# Ode on Melancholy

## POEM TEXT

No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist
    Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd
    By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;
        Make not your rosary of yew-berries,
    Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be
        Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl
A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;
    For shade to shade will come too drowsily,
        And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.

But when the melancholy fit shall fall
    Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
    And hides the green hill in an April shroud;
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
    Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,
        Or on the wealth of globed peonies;
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
    Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,
        And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
    And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
    Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
    Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
        Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
    Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
His soul shalt taste the sadness of her might,
        And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

## SUMMARY

Even if you're really sad, absolutely do not drink from the waters of the Lethe river, which would make you lose your memory, and don't pull wolf's-bane plants from the ground in order to poison yourself or dull your pain. Don't let your weak self come into contact with a deadly nightshade plant, or drink wine from the mythical Queen of the Underworld. Don't make a rosary bead necklace from poisonous yew-berries, and don't become obsessed with symbols of death and decay like beetles or death-moths. And don't join forces with the owl in order to intensify your mysterious sadness. Doing any of the above will bring too much darkness, and just numb you to your pain.

When a melancholy mood strikes you—like a sudden thunderstorm that makes the sky weep, pounds down on the flowers, and covers all the greenery with an April fog—then feed your pain by gazing upon a rose that blooms only in the morning, or the rainbows over the sea, or bounteous peony flowers. Or if your lover is really angry, just hold her soft hand and let her express that anger while you gaze deeply into her beautiful eyes.

Melancholy is inseparable from beauty, because beauty doesn't last forever. And melancholy is also a part of Joy, who is always holding his hand up to his mouth, ready to wish people good bye. It exists within Pleasure, which is already turning to poison even as the bee sips its nectar. Indeed, melancholy is contained within all of life's good things, like a queen dwelling, partially hidden, within a temple. She can only be seen by those who fully embrace joy and beauty—who pop the metaphorical fruit of joy into their discerning mouths. The person who does so will taste Melancholy's sad power, and his soul will be kept by her as a symbol of her inevitable victory.

## THEMES

### MELANCHOLY, BEAUTY, AND IMPERMANENCE

John Keats's "Ode on Melancholy" is a rich and complex poem that offers a way of responding to deep despair. Put simply, it encourages people to embrace sadness, not by seeking to end or soften it, but by living *within* it—that is, by actively acknowledging its presence. People ought to embrace "melancholy" because, even though it brings "sorrow," it's also a fundamental part of beauty, joy, and pleasure. Furthermore, the poem argues, the highest forms of beauty are actually *made* beautiful by the fact that they cannot last—and it's for this reason, the poem suggests, that melancholy, beauty, and time are so deeply intertwined.

The poem is almost like an early precursor to self-help literature, suggesting what to do and not to do when someone is feeling really down. To that end, the first stanza acts as a kind of warning, outlining different ways that people might respond to melancholy. These include self-poisoning and drinking from the ancient river of Lethe (which causes the drinker to forget

whatever is troubling them). If people try to numb or end their "anguish," the poem argues, they won't make the most of their melancholy—they won't be able to see its close relationship with beauty at first hand. Instead, they just will be overwhelmed by their sadness.

The second stanza then tells people what they *should* do when a melancholy mood strikes. Essentially, this boils down to embracing melancholy by seeking out beauty in the natural world. People should "glut"—that is, feed—their sorrows by looking at a "morning rose," a rainbow that appears over the sea, or a peony. Importantly, all of these things are temporary; a morning rose blooms in the morning, a rainbow fades, and globular peonies quickly brown and wilt. In fact, part of their beauty seems to come from the fact that their existence is fleeting. As such, the speaker argues that people should embrace their melancholy by bearing witness to the most melancholic fact of all: that the greatest beauty in the world is by its very nature temporary, and that's why beauty *contains* and even intensifies melancholy.

In the poem, beauty and melancholy are thus linked by their impermanence. "Beauty [...] must die," just as "Joy" is always bidding the joyful person "adieu" (goodbye). And though people can experience pleasure, it's always metaphorically in the process of "turning to poison"—because time will eventually bring about its end. Inherent to beauty, the poem thus argues, is a sense of poignant sadness given the knowledge that beauty will one day be gone.

For that reason, then, "Melancholy" is like a kind of goddess who rules over the "temple of Delight." Zooming out on this idea, the poem is essentially saying that nothing good can last forever. This in turn makes anything good in life full of sadness before it's even over—but the best response to this sad fact, agues the poem, is simply to embrace it. Indeed, that's why the poem's ending praises those people who "can burst Joy's grape against [their] palate fine." Someone like that accepts that beauty and melancholy "dwell" together, and "bursts" this metaphorical grape—a stand-in for all the good things in life—in full knowledge that doing so will eventually bring about a time when "Joy" will be gone. This is actually a pretty practical response in a world not built to last, and with a life that has death as its only real certainty.

