair "leaden-eyed" (line 8)?

### **Stanza IV.**

The poet suddenly cries out "Away! away! for I will fly to thee." He turns to fantasy again; he rejects wine in line 2, and in line 3 he announces he is going to use "the viewless wings of Poesy" to join a fantasy bird. In choosing Poesy, is he calling on analytical or scientific

reasoning, on poetry and imagination, on passion, on sensuality, or on some something else?

He contrasts this mode of experience (poetry) to the "dull brain" that "perplexes and retards" (line 4); what way of approaching life does this line reject? What kinds of activities is the brain often associated with, in contrast to the heart, which is associated with emotion?

In line 5, he succeeds or seems to succeed in joining the bird. The imagined world described in the rest of the stanza is dark; what qualities are associated with this darkness, e.g., is it frightening, safe, attractive, empty, fulfilling, sensuous, alive?

### **Stanza V.**

Because the poet cannot see in the darkness, he must rely on his other senses. What senses does he rely on? Are his experience and his sensations intense? for himself only or for the reader also?

Even in this refuge, death is present; what words hint of death? Do these hints help to prepare for stanza VI? Was death anticipated in stanza I by the vague suggestions in the words "Lethe," "hemlock," "drowsy numbness," "poisonous," and "shadowy darkness"?

The season is spring (the musk rose, which is a mid-May flower, has not yet bloomed). Nevertheless, Keats speaks of summer: in stanza one he introduces the nightingale singing "of summer," and in this stanza he refers to the murmur of flies "on summer eves." In the progression of the seasons, what changes occur between spring and summer? how do they differ (as, for instance, autumn brings fulfillment, harvest, and the beginning



of decay which becomes death in winter)? Why might Keats leap to thoughts of the summer to come?

## Stanza VI.

In Stanza VI, the poet begins to distance himself from the nightingale, which he joined in imagination in stanzas IV and V.

Keats yearns to die, a state which he imagines as only joyful, as pain-free, and to merge with the bird's song. The nightingale is characterised as wholly blissful--"full-throated ease" in stanza I and

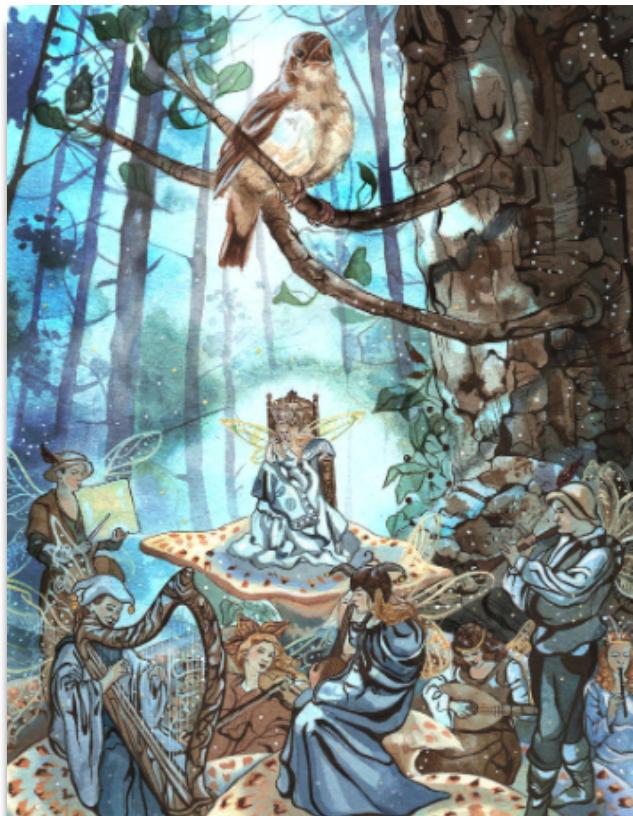
"pouring forth thy soul abroad / In such an ecstasy!" (lines 7-8).

The mixed nature of reality and its transience are suggested by the contrasting phrases "fast-fading violets" and "the coming musk-rose."

In the last two lines, the poet no longer identifies with the bird. He realises what death means for him; death is not release from pain; rather it means non-existence, the inability to feel the bird's ecstasy. Is there any suggestion of the bird's dying or

experiencing anything but bliss? Note the contrast between the bird's singing and the poet's hearing that song; what are the emotional effects of or associations with "high requiem" and "sod"? Why does Keats now hear the bird's song as a requiem? (He heard the bird's song very differently earlier in the poem.) Might the word "still" have more than one meaning here?

