A thing of beauty is a joy for ever (from

POEM TEXT

A Poetic Romance

(excerpt)

BOOK I

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.
Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing
A flowery band to bind us to the earth,
Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth
Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,
Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways
Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all,
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
From our dark spirits. Such the sun, the moon,
Trees old, and young sprouting a shady boon
For simple sheep; and such are daffodils
With the green world they live in; and clear rills
That for themselves a cooling covert make
'Gainst the hot season; the mid forest brake,
Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms:
And such too is the grandeur of the dooms
We have imagined for the mighty dead;
All lovely tales that we have heard or read:
An endless fountain of immortal drink,
Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink.

Nor do we merely feel these essences
For one short hour; no, even as the trees
That whisper round a temple become soon
Dear as the temple's self, so does the moon,
The passion poesy, glories infinite,
Haunt us till they become a cheering light
Unto our souls, and bound to us so fast,
That, whether there be shine, or gloom o'ercast,
They always must be with us, or we die.

Therefore, 'tis with full happiness that I
Will trace the story of Endymion.
The very music of the name has gone
Into my being, and each pleasant scene
Is growing fresh before me as the green
Of our own vallies: so I will begin
Now while I cannot hear the city's din;
Now while the early budders are just new,
And run in mazes of the youngest hue
About old forests; while the willow trails
Its delicate amber; and the dairy pails
Bring home increase of milk. And, as the year
Grows lush in juicy stalks, I'll smoothly steer
My little boat, for many quiet hours,
With streams that deepen freshly into bowers.
Many and many a verse I hope to write,
Before the daisies, vermeil rimm'd and white,
Hide in deep herbage; and ere yet the bees
Hum about globes of clover and sweet peas,
I must be near the middle of my story.
O may no wintry season, bare and hoary,
See it half finished: but let Autumn bold,
With universal tinge of sober gold,
Be all about me when I make an end.
And now at once, adventuresome, I send
My herald thought into a wilderness:
There let its trumpet blow, and quickly dress
My uncertain path with green, that I may speed
Easily onward, thorough flowers and weed.

SUMMARY

A beautiful thing gives endless joy. Its beauty only grows; it will never die; it will always make a safe place for us, where we can enjoy peaceful, healthy, quiet sleep. Thus, every morning, we make wreaths of flowers that keep us tied to this world—in spite of misery, in spite of the sad lack of great souls, in spite of bad days, in spite of all the dark, muddy paths we have to walk down in our lives. Yes, in spite of all that, some vision of beauty lifts the dark cloud away from our sad spirits. We see this beauty in the sun and the moon; in old trees and young saplings growing leaves to shade innocent sheep; in daffodils and their grassy world; in clear streams that make a cool, secret path for themselves through the hot summer; in clearings in the woods full of blooming musk-roses. We find beauty, too, in the great

tales we tell of long-gone heroes, and in all the wonderful stories we've heard or read: they offer us an immortal spring of refreshing water, pouring down to us from the heavens.

And we don't just enjoy such beauties for a little while. No: just as we come to love the trees around a temple as much as we love the temple itself, we feel that the moon, the love of poetry, all these endless glories stay with us, shining a heartening light on our souls. They're so close to us that, whether we're in a time of sunshine or rain, we feel them always—or else, we die.

I'm thus full of happiness as I prepare to tell the story of Endymion. The lovely sound of his name is in my soul, and I can see the beautiful scenes of his story opening up before me, plain as the English valleys. I'll start writing now that I'm far away from all the city's noise and fuss; now that the first flowers are budding, making patterns of fresh color that wander through the old trees; now that the willow tree hangs delicate amber leaves down; now that the dairy pails overflow with more and more milk. As the year turns to lush, grassy summer, I'll quietly guide the little boat of my poem hour after hour down streams that pass through tunnels of green leaves. I hope to write many verses before the fresh daisies, with their red-rimmed white petals, are hidden in the grass—and before the bees are murmuring among the clover and sweetpeas, I should be about halfway through. I pray that my poem won't be half-finished when the frosty, stark winter comes: rather, may Autumn, with its grand gold colors, be around me when I finish writing. With that, like an adventurer, I send my first thought out into the wilderness as if it were a messenger. Let it blow its trumpet and make the unknown path ahead of me sprout with grasses so that I can go swiftly on, making my way through the greenery.

THEMES

THE REDEMPTIVE POWER OF BEAUTY

In its famous first line, Keats's *Endymion* makes a fervent statement of belief: "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever." The opening stanzas of this long poem declare that, whether beauty appears in the face of the moon or in a poem, it offers humanity indestructible consolation, healing, and courage. In fact, the poem suggests, beauty might be the only thing that can give people the will to go on living in a disappointing, depressing, and imperfect world. To Keats, beauty isn't merely decorative or distracting, but life-sustaining.

Beauty, the poem's speaker says, offers consolation and redemption when nothing else can. Those who experience beauty in the natural world ("the sun, the moon," "daffodils / With the green world they live in") or in art ("all lovely tales that we have heard or read") are forever changed by it. Beauty helps people to endure all the world's sufferings and disappointments; "spite of despondence" (that is, in spite of deep unhappiness), they can always return to the metaphorical leafy "bower" that beauty builds within them, a place that offers "sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing" when nothing else can.

Beauty, therefore, isn't a fleeting, flimsy pleasure that occupies "one short hour," briefly entertaining people or distracting them from their troubles. Rather, a beautiful thing is an immortal "joy for ever," a permanent refuge whose "loveliness increases" in memory rather than fading away. Having once experienced a great beauty, in other words, people carry the feeling it gave them always. The experience of beauty thus "bind[s] us to the earth," keeping people dedicated to existence even as they walk down the "unhealthy and o'er-darkened" paths that make up so much of life's journey. There's nothing frivolous about loveliness: *without* beauty, the speaker soberly observes, "we die."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-33

NATURE, CREATIVITY, AND POETRY

The prologue to Keats's *Endymion* connects artistry to the natural world. Both art and nature, the speaker suggests, come alive in an organic, seasonal way, growing at their own speed and to their own innate rhythms. These first stanzas hint that poetry in particular should come (as Keats once put it) "as naturally as the leaves to a tree." Writing poetry, in other words, means tuning into deep-rooted instinct and letting one's art *grow*, not imposing some rigid idea on one's material.

As he begins his long poem, Keats imagines how his verses will progress through the seasons. He'll start in the spring "while the early budders are just new," write all through the summer as the grass "grows lush in juicy stalks," and (with any luck) finish up in autumn when a "tinge of sober gold" colors the landscape. These images suggest that the poem (and perhaps the poet) will grow and mature just as the natural world does, moving from bright, energetic, youthful freshness to a solemn but lovely maturity.