Ultimately, then, "Ode on Melancholy" uncovers an intimate connection between melancholy, beauty, and the passing of time. If beautiful things *could* last forever, the poem seems to say, then they wouldn't be suffused with such sadness. But, of course, nothing can last—and thereby the more beautiful something is (and beauty can stand for joy, pleasure, and general happiness) the more that melancholy "dwells" within it.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-10
- Lines 11-20
- Lines 21-30

## INTOXICATION VS. NATURE

One way to interpret "Ode on Melancholy" is as a warning against a certain kind of self-destructive intoxication. Though it's not overtly laid out as such, the poem implicitly argues that the natural world has more to offer people—even if they are melancholy—than does the world of drugs and alcohol. Indeed, it was around the time of this poem's composition that Keats wrote in a letter that he hoped to maintain "a peaceable and healthy spirit"—and perhaps this is at the root of the poem's apparent preference for the natural world over intoxication.

The first stanza reads like a list of self-destructive behaviors, all of which are ways that the poem presents as possible (but ill-advised) responses to melancholy, or a pervasive sense of deep sadness. These are presented in rich imagery with multiple classical allusions, but strip those away and essentially the stanza is talking about alcohol and drugs. The poem mentions "poisonous wine," the deadly nightshade plant, and the tempting grapes of a goddess. But rather than combating sadness, the poem argues, alcohol and drugs accelerate it to a point of no return, "drown[ing]" people's "soul[s]."

The beauty of the language in this stanza seems to speak to the temptation of such substances, and how people can be seduced by the promised comfort of intoxication. In other words, it's understandable that people react to melancholy through a kind of harmful self-medication—but that's not the way the speaker thinks they *should* respond.

The second stanza then offers the speaker's alternative to intoxication: appreciation of the natural world. The stanza is full of natural imagery, and instructs anyone feeling down to seek out roses, peony flowers, and rainbows. Together, these seem to offer an alternative to the list of intoxicants offered in the first stanza.

That's not to say that the natural world can *cure* people's sadness. The speaker ultimately feels that melancholy is simply a part of life—and that it dwells in the natural world too. With that in mind, though, the speaker does seem to think that avoiding the temptations of intoxicants is ultimately a *better* way to experience the beauty, joy, pleasure and delight of the world—even if these are all also filled with melancholy.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-17

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-5

*No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist*
*Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;*
*Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd*
*By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;*
*Make not your rosary of yew-berries,*

The poem opens by giving its addressee various instructions about things *not* to do. And, right of the bat, the speaker is emphatic—repeating "no" twice (technically something called epizeuxis) followed by "go not," just in case the listener isn't sure how serious the speaker takes this!

It's worth noting early on that the addressee of the poem is never made clear. The poem originally had another stanza at the start, which focused on a hero-figure questing to find the goddess Melancholy—this may explain the starting point for this instructive tone. But, of course, that stanza was deleted, so the poem could be interpreted as addressed to some unknown recipient, to the reader, to anyone who has ever experienced melancholy—or to some combination of all of these.

The poem's first instruction, then, is that this melancholic person should not go "to Lethe." This is an allusion to a river in the mythological Greek underworld. According to myth, drinking from this river will cause someone to forget everything and enter a kind of state of oblivion. The speaker, then, is cautioning against reckless, self-destructive oblivion. Though the point is not made till later in the stanza, this is because the speaker views the melancholic state—the "wakeful anguish of the soul"—as something to be embraced, rather than drunk or drugged away.

The next warnings are against "wolfsbane," "nightshade," and the "ruby grape of Proserpine." The first of these is a poisonous flower, also known as monkshood. The caesuras surrounding the clause "tight-rooted" in line 2 conveys the way the plant is tightly embedded in the ground, meaning anyone who wants to take it out needs to be pretty desperate and determined. The consonance of /t/ sounds in the phrase also sound tight and compressed.

Nightshade is another deadly plant (also know as atropa belladonna), while the "ruby grape of Proserpine" is another classical allusion. Proserpine, or Proserpina, is the Roman myth equivalent of the Greek Persephone. Long story short, Persephone is the daughter of Zeus and a goddess named Demeter. Hades, ruler of the underworld, kidnaps Persephone and makes her his queen. Her return to earth each year marks springtime; she is associated with both death and vegetation.

What's important here is that all of the above can be grouped together as intoxicants, and they also hint at the act of suicide. They are, then, part of the speaker's way of building an argument not quite in favor of—but against the *rejection* of—the melancholic state. That is, the speaker is telling the listener not to actively try to dull the pain of melancholy.

"Yew-berries," mentioned in line 5, are also highly toxic. To make a rosary of them would be to somehow construct a personal religion or way of life around intoxication, as though they are an object to aid prayer. Of course, the speaker rejects this idea too.