Is there any irony in Keats's using the same word to describe both the nightingale and death--the bird sings with "full-throated ease" at the



end of stanza I and death is "easeful" (line 2 of this stanza)?

### Stanza VII.

Keats moves from his awareness of his own mortality in the preceding stanza to the perception of the bird's immortality. On a literal level, his perception is wrong; this bird will die. Some readers, including very perceptive ones, see his characterisation of the bird as immortal as a flaw. Before you make this judgment, consider alternate interpretations. Interpreting the line literally may be a misreading, because the bird has clearly become a symbol for the poet.



- Is he saying that the bird he is now hearing is immortal? or is he saying something else, like "the bird is a symbol of the continuity of nature" or like "the bird represents the continuing presence of joy in life"? In such a reading, the poet contrasts the bird's immortality (and continuing joyful song) with the condition of human beings, "hungry generations."
- Does the bird symbolise ideal beauty, which is immortal? Or is the bird the visionary or imaginative realm which inspires poets? Or does the bird's song symbolise poetry and has the passion of the song/poem carried the listening poet away?
- Has the actual bird been transformed into a myth?
- Does this one bird represent the species, which by continuing generation after generation does achieve a kind of immortality as a species?

- Is the nightingale not born for death in the sense that, unlike us human beings, it doesn't know it's going to die? An implication of this reading is that the bird is integrated into nature or is part of natural processes whereas we are separated from nature. The resulting ability to observe nature gives us the ability to appreciate the beauty of nature, however transitory it, and we, may be.

The poet contrasts the bird's singing and immunity from death and suffering with human beings, "hungry generations." What is he saying about the human experience with "hungry"? If you think in terms of the passage of time, what is the effect of "generations"?



The stanza begins in the poet's present (note the present tense verbs tread and hear in lines 2 and 3). Keats then makes three references to the bird's singing in the past; the first reference to emperor and clown is general and presumably in a historical past; the other two are specific, one from the Old Testament, the other from fairy tales. The past becomes more remote, ending with a non-human past and place ("faery lands"), in which no human being is present. Is Keats trying to limit the meaning of the bird's song with these images or to extend its meaning? What ideas or aspects of human life do these references represent?

The mixed nature of reality manifests itself in his imagining the nightingale's joyous song being heard by in the past in the series of three images. Is the reference to the emperor and clown positive or neutral? The story of Ruth is unhappy (what words indicate her pain?). In the third image, the "charm'd magic casements" of fairy are "forlorn"

and the seas are "perilous." "Forlorn" and "perilous" would not ordinarily be associated with magic/enchantment. These words hint at the pain the poet recognized in the beginning of the poem and is trying to escape. Does bringing up the idea of pain prepare us or help to prepare us for the final stanza?

### **Stanza VIII.**

The poet repeats the word "forlorn" from the end of stanza VII; who or what is now forlorn? Is the poet identified with or separate from the nightingale?

In lines 2 and 3, the poet says that "fancy" (imagination) has cheated him, as has the "elf" (bird). What allusion in the preceding stanza does the word "elf" suggest? What delusion is the poet awakening from?

The bird has ceased to be a symbol and is again the actual bird the poet heard in stanza I. The poet, like the nightingale, has returned to the real world. The bird flies away to another spot to sing. The bird's song becomes a "plaintive anthem" and fainter. Is the change in the bird, in the poet, or in both? Is Keats's description of the bird's voice as "buried deep" a reference only to its physical distance, or does the phrase have an additional meaning? It is the last of the death images running through the poem.

With the last two lines, the poet wonders whether he has had a true insight or experience (vision) or whether he has been daydreaming. Is he questioning the validity of the experience the poem describes, or is he expressing the inability to maintain an intense, true vision? Of course, the imaginative experience is by its nature transient or brief. Is his experience a false vision, or is it a true, if transitory experience of and insight into the nature of reality?

