

Keats' Poetry for AQA E-Lit B Tragedy

Lamia, Isabella, the Eve of St Agnes, and La Belle Dame Sans Merci

Negative Capability refers to the inherent uncertainty and contrasts that are perhaps atypical, illogical, and/or confusing to the reader. It celebrates the concept that art should not be rational but purely aesthetic

Lamia

Lamia bribes Hermes to turn her from her serpentine form to her human form. She then woos Lycius with her charm and takes him to a palace that she builds with her illusions. There they spend time together and Lycius wishes to marry her. Lamia isn't pleased, but only requests that his teacher, Apollonius, must not be invited.

The wedding is lavish and attended by many. Lycius ignores Lamia's request and allows Apollonius anyways. Apollonius sees through Lamia's form which causes her to vanish. Lycius, heartbroken, dies too

The poem's tragedy lies in the triumph of wisdom over love. Although Apollonius is the obvious villain, Lycius too plays a partially villainous role (at least in the domestic figure), by enjoying the suffering he imposes on her. Lycius repeatedly denies Lamia's wishes and does what he wishes, even on their wedding day. It is difficult to say whether Lamia's flaw was that she loved Lycius, or her serpentine nature. This account seems to subvert the original tale* and no coherent parallels can be made. Ultimately, wisdom kills love.

* The Life of Apollonius of Tyana, Book IV, Chapter XXV

Key Quotes

- She was a gordian shape of dazzling hue, Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue; Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard, Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson barr'd
- some [...] lady elf, Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self.
- Her mouth foam'd [...] convulsed with scarlet pain
- A virgin purest lip'd, yet in the lore Of love deep learned to the red heart's core: Not one hour old, yet of sciential brain To unperplex bliss From its neighbor pain;
- He did, not with cold wonder fearingly, But Orpheus-like at an Eurydice;
- soon his eyes had drunk her beauty up, Leaving no drop [...] And still the cup was full
- Ah, Goddess, see Whether my eyes can ever turn from thee! [...] Even as thou vanishest so I shall die.
- So threw the goddess off, and won his heart More pleasantly by playing woman's part
- 'I'm wearied,' said fair Lamia: 'tell me who is that old man?
- That purple-lined palace of sweet sin
- How to entangle, trammel up and snare Your soul in mine, and labyrinth you there, Like the hid scent in an unbudded rose?
- with stronger fancy to reclaim Her wild and timid nature to his aim [...] Against his better self; he took delight Luxurious in her sorrows, soft and new
- Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings, Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
- Lamia, what means this? Wherefore dost thou start? Know'st thou that man!
- Shut, shut those juggling eyes, thou ruthless man!
- From every ill Of life have I preserved thee to this day, And shall I see thee made a serpent's prey?
- with a frightful scream she vanished: And Lycius' arms were empty of delight,
- no pulse or breath they found, And, in its marriage robe, the [...] heavy body wound



John William Waterhouse

Isabella or, The Pot of Basil

Isabella is a young woman who is in love with Lorenzo, a servant under her brothers. They, who had intended to marry Isabella off to a wealthy suitor, discovers this forbidden love, kills Lorenzo and buries him.

Lorenzo's ghost visits Isabella and tells her of his fate, and asks her to cry at his tomb. Isabella then goes to the forest in secret with a maid, digs up Lorenzo, cuts his head, and puts it in a pot of Basil. The brothers discover Lorenzo's head, and flees with the pot in fear of discovery. Isabella eventually dies of heartbreak.

The tragedy of this poem is two-fold. One, it shows how the Capitalist world corrupts the private sphere; Two, it shows the moral decline in those absorbed with Capitalism. The brothers, who only intended Isabella to be a business transaction, are horrified at the scandalous love that blooms between Lorenzo and Isabella. Throughout the poem, men hold power—as shown by the brothers who kill Lorenzo, and Lorenzo's ghost who asks Isabella to cry at his grave. The end is bittersweet, Isabella's heartbreak leads to her death, but the two may now be reunited forever.