Poetry, then, is ideally something that grows according to its own innate pattern, as plants do. Keats pictures beginning his poem by sending out a "herald thought" (a messenger-idea), a figure whose "trumpet" makes greenery sprout underfoot, creating a gentle poetic path for Keats to follow. This image suggests that the poet's job is to nourish a poem's natural growth, not to bend the verses to their own will. The poem's lines, in Keats's vision, might be *summoned* by the poet, but they'll spring up with their own life, as organically as grass.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 34-62

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

BEFORE LINE 1

A Poetic Romance

(excerpt)

Endymion was the Romantic poet John Keats's first big, ambitious project, a book-length telling of the Greek myth in which the goddess of the moon falls in love with a sleeping shepherd. As the 21-year-old Keats saw it, writing a long narrative poem on a classical subject was a test of his artistic mettle, a way to aim for the greatness of Milton or Chaucer. The poem's very form suggests the scope of Keats's ambition here:

- Endymion is written (for the most part) in heroic couplets—paired rhyming lines of iambic pentameter.
- That means that each line uses five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm: "A thing | of beau- | ty is | a joy | for ever." (The extra unstressed syllable on the end there is known as a feminine ending, a softening effect that Keats often reaches for in *Endymion*.)
- This is the same form that Chaucer used in *The Canterbury Tales* and the form in which Keats would have encountered English translations of the Greek epics the *Aeneid* and the *Odyssey*. Grand company!

Endymion was thus both Keats's creative challenge to himself and his declaration to the world—a way of saying, "Hello, I'm John Keats, and I'm on the road to glory." This "Poetic Romance' (not a love story, but a fantastical quest tale, though a love story forms part of that tale) was made to be his making.

However, Keats's ambition to be, as he once wrote, "among the English poets after my death" was far from his only motive in writing this poem. Keats truly adored Greek myth, and he loved poetry with joy, awe, and fervor. Though Keats would look back on *Endymion* as an adolescent embarrassment, the poem nonetheless captured a lot of the qualities that would make Keats, Keats: sensuous delight, a longing for enchantment, an awed curiosity about the workings of art, and a deep faith in beauty.

The lines this guide examines form Keats's introduction to the poem proper, a preface that explains why and how the author is going to write the rest of the thing. A young man's work the poem may be, but the first lines ring with conviction—and have become some of the most famous verses in the English language.

LINES 1-5

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

Endymion begins with a declaration of faith:

> A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:

Readers may very well have heard these words before, extracted from their context and worn down into a hoary old proverb. Stay with the idea for a moment, though, and its boldness will come back to life.

Treating beauty as something eternal, Keats cuts across the grain of centuries of literary convention. Beauty is more traditionally depicted as precious, fragile, and fleeting, requiring a kind of poetic pickling if it's going to last. Think about Shakespeare's famous Sonnet 18, for instance, in which the beauty of the seasons and the beauty of a beloved, however overpowering, inevitably fade. Lucky beloved, though: here comes Shakespeare to write an immortal *poem* that will preserve those fleeting beauties forever.

Though Keats is making his claim about beauty *in* a poem—and will go on to suggest that a poem can be one of those eternal things of beauty—he's *not* saying that art is the only way to make beauty last. A "thing of beauty," he insists, has a staying power of its own. It's a "joy for ever," words that might equally suggest that a thing of beauty provides eternal joy and that it is *itself* eternal.

In fact:

> Its loveliness increases; it will never
> Pass into nothingness; [...]

That is, not only does a thing of beauty never fade, it only gets *more* beautiful with time.

Now, a literal-minded person might offer the objection that any "thing" certainly *will* pass into nothingness, one time or another: roses wilt, people die, landscapes change, and even marble statues erode back into mere stones someday. What the speaker describes here must be some experience of beauty that *emerges* from the physical world, but also transcends it. A "thing of beauty" is a "joy for ever" because of the effect it has on people, because of the way it stays with people, because of the way one's pleasure in it deepens in memory.

Even the way that Keats frames these first ideas suggests that he knows he's saying something bold. Take a look at the way

lines 1-3 take shape:

> A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
> Its loveliness increases; || it will never
> Pass into nothingness; || but still will keep

The central belief from which the poem will hang—"a thing of beauty is a joy for ever"—gets its own solid end-stopped line. The next lines are enjambed, but also contain firm statements set off by bold semicolon caesurae. This shape invites readers to spend time with each of the speaker's big assertions, but also to see them as part of a continuous, gathering idea.

Beauty doesn't just find a home in people's minds, though. It also builds a home (or perhaps a temple) for them. A thing of beauty:

> [...] still will keep
> A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
> Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet
> breathing.

In this image, beauty becomes a leafy resting place, offering restorative, peaceful sleep and seeding new "sweet dreams." Beauty, in other words, heals and inspires and nourishes, and it makes a permanently safe and lovely place in a person's mind and heart.

If that's true, then beauty isn't just an ephemeral distraction, but a matter of huge importance.

LINES 6-13

> *Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing*
> *A flowery band to bind us to the earth,*
> *Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth*
> *Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,*
> *Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways*
> *Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all,*
> *Some shape of beauty moves away the pall*
> *From our dark spirits.*

Beauty, the poem's opening lines declared, builds a quiet "bower" in people's souls, giving them a place to retreat and rest. That doesn't mean, however, that beauty merely provides an *escape* from the world's troubles. No, the speaker goes on, in seeking beauty, we're:

> [...] wreathing
> A flowery band to bind us to the earth,

Beauty, in this metaphor, is a way that people keep themselves tied to the world, not a way for them to get away from it. The tight internal slant rhyme between "band" and "bind" suggests that this apparently ephemeral garland manages to hold us tight.

That's lucky, the poem argues, because this band needs to keep people on the ground despite serious problems. It's *hard*, the speaker says, to go on living in this imperfect place.

The struggles the speaker singles out here paint a picture of his character, not just his world. The particular things he finds depressing are:

- A downright "inhuman" lack of "noble natures"—that is, a lack of great spirits, of good people. People, the speaker seems to feel, have the potential for glory. But they often sadly waste it in a lowly inhumanity, a failure to live up to everything a person could be. These are the words of a disappointed idealist.
- The "unhealthy and o'er-darkened" paths that people have to find their way on. Besides suggesting that life's journey is more often confusing, difficult, and uncomfortable than not, this line hints at the awful burden of illness (which Keats knew well—he trained as a doctor and lost a mother and a brother to tuberculosis).
- "Gloomy days," words which might suggest both unhappy brooding and plain old bad weather, times when it just isn't much fun to be in the world.
- And, last but not least, good old "despondence": there's nothing more depressing than the fact that the world contains so many reasons to feel depressed.

It would all be enough to make you wonder why to stick around at all, if "some shape of beauty" weren't there to lift the "pall" from your soul. A "pall" can be either a dark cloud or a gravecloth, and both of those metaphors are relevant here: beauty lets the light through, and it undoes what might otherwise feel like a living death.