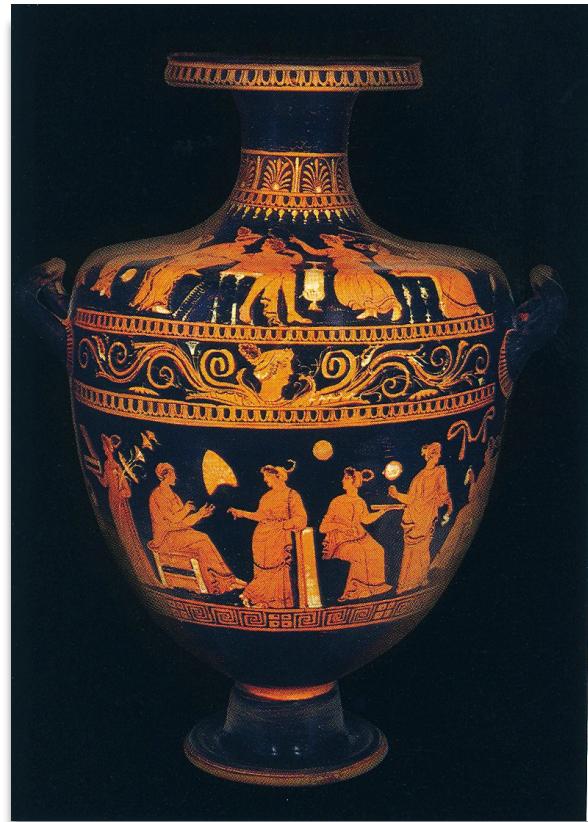
Has the dreamer in this poem changed as a result of his visionary experience? For instance, has his life been improved in any way? has he been damaged in any way? (The effect of the dream on the dreamer is a thread that runs through Keats's poems. The life of the dreamer in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" has been destroyed, and there is a question about the impact of dreaming on Madeline in "The Eve of St. Agnes.) What does the tone of the ending seem to you, e.g., happy, excited, hopeful, depressed, sad, despairing, resigned, accepting?



# Ode on a Grecian Urn

## Stanza I.

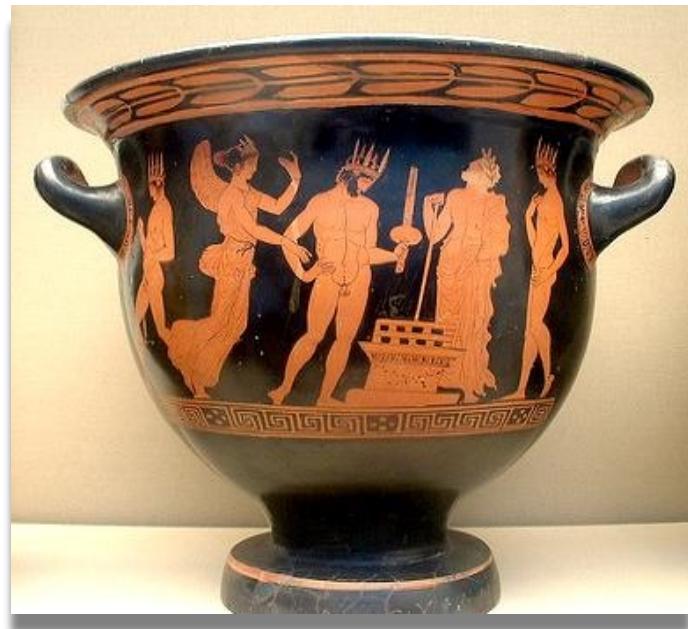
Stanza I begins slowly, asks questions arising from thought and raises abstract concepts such as time and art. The comparison of the urn to an "unravish'd bride" functions at a number of levels. It prepares for the impossibility of fulfilment of stanza II and for the violence of lines 8-10 of this stanza. "Still" embodies two concepts--time and motion--which appear in a number of ways in the rest of the poem. They appear immediately in line 2 with the urn as a "foster" child. The urn exists in the real world, which is mutable or subject to time and change, yet it and the life it presents are unchanging; hence, the bride is "unravish'd" and as a "foster" child, the urn is touched by "slow time," not the time of the real world. The figures carved on the urn are not subject to time, though the urn may be changed or affected over slow time.



The urn as "sylvan historian" speaks to the viewer, even if it doesn't answer the poet's questions (stanzas I and IV). Whether the urn communicates a message depends on how you interpret the final stanza. The urn is "sylvan"--first, because a border of leaves encircles the vase and second because the scene carved on the urn is set in woods. The "flowery tale" told "sweetly" and "sylvan historian" do not

prepare for the terror and wild sexuality unleashed in lines 8-10 (another opposition); the effect and the subject of the urn or art conflict. Is it paradoxical that the urn, which is silent, tells tales "more sweetly than our rime"? Twice (lines 6 and 8) the poet is unable to distinguish between mortal and immortal, men and gods, another opposition; is there a suggestion of coexistence and inseparableness in this blurring of differences between them?