Key Quotes

- Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel!
- They could not, sure, beneath the same roof sleep
- O may I never see another night, Lorenzo, if thy lips breath not love's tune.
- I will drink her tears
- Alas! when passion is both meek and wild
- I would not grieve Thy hand by unwelcome pressing, would not fear Thine eyes by gazing
- there is richest juice in poison-flowers
- A thousand men in troubles wide and dark.
- When 'twas their plan to coax her by degrees To some high noble and his olive-trees.
- They dipp'd their swords in the water
- So sweet Isabel By gradual decay from beauty fell
- And every night in dreams they groan'd aloud, To see their sister in her snowy shroud.
- Go, shed one tear upon my heather-bloom, And it shall comfort me within the tomb
- But there is crime—a brother's bloody knife!
- what good can thee betide That thou shouldst smile again?
- throw back at times her veiling hair:
- With duller steel than the Persean sword They cut away no formless monster's head
- 'Twas love, cold-dead indeed, but not dethroned
- Hung over her sweet Basil ever more, And moisten'd it with tears unto the core.
- As bird on wing to breast its eggs again
- Away they went, With blood upon their heads, to banishment
- And so she pined, and so she died



William Holman Hunt

The Eve of St. Agnes

The Eve of St. Agnes is a night where women would dream of their future husband. Madeline is a young woman who follows this tradition as her family feasts in their palace. Porphyro, a young man from a rival family, sneaks into the palace, and into Madeline's room with the help of the nurse.

He, overcome by passion, presumably, consummates his love for Madeline. Madeline only believes it was the dream until she awakens and is partially disappointed that reality is not as pleasing as the dream. She does, ultimately, run away with Porphyro, albeit with ambiguity of their fate.

Key Quotes

- Numb were the Beadsman's fingers
- The carved angels, ever eager-eyed, Stared, where upon their heads the cornice rests, With hair blown back, and wings put cross-wise on their breasts
- Came many a tiptoe, amorous cavalier
- Meantime, across the moors, Had come young Porphyro, with heart on fire
- That he might gaze and worship all unseen, Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss
- not one breast affords Him any mercy
- They are all here to-night, the whole bloodthirsty race!
- A cruel man and impious thou art: [...] wicked men like thee [...] Thou canst not surely be the same that thou didst seem
- And win perhaps that night a peerless bride
- She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest, Save wings, for heaven
- Unclass her warmed jewels one by one, Loosens her fragrant bodice, by degrees Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees



William Holman Hunt

The Eve of St. Agnes (contd.)

The tragedy of this poem is of Madeline. The once heroic, knight in shining armour, character of Porphyro soon falls victim to his own lust, highlighting the negative capability of the poem. Although the initial purpose of this pursuit is perhaps noble, Porphyro's downfall is that he falls from his heroic grace to take a more villainous, lusty identity.

Madeline's lack of agency in the consummation, and disappointment further highlights the tragic power imbalance and loss of the poem

Key Quotes

- Open thine eyes, for meek St. Agnes' sake, Or I shall drowse beside thee
- There was a painful change, that nigh expell'd The blisses of her dream so pure and deep
- How changed thou art! how pallid, chill, and drear!
- Cruel! what traitor could thee hither bring? I curse not, for my heart is lost in thine, Though thou forsakest a deceived thing- A dove forlorn and lost
- There are no ears to hear, or eyes to see - Drown'd all in Rhenish and the sleepy mead
- The wakeful bloodhound rose, and shook his hide, But his sagacious eye
- And they are gone: ay, ages long ago These lovers fled away into the storm.



La Belle Dame Sans Merci

A bypasser sees a knight on the hill side, who seems near death, and asks him what ails him. The knight, in response, tells the tale of his endeavour with this faery child. The faery child, "full beautiful", is intimate with the knight and then takes him to her "elfin grot". She confesses her love for him, feeds him, weeps, and even lulls him to sleep.

In his sleep, the knight dreams of pale kings and princes who all warm him of the *Beautiful Lady with No Mercy*. The knight awakens out of fear and finds himself at the cold hill side and loiters there pale and alone.

The tragic roles of this poem are ambiguous. The faery is a *femme fatale*, someone who seemingly seduces the knight and hurts him, perhaps fatally. It is, however, difficult to blame either character for the tragedy. The knight seems to be proud and overly confident. He approaches an unknown woman, interprets love from her, and is intimate with her. In that sense, the faery is merely a tool in this self-caused tragedy. However, the greater image of her as a merciless seductive villain, who inflicts emotional toll on the knight, implies her agency in the tragedy.

Key Quotes

- Alone and palely loitering?
- The sedge has withered from the lake
- The squirrel's granary is full And the harvest's done
- I see a lily on thy brow
- Full beautiful-a faery's child Her hair was long [...] And her eyes were wild
- She looked at me as she did love, And made sweet moan
- I set her on my pacing steed
- Saw nothing else all day long
- She found me roots of relish sweet, And honey wild, and manna dew
- Sure in language strange she said-'I love thee true'
- She took me to her Elfín grot
- There she wept and sighed full sore
- There she lulled me asleep
- I saw pale Kings and princes too, Pale warriors, death-pale were they all
- La Belle Dame sans Merci Thee hath in thrall!
- Starved lips [...] With horrid warning gaped wide