Withdrawing to the inner bower that beauty builds, the speaker thus suggests, isn't at all an escapist retreat or an indulgence reserved for dreamy poets with time on their hands. On the contrary, experiences of beauty help people to be brave, to confront the world's inevitable sorrows and horrors without just lying down and giving up. Beauty offers courage, endurance, healing, and *rest*—a dream-filled sleep that gives people the strength to go out and face another day in the murky world.

LINES 13-19

> *Such the sun, the moon,*
> *Trees old, and young sprouting a shady boon*
> *For simple sheep; and such are daffodils*
> *With the green world they live in; and clear rills*
> *That for themselves a cooling covert make*
> *'Gainst the hot season; the mid forest brake,*
> *Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms:*

The speaker has suggested that beauty isn't just a solace and an

escape, but also a kind of flowery safety belt that keeps people on the planet when they'd rather just give up and get out. Now, he points out that beauty isn't hard to find, either. It will begin making its place in your soul the moment you go outside.

In this passage, the speaker lists some of the places where eternal beauty lives, and he starts with sights people might see just about every day: "the sun, the moon." The unadorned language here—no adjectives, no "glorious sun" or "silvery moon," just "the sun, the moon"—suggests a simple, matter-of-fact awe. The sun and the moon are in some sense the most ordinary things we know. Yet, equally, they're flabbergasting, astonishing, utterly lovely.

Having neatly made the point that the most fundamental, universal, and everyday sights in nature are glorious, the speaker starts to settle down into some more specific images of what seems to be Keats's own native landscape, the English countryside. Again, there's nothing extraordinary about the things he describes, and yet there's *everything* extraordinary about them if one just stops and looks at them for a moment. He pictures a forest of mixed trees, old and young alike, growing new leaves growing to shelter sheep. He pictures the "cooling covert" (or cool, sheltered place) that "clear rills," little brooks, make in summer.

In these images, nature is personified, protective, and creative. The trees shade the sheep as if that were their kind intention all along, and the brooks, in making "for themselves" a space of cool moisture, also offer the human wanderer relief: as the speaker imaginatively enters the life of that water, it feels as if he's also physically entering it, relishing the coolness on his own skin.

He gets right down beside the "daffodils / With the green world they live in." To a daffodil, the speaker sees, the whole world is the place where you grow—a "green world" that feels simultaneously vast and safe, like a restored Eden. The speaker's eye, here, moves from gazing at the yellow flowers themselves to seeing as they see, immersed in nature.

Again, there's nothing extraordinary about these sights, and there's *everything* extraordinary about these sights. The speaker's sensuous imagery suggests that all you have to do to harvest this kind of beauty is go outside and pay attention.

His last example—clearings in the woods adorned with "a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms"—might also hint at where he's going next. While this more conventional image isn't quite as arresting as the daffodils and their green world, the reference to the "musk-rose" links this passage to a speech from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that Keats would subtly allude to more than once in his poetic life. As the next lines will show, art, as well as nature, has restorative beauties to offer.

LINES 20-24

And such too is the grandeur of the dooms
We have imagined for the mighty dead;
All lovely tales that we have heard or read:
An endless fountain of immortal drink,
Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink.

Having described all the abundant natural beauty that might make life worth living, the speaker turns to the beauty of art. Stories and poems, like the sun and the brooks and the greenery, help to build that inner bower.

The speaker thinks first of great epics: the "grandeur of the dooms" (that is, the fates) of the "mighty dead." That might at first seem like an odd juxtaposition with the natural images above: where nature's everyday beauty is always at one's fingertips, the "mighty dead" feel more remote, more obviously extraordinary. In a world that suffers from a disappointing "dearth / Of noble natures," tales of fated heroes might seem far away.

That makes one particular word in these lines feel important:

> And such too is the grandeur of the dooms
> We have **imagined** for the mighty dead;

You don't only find beauty by immersing yourself in what's there, in other words. You can also find it by reaching out to what *isn't* there, by imagining beyond the limits of the ordinary. Dreams of heroic figures offer a kind of beauty one might only sometimes glimpse in daily life.

Of course, art also offers loveliness: "all lovely tales that we have heard or read" can create a quiet bower of beauty. Not only a bower, either. In the closing lines of this first stanza, the speaker introduces a new metaphor for what beauty offers us:

> An **endless fountain** of immortal drink,
> Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink.

The image of an "endless fountain" pouring from the heavens stresses that beauty is a "joy for ever," an unstoppable source of refreshment, miraculously pouring out whenever people need it. Perhaps this deathless fountain also alludes to the nectar of the Greek gods—a mythological drink that conferred immortality on those who consumed it.

Here at the end of the first stanza, then, the speaker has made a fervent case for beauty. Beauty isn't just decorative or escapist: it's life-giving and life-saving.

LINES 25-33

Nor do we merely feel these essences
For one short hour; no, even as the trees
That whisper round a temple become soon
Dear as the temple's self, so does the moon,

The passion poesy, glories infinite,
Haunt us till they become a cheering light
Unto our souls, and bound to us so fast,
That, whether there be shine, or gloom o'ercast,
They always must be with us, or we die.

As the short second stanza begins, the speaker seems to anticipate an objection. No, he says, no matter what you might think, people don't "merely feel these essences / For one short hour." Beauty isn't just a temporary distraction from the tough world, in other words—it isn't something that you can only appreciate while you're directly experiencing it.

He uses a curious simile to explain why that's so:

> [...] no, even as the trees
> That whisper round a temple become soon
> Dear as the temple's self, so does the moon,

In other words, the things that are *near* a beauty become somehow *part* of that beauty, touched by it. The sacred beauty of the temple overflows into the trees around it; the experience of a "thing of beauty," likewise, overflows into your later life.

This poem here introduces a "temple" with as much casual familiarity as it introduced daffodils and sheep a moment ago—*You know how it is when you start to like the trees around a temple as much as the temple, right?* This will be the first of many times that the Greek and English worlds mingle in Keats's imagination and in Keats's poem. Planting an image of something mysterious and holy in the middle of a familiar landscape, this moment might mirror what a "thing of beauty" does in more than one way, creating sacred space in and around the ordinary.

The beauty here might be "the passion poesy"—words that might suggest a love *for* poetry, or that might imagine poetry itself as a kind of passion, a feeling: love, pain, poetry. It might be "the moon," the beauty of which the speaker alluded to earlier (and a hint at just how important the moon will be in the poem's story: it's the goddess of the moon, remember, who will fall in love with the sleeping Endymion). Or it might be one of any number of "glories infinite."

Keats piles metaphor upon metaphor to describe how these beauties stay with us:

- They "haunt us," like ghosts: even when they're not right in front of us, they seem to hover nearby.
- They "become a cheering light," a glow that illuminates all those "o'er-darkened ways" we have to walk.
- And, not only do they "bind us to the earth," they're "bound to us," so tightly that they're never far away.