With lines 8-10, the poet is caught up in the excited, rapid activities depicted on the urn and moves from observer to participant in the life on the urn, in the sense that he is emotionally involved. Paradoxically, turbulent dynamic passion is convincingly portrayed on cold, motionless stone.



Paradox and opposites run through the rest of the poem. As you read and reread the poem, you should become aware of them.

## **Stanza II.**

The first four lines contrast the ideal (in art, love, and nature) and the real; which does Keats prefer at this point? What is the paradox of unheard pipes? Is this an oxymoron?

The last six lines contrast the drawback of frozen time; note the negative phrasing: "canst not leave," "nor ever can," "never, never canst" in lines 5-8. Keats says not to grieve; whom he is addressing--the carved figures or the reader? or both? Then he lists the advantages of frozen time; however, Keats continues to use negative phrasing even in these lines: "do not grieve," "cannot fade," and ""hast not thy bliss."

Keats may have made a mistake, or there may be a reason for this negative undertone, a reason which will become clear as the poem continues.



### Stanza III.

This stanza recapitulates ideas from the preceding two stanzas and re-introduces some figures: the trees which can't shed leaves, the musician, and the lover. Keats portrays the ideal life on the urn as one without disappointment and suffering. The urn-depicted passion may be human, but it is also "all breathing passion far above" because it is unchanging. Is there irony in the fact that the superior passion depicted on the urn is also unfulfillable, that satisfaction is impossible?

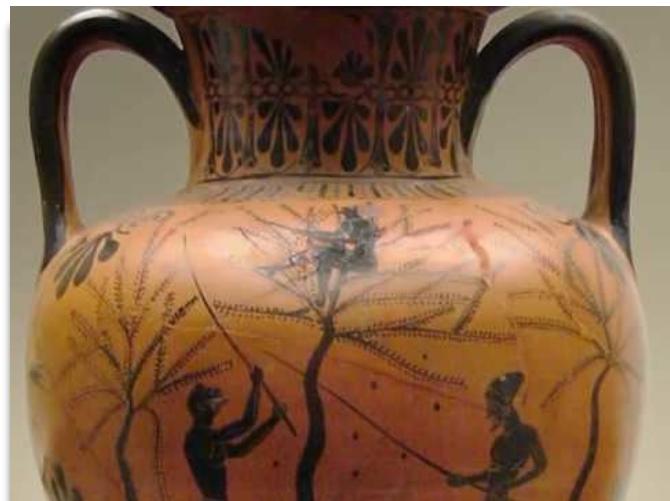
How does he portray real life, actual passion in the last three lines? Which is preferable, the urn life or real life? Note the repetition of the word "happy." Is there irony in this situation?

## **Stanza IV.**

Stanza IV shows the ability of art to stir the imagination, so that the viewer sees more than is portrayed. The poet imagines the village from which the people on the urn came. In this stanza, the poet begins to withdraw from his emotional participation in and identification with life on the urn.

This stanza focuses on communal life (the previous stanzas described individuals). What paradox is implicit in the contrast between the event being a sacrifice and the altar being "green"? between leading the heifer to the sacrifice and her "silken flanks with garlands drest"?

In imagining an empty town, why does he give three possible locations for the town, rather than fix on one location? Why does he use the word "folk," rather than "people"? Think about the different connotations of these words. The image of the silent, desolate town embodies both pain and joy. How is it ironic that not a soul can tell us why the town is empty and that the vase communicates so much to the poet and so to the reader? Is this also paradoxical?



In terms of the theme of pain-joy, what is Keats saying in lines 1-4, which describe the procession? in the rest of the stanza which describes the desolate town? Is he describing a temporary or a permanent condition?

Is the viewer, who is the poet as well as the reader, pulled into the world of the urn?

## **Stanza V.**

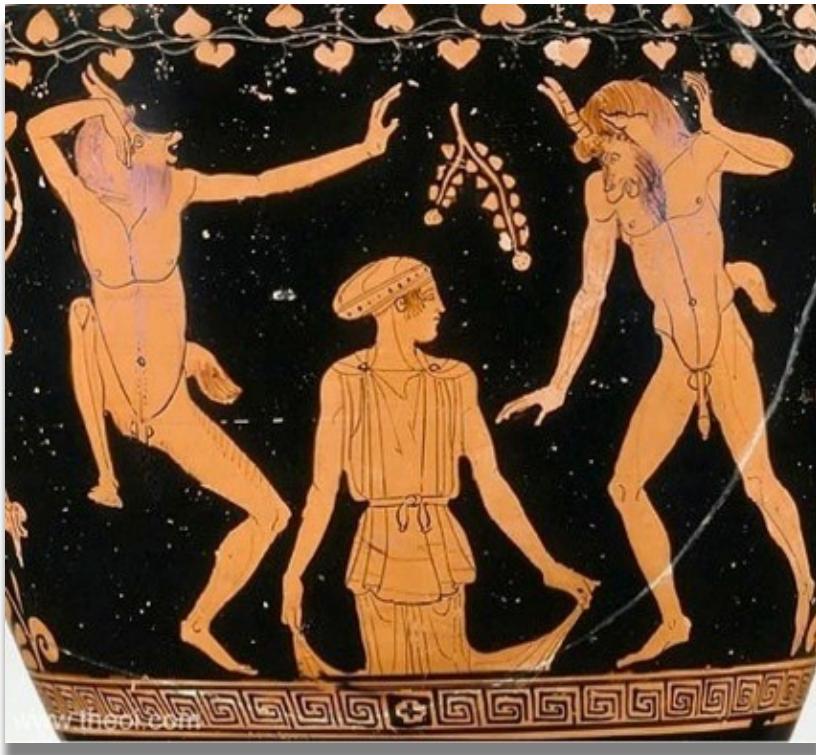
The poet observes the urn as a whole and remembers his vision. Is he emotionally involved in the life of the urn at this point, or is he again the observer? What aspect of the urn is stressed in the phrases "marble men and maidens," "silent form," and "Cold Pastoral"?

Is there a paradox  
in the phrase "Cold  
Pastoral"?

Yet the poet did experience the life experienced on the urn and comments, ambiguously perhaps, that the urn "dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity." Is this another reference to the "dull brain" which "perplexes and retards" ("Ode to a Nightingale")? Why does Keats use the word "tease"? By teasing him "out of thought," did the urn draw him from the real world into an ideal world, where, if there was neither imperfection nor change, there was also no real life or fulfillment? Or, possibly, was the poet so involved in the life of the urn that he couldn't think? Was the urn an escape, however temporary, from the pains and problems of life? One thing that all these suggestions mean is that this is a puzzling line.



In the final couplet, is Keats saying that pain is beautiful? You must decide whether it is the poet (a persona), Keats (the actual poet), or the urn speaking. Are both lines spoken by the same person, or does some of the quotation express the view of one speaker and the rest of the



couplet express the comment upon that view by another speaker? Who is being addressed--the poet, the urn, or the reader? Are the concluding lines a philosophical statement about life or do they make sense only in the context of the poem? Click here to

read the three versions of the last two lines.

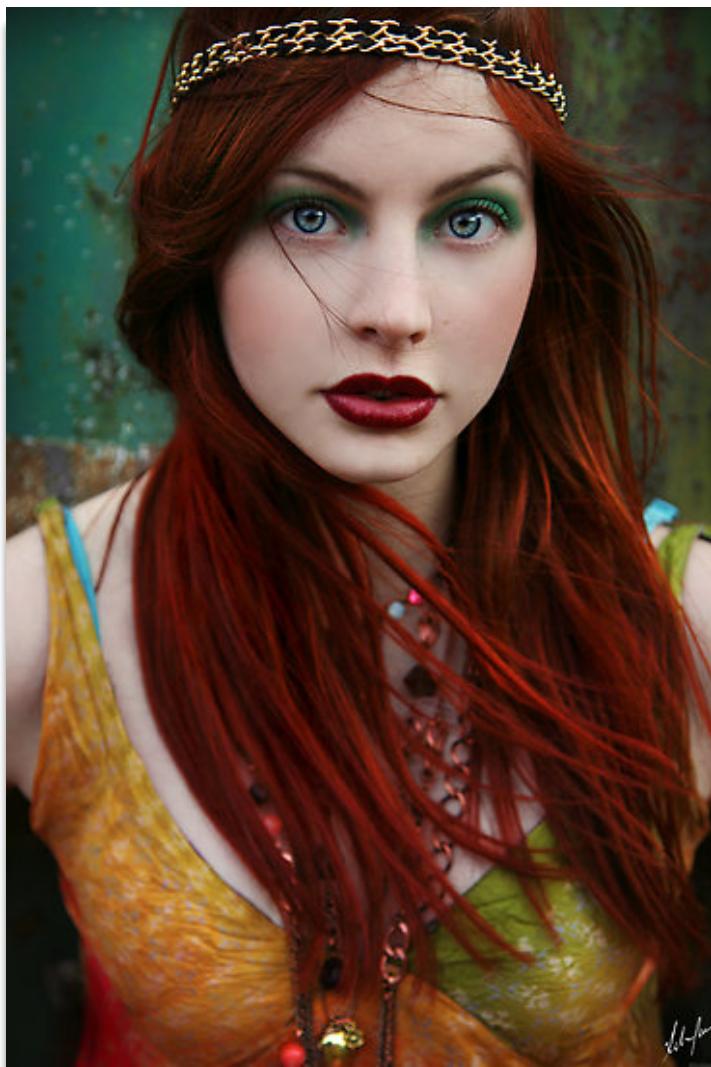
Some critics feel that Keats is saying that Art is superior to Nature. Is Keats thinking or feeling or talking about the urn only as a work of art? Your reading on this issue will be affected by your decision about who is speaking.