Beauty and the good it offers, in other words, stay with people no matter what. If they somehow don't, the speaker goes on—if people lose sight of any idea of beauty in the world—the consequences are simple and dire: "we die." The word "die" lands so hard that, for a moment, it hangs in midair without a partner: this stanza breaks off short, right in the middle of a couplet.

LINES 34-39

Therefore, 'tis with full happiness that I
Will trace the story of Endymion.
The very music of the name has gone
Into my being, and each pleasant scene
Is growing fresh before me as the green
Of our own vallies:

The speaker has just finished solemnly declaring that, without beauty, "we die." He perks up considerably as he completes his rhymed couplet at the beginning of a new stanza:

> Therefore, 'tis with full happiness that I
> Will trace the story of Endymion.
> The very music of the name has gone
> Into my being, [...]

This is the speaker's first personal appearance in the poem. So far, he's been speaking philosophically, describing universals; now, he waves at his readers, reminding them that he's there, pen in hand. What's more, he's writing *because* of what he believes about beauty. Moved by the "very music" of Endymion's name—a thing of beauty in itself—he'll attempt to add a drop to the "endless fountain" of beauties through his verse.

Once again, though, the Grecian beauty of the Endymion myth mingles with something much closer to home. As he begins to picture the story he'll tell, the speaker observes:

> [...] each pleasant scene
> Is growing fresh before me as the green
> Of our own vallies: [...]

In this simile, art and nature interweave. The story of Endymion appears to the speaker as a green English valley, a landscape he'll navigate—something in some way external to him, with its own life. In fact, it's "growing" according to its own spontaneous pattern in his imagination. Keats once wrote that poetry should "come as naturally as the leaves to a tree"; this moment suggests that the "green world" of nature and the growing world of art might work in similar ways. Endymion's musical name seems to have planted a seed in the speaker, allowing something new to take root in him.

Remember, *Endymion* was Keats's first serious stab at a long poem, a test of his mettle. In this stanza, he'll let readers see him bracing to jump into the sea of poetry, preparing as if he's about to set out on a journey through an uncharted landscape.

LINES 39-45

so I will begin
Now while I cannot hear the city's din;
Now while the early budders are just new,
And run in mazes of the youngest hue
About old forests; while the willow trails
Its delicate amber; and the dairy pails
Bring home increase of milk.

Nature and art, in this speaker's view, have a lot in common. It makes sense, then, that he should get started on his poem while he's out in the countryside, not distracted by the "city's din"—the clamor of town. Keats is being straightforwardly autobiographical here: he began *Endymion* during springtime travels through the Isle of Wight and the south coast, and he wouldn't return to his native London for some months.

The natural world around him mirrors his own state of mind. He'll sit down to write:

> Now while I cannot hear the city's din;
> Now while the early budders are just new,
> And run in mazes of the youngest hue
> About old forests; while the willow trails
> Its delicate amber; and the dairy pails
> Bring home increase of milk [...]

The imagery here might remind readers of the speaker's things of beauty in the first stanza: these are sights at once gentle, familiar, and lovely. They're also *new*. This is the English spring, and the "budders," the budding flowers, are gradually opening up, just as the speaker hopes his newborn work will. They're also growing in "mazes," winding pathways that suggest the poem will have some meandering exploration to do along the way.

The anaphora of "Now" here also suggests a poet declaring himself: it's now or never, time to get this poem on the road. Perhaps there's a hint of nerves in the repetition, too: *I'll start... now! I mean, uh*, now! That excited, eager, nervy tone pairs with the thrill and beauty of new spring growth to depict the speaker's state of mind.

Like the budders, the speaker hopes to open up beautifully; like the "dairy pails," he hopes to overflow with "increase of milk," a new and delicious artistic abundance.

LINES 45-57

And, as the year
Grows lush in juicy stalks, I'll smoothly steer
My little boat, for many quiet hours,
With streams that deepen freshly into bowers.
Many and many a verse I hope to write,
Before the daisies, vermeil rimm'd and white,
Hide in deep herbage; and ere yet the bees
Hum about globes of clover and sweet peas,
I must be near the middle of my story.
O may no wintry season, bare and hoary,
See it half finished: but let Autumn bold,
With universal tinge of sober gold,
Be all about me when I make an end.

The speaker is getting into the swing of his imagined writing process now. He's setting out in spring, but looking down the road, he can picture where he'll be in summer: on a journey.

Where the speaker's imagery around the spring framed single pictures (new-budded flowers, trailing willow leaves, brimming milk pails), his summer visions are more dynamic. He puts himself in a metaphorical "little boat" that makes its way down "streams that deepen freshly into bowers"—an image that recalls both the "clear rills" he enjoyed in the first stanza and the inner bower that beauty builds. Once again, the poetic process here involves the receptive exploration of an inner landscape with its own independent life. The speaker will "steer" his little boat, but he'll also trustingly allow the stream to carry him wherever it goes.

The speaker's imaginings make some characteristic Keatsian music. Listen to the sounds here:

> Many and many a **ver**se I hope to write,
> Before the daisies, **ver**meil rimm'd and white,
> **H**ide in deep **h**erbage; and ere yet the bees
> **H**um about gl**o**bes of cl**o**ver and sw**ee**t p**ea**s,

The poet obviously enjoys alliteratively weaving the old word "**ver**meil" (that is, vermillion) into his "**ver**se," making his language take on the same color as the tips of the daisy petals. The soft alliterative /h/ of "**h**ide," "**h**erbage," and "**h**um," alongside the rich /oh/ and /ee/ assonance of "gl**o**bes of cl**o**ver and sw**ee**t p**ea**s," captures the pleasure of lying in a meadow listening to the bees going about their business. Like the poet, they're busy at their creative work, making sweetness from what the natural world offers them. Between these bees and the dairy pails, the speaker seems to hope his poem, like paradise itself, will overflow with milk and honey.

If all goes as he hopes, then, writing this poem will be both an adventure and a pleasure. Wishful thinking, perhaps; like any writer, Keats struggled with his ambitious project along the way. But here at the outset, the speaker has big dreams not only about how much he'll enjoy making his way through *Endymion*, but also about his writing schedule. He foresees a steady journey, bringing him midway through his poem when he's midway through the year. Once again, he hopes to be in tune with the world, letting his poem mature as the seasons do.

Here, the speaker's dreamy dreams of following his poem's path through the year skids on a patch of icy nervousness. God forbid, the speaker says, that he not be finished by the time the

"bare and hoary" (leafless and frosty) winter rolls around. Symbolically speaking, this might suggest some anxiety about losing all the fertile creative energy he feels in the spring—running out of steam, in short. He'd much rather finish in autumn, a season that mattered a lot to Keats. Autumn's mature "sober gold" should befit not only his poem's completion, but his own creative maturity.