No matter how you read the last two lines, do they really mean anything? do they merely sound as if they mean something? or do they speak to some deep part of us that apprehends or feels the meaning but it is an experience/meaning that can't be put into words? Do they make a final statement on the relation of the ideal to the actual? Is the urn rejected at the end? Is art--can art ever be--a substitute for real life?

What, if anything, has the poet learned from his imaginative vision of or daydream participation in the life of the urn?

Does Keats, in this ode, follow the pattern of the romantic ode?

# La Belle Dame Sans Merci



## Part I: The Anonymous Speaker

Most readers take the anonymous speaker at face value: he is a concerned passerby who comes upon the knight accidentally and who describes accurately and factually the condition of the knight and the place where they meet. However, is it possible that the knight's pitiful condition exists only in the mind or perception of the anonymous speaker? We have only his word that the

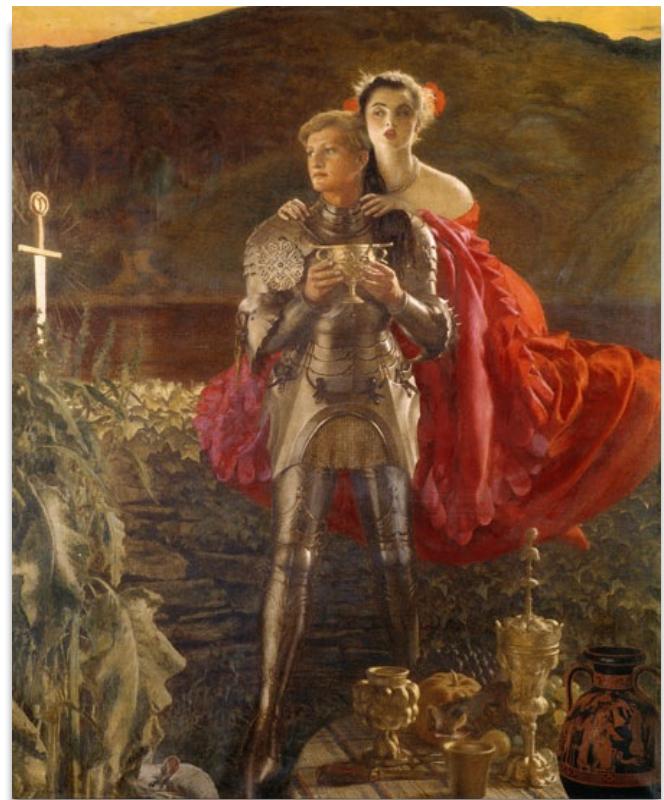
knight looks pale, haggard, woe-begone, etc. To carry this train of thought to an extreme, we could ask whether there really is a knight.

Could this entire poem be the hallucination of a madman? If we accept any of these interpretations of the anonymous speaker, is the meaning of the poem affected? Is the effectiveness of the poem affected?

Do we automatically make assumptions about the speaker? Is the anonymous speaker male? Whether the speaker is male or female, do we assume that the speaker is white? Why? Do these assumptions affect our reading of the poem and its effect on us?

## Stanzas I-II

In the first two lines of stanzas I and II, the anonymous speaker asks a question. The first line of both questions is identical ("O, what can ail thee, knight-at-arms"). The second lines differ somewhat; in stanza I, the question focuses on his physical condition ("Alone and palely loitering"); in stanza II, the question describes both the knight's physical state and his emotional state ("Haggard and woe-begone"). This repetition with slight variation is called incremental repetition and is a characteristic of the folk ballad.



This speaker sees no reason for the knight's presence ("loitering") in such a barren spot (the grass is "wither'd" and no birds sing). Even in this spot, not all life is wasteland, however; the squirrel's winter storage is full, and the harvest has been completed. In other words, there is an alternative or fulfilling life which the knight could choose. Thus lines 3 and 4 of stanzas I and II present contrasting views of life.

## Stanza III

This stanza elaborates on the knight's physical appearance and mental state, which are associated with dying and with nature. In the previous

stanzas, the descriptions of nature are factual; here, nature is used metaphorically. His pallor is compared first to the whiteness of a lily, then to a rose; the rose is "fading" and quickly "withereth." The lily, of course, is a traditional symbol of death; the rose, a symbol of beauty. The knight's misery is suggested by the "dew" or perspiration on his forehead.

What is Keats trying to emphasize by using both "fading" and "fast withereth"? Is there a difference in the effect of "fading," the word Keats uses, and "faded"?

## Part II: The Knight

The knight's narrative consists of three units: stanzas IV-VII describe the knight's meeting and involvement with the lady; stanza VIII presents the climax (he goes with her to the "elfin grot"); the last four stanzas describe his sleep and expulsion from the grotto. Thus, the first four stanzas (IV-VII) are balanced by the last four stanzas (IX-XII). The poem returns to where it started, so that the poem has a circular movement; reinforcing the connection of the opening and the ending, Keats uses the same language.

## Stanzas IV-IX



The roles of the knight and the lady change. In stanzas IV, V, and VI, the knight is dominant; lines 1 and 2 of each stanza describe his actions ("I met," "I made," "I set her"), and lines three and four of these three stanzas focus on the lady.

But a shift in dominance occurs; stanza VII is devoted entirely to the lady ("She found" and "she said"). In stanza VIII the lady initiates the action and takes the dominant position in lines 1 and 2 ("She took me" and "she wept and sigh'd"); the knight's actions are presented in lines three and four. In Stanza IX, she "lull'd" him to sleep (line 1) and he "dream'd." The rest of this stanza and the next two stanzas are about his dream.

### Stanzas X and XI

Eight and a half lines of this poem are devoted to his dream (the poem itself is only 48 lines long) and the last six lines are about the consequences of the dream. The



men he dreams about are all men of power and achievement (kings, princes, and warriors). Their paleness associates them both with the loitering pale knight and with death; in fact, we are told that they are "death-pale." The description of her former lovers, with their starved

lips and gaping mouths, is chilling. Is it appropriate that he awakens from this dream to a "cold" hill?

Can a political meaning be read into the poem based on the fact the fact that the men in his dream are all kings, princes, and warriors? Or is there a simpler explanation for their status? The knight is of their kind and class, so naturally he dreams of men like himself. Perhaps La Belle Dame sans Merci is attracted to this kind of man. Or Keats may merely be imitating the folk ballad, which is a traditional and conservative form and tends to observe class lines.

## Stanza XII

The knight uses the word "sojourn," which implies he will be there for some time. The repetition of language from stanza I also reinforces the sense of no movement in connection with the knight. Ironically, although he is not moving physically, he has "moved" or been emotionally ravaged by his dream or vision.



## The Significance of *La Belle Dame sans Merci*

Whereas the impact of the lady on the knight is clear, her character remains shadowy. Why? You have a number of possibilities to choose among; which one you choose will be determined by how you read the poem.

1. We see the lady only through the knight's eyes, and he didn't know her. As a human being, he cannot fully understand the non- mortal; she is a "faery's child," sings a "faery's song," and takes him to an "elfin grot." She speaks "in language strange" (VII). Whether she speaks a language unknown to the knight or merely had an unfamiliar pronunciation, the phrase suggests a problem in, if not a failure of communication. They are incompatible by nature.

2. The references to "faery" and "elfin" suggest enchantment or imagination. Her "sweet moan" and "song" represent art inspired by imagination. The lady, symbolising imagination, takes him to an ideal world. The knight becomes enraptured by or totally absorbed in the pleasures of the imagination--the delicious foods, her song, her beauty, her love or favour ("and nothing else saw all day long"). But the imagination or visionary experience is fleeting; the human being cannot



live in this realm, a fact which the dreamer chooses to ignore. The knight's refusal to let go of the joys of the imagination destroys his life in the real world.

Or is she possibly the cheating or false imagination, not true imagination? Does the food she gives him starve rather than nourish him? The men in his vision have "starved lips." Think of the ending of "Ode to a Nightingale" with its "deceiving imp."