In this vision, poet, poem, and seasons all develop together, growing to an instinctive creative rhythm. All are involved in the pursuit of beauty. Not just the completed poem, but the natural, vital, organic act of writing will make an inner "bower" for the poet.

LINES 58-62

And now at once, adventuresome, I send
My herald thought into a wilderness:
There let its trumpet blow, and quickly dress
My uncertain path with green, that I may speed
Easily onward, thorough flowers and weed.

The speaker has laid out his deeply felt philosophy of beauty and planned his writing schedule for the year. There remains only one more task: beginning the poem proper, the story of Endymion himself. As he prepares to launch, the speaker calls on a helper:

> [...] I send
> My herald thought into a wilderness:

This personified thought goes out like an explorer into the "wilderness" of the poetic landscape—a more forbidding take on the delightful green "vallies" the speaker saw growing before him back at the beginning of this long stanza. This thought is also a "herald," a messenger and an announcer, and it's got its own creative power. When its "trumpet blow[s]," it calls up new "green" from the wilderness, making a track of "flowers and weed" that the speaker can follow—perhaps a path rather like the flowery "mazes of the youngest hue" that budded in line 42. Once more, art and nature grow together.

Through this metaphor, the creative process appears as a mixture of will and receptivity, intention and patience, exploration and observation. The speaker sees the landscape of *Endymion* before him as effortlessly as if he'd dreamed it, but he has to send his creative "herald thought" out there in order to find the shape of a poem in it.

The first stanzas of *Endymion*, then, trace a young poet's motivations, hopes, anxieties, and beliefs. In this, they're not only an introduction to a quest that Keats would pursue his whole short life, but a mirror of the Endymion myth itself. Endymion will seek the gorgeous goddess who visits him in his dreams; Keats will seek a vision of poetic loveliness, blissful and serious, that can be a lasting "friend to man." Even if (as he later shamefacedly wrote) he didn't quite reach that goal in *Endymion*, he had started to make his way along the green path.

SYMBOLS

LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Keats uses conventional light/dark symbolism here: light represents joy, beauty, and understanding, and darkness the opposite.

Life, the poem suggests, is often a pretty "gloomy" business. Everyone must sometimes travel down "o'er-darkened ways," through times of confusion, misery, and suffering.

Fortunately, the "cheering light" of beauty—whether it comes from "the sun, the moon," or from some more ethereal source—can "move[] away the pall / From our dark spirits."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "gloomy days,"
- **Line 10:** "o'er-darkened ways"
- **Lines 12-13:** "the pall / From our dark spirits"
- **Line 13:** "the sun, the moon"
- **Lines 30-31:** "a cheering light / Unto our souls"
- **Line 32:** "whether there be shine, or gloom o'ercast,"

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The metaphors in these introductory stanzas draw a web of connections between the natural world, poetry, and the abstract idea of beauty itself.

A "thing of beauty," the speaker says in the opening lines:

> [...] will never
> Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
> A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
> Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet
> breathing.

Beauty, in other words, builds a leafy refuge in the soul—a restful place where you can recover your strength when the tough world has tired you out. But beauty isn't just escapism; it also, the poem asserts, allows people to weave "a flowery band to bind us to the earth." That is, the bower that beauty builds helps people to *stay* in the world, not to get away from it. The "sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing" that beauty offers make people want to go on living, in spite of all the suffering they inevitably face.

The speaker presents this suffering, too, as a place. The metaphorical journey through life takes people through

"unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways," or perilous paths. Notice the speaker's return to the idea of health (or the lack thereof): Keats, who trained as a doctor and who lost more than one family member to tuberculosis, had a particularly acute sense of how much it matters to be well.

Luckily, beauty offers not only a respite from such gloomy wanderings but also a guiding light and refreshment along the way. Experiences of beauty "become a cheering light / Unto our souls," the speaker says, and form "an endless fountain of immortal drink." That metaphorical cascade might even suggest the nectar of the gods, a beverage that flows eternally while offering those who taste it their own immortality. Perhaps that's where writing poetry comes into the picture. *Creating* a deathless "thing of beauty," after all, is one way to achieve immortality.

The poem goes on to describe the process of writing as being like a journey—a more pleasant one than the dark and rocky stumbling of the first stanza. The scenes of the story the speaker is about to tell rise up before him like "our own vallies," as green as an English hillside in spring. He'll steer the "little boat" of his words through this imagined landscape, eventually.

But first, he'll send an advance party: a "herald thought," a personified inciting idea, which he pictures preparing a path for him. By playing its "trumpet," this herald will make a green path spring up, a path that Keats can follow.

These metaphors suggest that, for Keats, writing means collaborating with a vision. The poem itself, ready to be written, appears in the imagination as a landscape; to capture its beauty, the writer must go exploring.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "A bower quiet for us, and a sleep / Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing."
- **Lines 6-7:** "on every morrow, are we wreathing / A flowery band to bind us to the earth,"
- **Lines 10-11:** "all the unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways / Made for our searching:"
- **Lines 12-13:** "Some shape of beauty moves away the pall / From our dark spirits."
- **Lines 23-24:** "An endless fountain of immortal drink, / Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink."
- **Lines 28-31:** "the moon, / The passion poesy, glories infinite, / Haunt us till they become a cheering light / Unto our souls,"
- **Lines 37-39:** "each pleasant scene / Is growing fresh before me as the green / Of our own vallies:"
- **Line 42:** "mazes of the youngest hue"
- **Lines 46-48:** "I'll smoothly steer / My little boat, for many quiet hours, / With streams that deepen freshly into bowers."
- **Lines 58-62:** "I send / My herald thought into a wilderness: / There let its trumpet blow, and quickly dress / My uncertain path with green, that I may speed / Easily onward, thorough flowers and weed."

IMAGERY

Keats relished sensuous imagery, and this early work overflows with it. From the metaphorical "bower" that a "thing of beauty" builds in people's souls—the most peaceful resting place one could hope for, where the only sound is "quiet breathing"—to the real English countryside, Keats describes loveliness with a loving eye.

Some of the most memorable moments of imagery here are the simplest. When the speaker describes the natural beauty that might make an impression on people, for instance, he does a lot with the single adjective "green":

> [...] such are daffodils
> With the green world they live in

The poem's eye, here, looks up from the daffodils to take in the world at their level—a world that's nothing but "green" as far as you can see. To a daffodil, the whole world is the patch of countryside where you happen to grow, and the speaker invites readers to share that flower's-eye view, reveling in this lush, contained-but-spacious world.

The speaker has a similar vision of abundant greenness when setting out to tell the story of Endymion:

> [...] each pleasant scene
> Is growing fresh before me as the green
> Of our own vallies: [...]