3. This possibility is a variant of choice #2. The lady represents the ideal, and the poem is about the relationship of the real and the ideal. The knight rejects the real world with its real fulfillments for an ideal which cannot exist in the real world. In giving himself entirely to the dream of the ideal, he destroys his life in the real world.

4. The lady is evil and belongs to a tradition of "femmes fatales." She seduces him with her beauty, with her accomplishments, with her avowal of love, and with sensuality ("roots of relish sweet, / And honey wild, and manna dew"). The vision of the pale men suggests she is deliberately destructive. The destructiveness of love is a common theme in the folk ballad.

5. Is the knight self-deluded? Does he enthrall himself by placing her on his horse and making garlands for her? The knight ignores warning signs: she has "wild wild" eyes, she gives him "wild" honey, she avows her love "in language strange," and she "wept and sigh'd full sore" in the elfin grotto. Also he continues to desire her, despite the wasteland he finds himself in and despite the warning of his dream.



## Bright Star

Keats wrote "Bright Star" in 1819 and revised it in 1820, perhaps on the (final) voyage to Italy. Friends and his doctor had urged him to try a common treatment for tuberculosis, a trip to Italy; however, Keats was aware that he was dying. Some critics have theorized that this poem was addressed to his fiance, Fanny Brawne, and connect the poem to his May 3, 1818 letter to her.

## Definitions and Allusions in 'Bright Star'

<b>Line 1</b>	Bright star, would I were <b>stedfast</b> as thou art--	<b>Unchanging, constant</b>
<b>Line 2</b>	Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night!	<b>Above, high over the earth.</b> Keats is pointing out the star's isolation, as well as a positive quality, its splendour. Its separateness contrasts with the poet's relationship with his beloved later.
<b>Line 3</b>	And watching, with eternal <b>lids</b> apart,	<b>Eyelids.</b> The star's isolation is implicit in its watching and in its not participating. It never sleeps. There is also a lack of motion in these lines.
<b>Line 4</b>	Like nature's patient, sleepless <b>Eremite</b> ,	<b>Hermit, usually with a religious connotation.</b> Emphasising the star's sleeplessness is part of the characterisation of the star's non-humanness, which makes it an impossible goal for a human being to aspire to.
<b>Line 5</b>	The moving waters at their priestlike task	The rise and the fall of the tides twice a day are seen as a religiously performed ritual. With the poem's shift to earth, there is movement and aliveness, as well as spirituality ("priestlike").
<b>Line 6</b>	Of <b>pure ablution</b> round earth's human shores,	<b>A religious cleaning; ritual washing.</b> This reference continues the religious imagery of "Eremite" and "priestlike." "Human" is what the poet is and the star is not.
<b>Line 7</b>	Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask	The "mask" is the covering of snow on the ground. This snow has pleasing connotations, being "new" and "soft." All the moon can do is "gaze."
<b>Line 8</b>	Of snow upon the mountains and the moors-	Beauty (the snow) is found in diverse places on earth. The alliteration (repetition of M sounds) stresses the connection of these words.
<b>Line 9</b>	No--yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,	The poet turns again to himself; "Still" has two meanings here: (1) always or ever and (2) motionless.
<b>Line 10</b>	Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,	Movement and change in human life are introduced with "ripening," a contrast to the star.

<b>Line 11</b>	To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,	"Fall and swell" are also change and movement . "Soft" intensifies the sensuality introduced with "pillow'd."
<b>Line 12</b>	Awake for ever in a sweet unrest	In contrast to the eternal sleeplessness and motionlessness of the star, the poet's not sleeping is active ("awake"). Now change or flux becomes desireable, <b>"sweet unrest," an oxymoron.</b>
<b>Line 13</b>	Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,	Repetition ("still" is used 4 times in 5 lines) emphasizes time/timelessness for human beings. "Breath" is flux, and "tender" makes it positive.
<b>Line 14</b>	And so live ever--or else swoon to death.	Three of the last four lines use "for ever" or "ever," emphasizing steadfastness in time or eternity, but it is an eternity of love, passion and sensuality. In a swift reversal, the poet accepts the possibility of dying from pleasure. "Swoon" has sexual overtones; orgasm is often compared to a dying (the French term for orgasm is le petit morte, or the small death). Because of its position as the last word in the poem and because of being an <b>accented syllable</b> , "death" carries a great deal of weight in the final effect and meaning of the poem.

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?