The speaker's connection between greenery and freshness suggests that a beautiful story and a beautiful landscape share a springy, ever-youthful quality—the immortality described in the poem's first lines.

It's not all greenery, though: the speaker also relishes the "delicate amber" of new willow leaves, the "vermeil" (or vermillion) tips of daisy petals, and the "sober gold" of autumn. He feels as much as he sees, enjoying the "cooling" thought of "clear rills" of water making their way through hot summer days and the "juicy stalks" of healthy grass. Through such imagery, the speaker *does* what he *describes*, painting a refreshing picture of a perpetually lovely world.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "a sleep / Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing."
- **Line 7:** "A flowery band to bind us to the earth,"
- **Lines 9-11:** "the gloomy days, / Of all the unhealthy and

o'er-darkened ways / Made for our searching:"
- **Lines 12-13:** "Some shape of beauty moves away the pall / From our dark spirits."
- **Lines 15-16:** "daffodils / With the green world they live in"
- **Lines 16-19:** "clear rills / That for themselves a cooling covert make / 'Gainst the hot season; the mid forest brake, / Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms:"
- **Lines 26-27:** "the trees / That whisper round a temple"
- **Lines 37-39:** "each pleasant scene / Is growing fresh before me as the green / Of our own vallies:"
- **Lines 41-44:** "the early budders are just new, / And run in mazes of the youngest hue / About old forests; while the willow trails / Its delicate amber;"
- **Lines 45-46:** "as the year / Grows lush in juicy stalks,"
- **Lines 50-52:** "the daisies, vermeil rimm'd and white, / Hide in deep herbage; and ere yet the bees / Hum about globes of clover and sweet peas,"
- **Line 54:** "wintry season, bare and hoary,"
- **Lines 55-56:** "Autumn bold, / With universal tinge of sober gold,"
- **Lines 60-61:** "quickly dress / My uncertain path with green,"

ALLUSION

The excerpt we're covering in this guide introduces a long narrative poem about Endymion, the mythological Greek shepherd beloved by the goddess of the moon. But in these first stanzas, there's only one brief allusion to the guy who'll be the poem's hero. It comes in lines 34-39:

> Therefore, 'tis with full happiness that I
> Will trace the story of Endymion.
> The very music of the name has gone
> Into my being, and each pleasant scene
> Is growing fresh before me as the green
> Of our own vallies: [...]

The word "Endymion" itself feels romantic and compelling to the speaker: the "very music" of the Grecian name attracts him to the project.

Endymion himself was also a deeply romantic subject:

- As the legend goes, Endymion is the archetypal dreamer: Zeus, the king of the gods, trickily grants him his wish for perpetual youth and beauty by making him fall into an eternal sleep. (At least, that's one of the more common tellings of the story. Like a lot of Greek myths, this one has plenty of variations.)
- The moon goddess, Selene (also known as Artemis, Cynthia, or Diana), finds the sleeping Endymion so beautiful that she falls in love with him. According to some versions of the story, she visits him in his dreams, and he becomes the father of her 50 (!) daughters.

Keats's Endymion is a more active figure—an entranced dreamer, certainly, but also a lover who goes in pursuit of his goddess, not just the passive recipient of her favors. Still, the vision of the dreamer visited by the moon itself suggests the kind of poet Keats was: one who believed that art came from a kind of patient, open receptivity. The sleeping Endymion himself might also be the type of a "thing of beauty": timelessly, changelessly lovely, eternally at peace.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 34-39:** "Therefore, 'tis with full happiness that I / Will trace the story of Endymion. / The very music of the name has gone / Into my being, and each pleasant scene / Is growing fresh before me as the green / Of our own vallies:"

CAESURA

The poem's many caesurae help to create a thoughtful, unhurried rhythm, inviting the reader to rest on one idea or image after another.

For one good example, listen to the pauses that frame the poem's first lines:

> A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
> Its loveliness increases; || it will never
> Pass into nothingness; || but still will keep
> A bower quiet for us, [...]

Those strong semicolons separate out two big ideas: that a beautiful thing only gets more beautiful with time, and that it will never die. By encouraging readers to stay with these ideas for a moment, the caesurae make the opening lines feel fervent and serious. These words are a declaration of faith, a credo from which the rest of the poem will hang.

Elsewhere, similar caesurae evoke a delicious wander through the countryside:

> [...] and such are daffodils
> With the green world they live in; || and clear rills
> That for themselves a cooling covert make
> 'Gainst the hot season; || the mid forest brake,
> Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms:

Again, these mid-line pauses set a restful, meditative pace. Rather than scurrying through this tour of the countryside, the speaker sits down and relishes each of these scenes, as if pausing on a walk to soak up the loveliness. Notice, too, the way

that the caesurae interact with enjambments here: each of these descriptions is long and leisurely, overspilling lines with lush detail.

Gentler caesurae musically modulate the poem's rhythm, too. Listen to what happens when the speaker prepares to launch into his poem:

> And now at once, || adventuresome, || I send
> My herald thought into a wilderness:

The commas around the word "adventuresome"—the only polysyllabic word in its line—set off its jaunty energy, making the line's rhythm swing like a walker's arms.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "increases; it"
- **Line 3:** "nothingness; but"
- **Line 4:** "us, and"
- **Line 5:** "dreams, and," "health, and"
- **Line 6:** "Therefore, on," "morrow, are"
- **Line 8:** "despondence, of"
- **Line 9:** " natures, of"
- **Line 11:** "searching: yes, in"
- **Line 13:** "spirits. Such," "sun, the"
- **Line 14:** "old, and"
- **Line 15:** "sheep; and"
- **Line 16:** "in; and"
- **Line 18:** "season; the"
- **Line 26:** "hour; no, even"
- **Line 28:** "self, so"
- **Line 29:** "poesy, glories"
- **Line 31:** "souls, and"
- **Line 32:** "That, whether," "shine, or"
- **Line 34:** "Therefore, 'tis"
- **Line 37:** "being, and"
- **Line 39:** "vallies: so"
- **Line 43:** "forests; while"
- **Line 44:** "amber; and"
- **Line 45:** "milk. And, as"
- **Line 46:** "stalks, I'll"
- **Line 47:** "boat, for"
- **Line 50:** "daisies, vermeil"
- **Line 51:** "herbage; and"
- **Line 54:** "season, bare"
- **Line 55:** "finished: but"
- **Line 58:** "once, adventuresome, I"
- **Line 60:** "blow, and"
- **Line 61:** "green, that"
- **Line 62:** "onward, thorough"

ENJAMBMENT

As the speaker says, *Endymion* will move like a "little boat" floating down a stream. These first stanzas' many enjambments help to create that easy, reflective pace.

Listen, for instance, to this excerpt from the first stanza:

> A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
> Its loveliness increases; it will never
> Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
> A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
> Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet
> breathing.

The speaker starts out with an end-stopped declaration of faith: "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever." The rest of these lines are then enjambed. This means that, while the speaker makes several bold statements set off by caesurae within these lines, the passage as a whole keeps a fluid continuity.

What's more, breaking just where they do, these lines invite readers to put a little extra energy into the lines' last words. The word "never" takes on a special force; "keep" keeps its space for a moment; "sleep" sits quietly before the speaker describes what that sleep is like.

Later on, swifter enjambments suggest the speaker's excitement as he prepares to "trace the story of Endymion":

> The very music of the name has gone
> Into my being, and each pleasant scene
> Is growing fresh before me as the green
> Of our own vallies: [...]

Interrupted only by one quick comma, these enjambed lines unfold as easily as the "pleasant scene[s]" of the coming story that the speaker already sees rising before him.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "never / Pass"
- **Lines 3-4:** "keep / A"
- **Lines 4-5:** "sleep / Full"
- **Lines 6-7:** "wreathing / A"
- **Lines 8-9:** "dearth / Of"
- **Lines 10-11:** "ways / Made"
- **Lines 12-13:** "pall / From"
- **Lines 14-15:** "boon / For"
- **Lines 15-16:** "daffodils / With"
- **Lines 16-17:** "rills / That"
- **Lines 17-18:** "make / 'Gainst"
- **Lines 20-21:** "dooms / We"
- **Lines 25-26:** "essences / For"
- **Lines 26-27:** "trees / That"
- **Lines 27-28:** "soon / Dear"
- **Lines 30-31:** "light / Unto"
- **Lines 34-35:** "I / Will"

- **Lines 36-37:** "gone / Into"
- **Lines 37-38:** "scene / Is"
- **Lines 38-39:** "green / Of"
- **Lines 39-40:** "begin / Now"
- **Lines 42-43:** "hue / About"
- **Lines 43-44:** "trails / Its"
- **Lines 44-45:** "pails / Bring"
- **Lines 45-46:** "year / Grows"
- **Lines 46-47:** "steer / My"
- **Lines 51-52:** "bees / Hum"
- **Lines 58-59:** "send / My"
- **Lines 60-61:** "dress / My"
- **Lines 61-62:** "speed / Easily"

ALLITERATION

Harmonious alliteration gives strength and music to *Endymion's* fervent first lines.

A thing of beauty, the speaker begins, is eternal: it will "never / Pass into nothingness." That emphatic /n/ sound is the first of many alliterative moments that mirror the speaker's passion as he insists on the deep meaning of beauty:

> Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing
> A flowery band to bind us to the earth,
> Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth
> Of noble natures, [...]

Beauty, in other words, keeps us committed to existence even when existence is pretty rough. The hard, unrelenting /d/ and /n/ alliteration stresses that despondence and a tragic lack of noble feeling are real problems. That's why it takes the "flowery band" of beauty to "bind" us here—and notice that there isn't just /b/ alliteration in those words, but a full internal slant rhyme between "band" and "bind," expressing in sound how securely such a band holds us.

Later on, alliteration mirrors the poet's harmony with the seasons:

> Many and many a verse I hope to write,
> Before the daisies, vermeil rimm'd and white,
> Hide in deep herbage; and ere yet the bees
> Hum about globes of clover and sweet peas,
> I must be near the middle of my story.

Here, the speaker's "verse" and the "vermeil" (or vermillion) tips of the daisy petals seem related to each other: the poem will take color just as the daisies do. The gentle /h/ of "hide," "herbage," and "hum," alongside the /m/ of "must" and "middle," meanwhile, feel as soft as new grass and murmurous as the humming bees.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "never"
- **Line 3:** "nothingness"
- **Line 4:** "sleep"
- **Line 5:** "sweet"
- **Line 7:** "band," "bind"
- **Line 8:** "despondence," "dearth"
- **Line 9:** "noble natures"
- **Line 13:** "Such," "sun"
- **Line 14:** "shady"
- **Line 15:** "sheep"
- **Line 17:** "cooling covert"
- **Line 18:** "mid," "forest"
- **Line 19:** "fair," "musk"
- **Line 20:** "dooms"
- **Line 21:** "dead"
- **Line 26:** "trees"
- **Line 27:** "temple"
- **Line 29:** "passion poesy"
- **Line 38:** "growing," "green"
- **Line 41:** "Now," "new"
- **Line 43:** "while," "willow"
- **Line 44:** "delicate," "dairy"
- **Line 46:** "stalks," "smoothly steer"
- **Line 49:** "verse"
- **Line 50:** "vermeil"
- **Line 51:** "Hide," "herbage"
- **Line 52:** "Hum"
- **Line 53:** "must," "middle"
- **Line 54:** "may"

VOCABULARY

Bower (Line 4, Line 48) - A shaded resting place enclosed by greenery.

Morrow (Line 6) - New day, morning.

Spite of (Line 8) - Despite.

Despondence (Line 8) - Sorrow, heavy spirits.

Dearth (Line 8) - Lack, scarcity.

O'er-darkened (Line 10) - Made dark. The image might suggest a path made murky by thick overhanging branches.

Pall (Line 12) - A pall can be either a dark cloud or a gravecloth; both meanings resonate here!

Boon (Line 14) - Something helpful or fortunate.

Rills (Line 16) - Little streams.

Covert (Line 17) - A sheltering patch of greenery.

Brake (Line 18) - A thicket; a dense patch of wild grasses and plants.

Dooms (Line 20) - Fates, destinies.

O'ercast (Line 32) - Overcast.

Vermeil rimm'd (Line 50) - Edged with a rich red color (as daisy petals sometimes are).

Ere (Line 51) - Before.

Hoary (Line 54) - Frosty.

Herald (Line 59) - Messenger, forerunner.

Thorough (Line 62) - Through.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Endymion introduces itself as a "Poetic Romance"—a term that doesn't mean what the modern reader might guess at first. Though this poem does tell a love story, a "romance" in the sense Keats means it is a story of adventure, often with a quest at its heart. *Endymion* will retell the old Greek myth of a mortal shepherd's quest to find the goddess of the moon, whom he meets in a dream and falls passionately in love with.

This first 62-line section of the poem, however, focuses on Keats's statement of poetic intent, not on the tale he'll tell. It also introduces the form the poem will use: heroic couplets, paired lines of rhymed iambic pentameter.

There's no standard stanza length in this form, so Keats's stanzas go on just as long as he wants them to. In this instance, he makes a passionate case for the importance of beauty in his first 24-line stanza, describes beauty's lasting power in a 9-line stanza, and sets out his hopes for his project and his intended writing schedule in a 29-line stanza. Notice that this division splits one pair of rhymes: "die" in line 33 and "I" in line 34. The second stanza thus launches energetically into the third, just as the young Keats launches energetically into his new project.

METER

Endymion is written (for the most part) in iambic pentameter. That means that each of its lines uses five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in the poem's famous first line:

A thing | of beau- | ty is | a joy | for ever:

That extra unstressed syllable on the end there ("for ever") is what's known as a feminine ending, a softening effect that Keats often uses along the way.

Iambic pentameter is one of the more common meters in English-language poetry: spoken English often naturally falls into an iambic rhythm. It's a flexible meter, too, allowing for lots of variations that let the verse flow easily as water. Listen to the rhythm of line 49, for instance:

Many and | many | a verse | I hope | to write,

Kicking the line off with a dactyl (a three-syllable foot with a DUM-da-da rhythm) and following it up with a trochee (the opposite of an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm), Keats stresses just how very many verses he's hoping to get through. The extra syllable and up-front stresses here create a tumbling, quick-paced rhythm that evokes verses spilling out onto the page like marbles from a jar.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem is written in heroic couplets. That means that its lines of iambic pentameter rhyme in this pattern:

AABBCCDD

...and so on.

In choosing this rhyme scheme, Keats lays claim to a noble poetic heritage. Heroic couplets, as their name suggests, were traditionally used to tell grand stories in narrative verse. The great Middle English poet Geoffrey Chaucer used them in *The Canterbury Tales*, and 17th-century writers like John Dryden and Alexander Pope used them in their English translations of classical epics like *The Aeneid* and *The Odyssey*.

Heroic couplets would thus have felt like a natural fit for a long poem telling a tale from Greek mythology. Keats is making an ambitious claim for his verse with this rhyme scheme, making it clear that this, his first long poem, aims for the grandeur and glory of great epics.

SPEAKER

It's fair to take the speaker in this prologue as being none other than John Keats himself. Keats was only 21 years old when he began writing *Endymion*, and the poem was his first long, ambitious project—a task he saw as a testing ground for his poetic vocation. Before he gets started on his quest, he lays out his motivation for writing: a wholehearted faith in the spiritual value of beauty that would, in one way and another, stay with him all his short life.

As he sets out to write, he also draws attention to the fact that he's writing. Rather than launching straight into the tale of the shepherd Endymion and his love for the moon goddess, Keats first explains why he wants to tell this story, then lays out his intended composition schedule: if all goes according to plan, he'll get started in the spring, write all summer, and finish up in autumn. Right from the start, then, this poet keeps the idea of poetry and art-making in front of the reader's eyes, inviting them to consider what the tale of Endymion might have to do with art itself.

This earnest, eager poem would embarrass Keats later. When he published *Endymion*, he wrote a preface explaining that this was a young man's work and he knew it wasn't everything he'd

wanted it to be—a preface that itself has a young man's blushing defensiveness. But the calm, ringing assurance of the first lines has survived both Keats's embarrassment and two centuries of wear.

SETTING

As is often the case in Keats's poetry, the setting here wavers between the English countryside and a mythologized ancient Greece.

The speaker makes it clear he's writing this poem in his native England. He's left the "city's din" for the countryside, where "early budders" (or early blooming flowers) can inspire his own poetic budding. There, he can rejoice in a very English vision of natural beauty, lying among the daffodils in "the green world they live in."

Flashes of old magic interweave with these visions of the English spring. When the speaker describes the trees "that whisper round a temple," he seems to see something straight out of ancient Greece springing up in his native woodlands. He even says that he can see episodes from Endymion's story:

> [...] growing fresh before me as the green
> Of our own vallies [...]

The story of Endymion itself will be set entirely in the world of ancient Greek mythology. But that world will look very much like an idealized, enchanted English countryside: nymph-haunted, green-leaved, springing with wildflowers.

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."

Keats was also among a notable crowd of English poets during his lifetime: he met or corresponded with most of his fellow Romantics. However, he never got too close to any of them. As a young writer, 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 a 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.

Endymion, which appeared in 1818, was Keats's second published work and his first book-length poem, a test of his poetic mettle. While it didn't make the splash he'd hoped (it attracted mostly vicious pans in the newspapers), its immortal first words have become some of the most famous and widely quoted lines of poetry in the English language.

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 *Endymion* was published in 1818, a glorious literary afterlife must have felt painfully far away to Keats. After working on the poem for over a year, he was a better poet when he was done than he had been when he started, and he winced as he looked back on some of his earlier work. Accordingly, he wrote a defensive preface to the poem apologizing in advance for its immaturity.

This, perhaps, was not the best idea. Even if Keats hadn't introduced his work this way, the critics who believed a "Cockney poet" like Keats shouldn't be writing about a subject so lofty as Greek mythology would still have ripped the poem apart.

The England of Keats's time (and the England before and since, for that matter) was intensely classist, marked by sharp divides between an educated, wealthy upper class and everybody else. In the eyes of the conservative literati, Keats—the son of a London innkeeper, trained as a doctor—was laughably pretentious, a middle-class nobody daring to call himself a poet. One such critic, John Lockhart, wrote a review of *Endymion* that called Keats "the meanest, the filthiest, and the most vulgar of Cockney poetasters," and told him:

> It is a better and a wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet; so back to the shop Mr John, back to "plasters, pills, and ointment boxes," &c.

Such snobbish criticisms would dog Keats all his life. Though he had important champions—journalist and poet Leigh Hunt, notable Romantic Percy Bysshe Shelley—his genius would go mostly unrecognized in his lifetime, in great part because of a literary world that had conveniently forgotten that

Shakespeare himself was a glovemaker's son.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem's first 33 lines. (https://youtu.be/ZgU8KiXkB6E)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Keats's life and work via the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/john-keats)
- The First Edition — See images of the first edition of Endymion—a book that would make Keats the target of much vicious criticism in the conservative press. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/first-edition-of-keatss-endymion)
- Keats's Preface to Endymion — Read Keats's rather self-conscious preface to Endymion, in which he tries to get ahead of the critics by admitting it's an immature work before they can tell him so. (This didn't work.) (https://kalliope.org/en/text/keats2001071112)
- The Complete Poem — Read the full text of Endymion. (https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/24280/pg24280-images.html)
- The Keats-Shelley House — Learn more about Keats at the website of the Keats-Shelley House, a museum housed in Keats's final lodgings in Rome. (https://ksh.roma.it/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN KEATS POEMS

- Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art
- In drear nighted December
- La Belle Dame sans Merci
- Ode on a Grecian Urn
- Ode on Indolence
- Ode on Melancholy
- Ode to a Nightingale
- Ode to Psyche
- On First Looking into Chapman's Homer
- On Seeing the Elgin Marbles
- On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again
- On the Grasshopper and Cricket
- On the Sea
- The Eve of St. Agnes
- This living hand, now warm and capable
- To Autumn
- When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be

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