### LINES 6-10

*Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be*
*Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl*
*A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;*
*For shade to shade will come too drowsily,*
*And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.*

The second half of the first stanza continues much the same as the first, offering further "Do Not" instructions to whoever is on the other end of the speaker's words. Lines 6 to 8 are more about symbolic associations, like a parent warning their child not to hang out with certain classmates. Accordingly, the speaker warns against keeping the company of "the beetle," the "death-moth," and "the downy owl." There are multiple connotations of these three.

Firstly, and most generally, they are all winged creatures. To put it metaphorically, the poem argues that a melancholic person should remain grounded in their melancholic world—they should embrace their feelings and, as stanza two suggests, pursue the earthly beauties of the natural world—rather than take intoxicants in order to escape—to fly away from—their melancholic feeling. The beetle has also long been associated with death, even as far back as the Ancient Egyptians (who considered scarabs, or dung beetles, sacred). The death-moth is a moth with a skull pattern on its back, and the "downy owl" carries with it connotations of midnight and the supernatural. Basically, then, the speaker is urging the listener no to focus on or wallow in symbols of death.

These three lines are full of beautiful sounds, however, which is part of the way that the first stanza builds a picture of the seduction of intoxication and/or the overindulgence of melancholy (there is a key difference in the poem between *embracing* melancholy and people letting it get the better of them). The sounds are luxurious, enticing, and, in their own way, indulgent:

> Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be
> Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl
> A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;

These lines are full of consonance and assonance: long /ee/ sounds, /our/, the delicate /th/ sound of the moth, humming /m/ sounds, whispering /s/ sounds, and more. They build a picture of a certain kind of temptation, one that the poem is warning against.

The allusion to Psyche is important here. Psyche has two meanings, one more familiar to contemporary readers than the other. Keats is, in part, talking about psychology, warning the addressee of the poem not to wed themselves—psychologically speaking—with the "death-moth," which is a kind of stand-in for the desire for death and self-destruction. But Psyche is also a figure from Greek mythology associated with love and beauty (in fact, she is the lover of Cupid—who in myth is the son of the goddess Venus, not a cherubic, arrow-toting baby). Psyche is often depicted as having butterfly wings, hence the association with the moth here.

The closing lines of the stanza work as a summary of the speaker's motives in the previous eight lines. That is, they explain *why* the stanza is so full of warnings. Essentially, the speaker doesn't try to offer the addressee a way out of melancholy, but instead advocates embracing the "anguish of the soul" with "wakeful[ness]."

In other words, the melancholic individual should embrace melancholy, but not to the extent that they *indulge* it with intoxication or even suicide. They should instead be *alive* to it—there's a reason anguish is described here as "wakeful"—rather than letting the "shade" of intoxicants or death cast further "shade" on their sadness (the repeat of shade in line 9 is an example of diacope). The "drowsi[ness]" of Lethe, wolf's-bane, and so on only leads to the "drown[ing]" of the soul.

## LINES 11-14

*But when the melancholy fit shall fall*
*Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,*
*That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,*
*And hides the green hill in an April shroud;*

If the first stanza read as a list of ways *not* to respond to melancholy, the second stanza starts to offer more active suggestions of what people *should* do. But before it does so, the first four lines build a picture of the arrival of a melancholic mood. This is characterized as a "fit," a kind of mood that overpowers an individual. Melancholy is presented as something external to an individual that imposes itself upon that individual, and in this case it is likened through simile to a falling rain.

The second line in the stanza begins with the urgent sound of a trochee, a foot that is stressed-unstressed (momentarily altering the line's iambic pentameter). This trochee emphasizes the suddenness with which the "melancholy fit" arrives:

But when | the mel- | ancho- | ly fit | shall fall
Sudden | from heav- | en like | a weep- | ing cloud,

This starts to build an association between melancholy, nature, and beauty. "Heaven" here doesn't just mean the sky, but also carries with it positive connotations, as if this melancholy rain is a blessing sent from heaven. It's worth noting how enjambment creates a little "fall" between the two lines, the reader's eyes having to fall to the next line in order to complete the sense of the phrase.

Indeed, the following two lines compare the relationship between melancholy and beauty to the relationship between water and plants. The "weeping cloud"

[...] fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
And hides the green hill in an April shroud;

Personification here characterizes rainwater as a kind of caring, motherly figure "foster[ing] the droop-headed flowers." Just as rain keeps the beautiful flowers alive, so too does melancholy keep beauty alive.

April is also personified. Its "shroud" can be interpreted as both a mournful garment and as a kind of protection, suggesting there's a beneficial side to melancholy. These first four lines, then, start to build a positive case for melancholy, the speaker attempting to show both how and why people should embrace this kind of mood.

## LINES 15-20

*Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,*
*Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,*
*Or on the wealth of globed peonies;*
*Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,*
*Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,*
*And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.*

Lines 15 to 20 offer the speaker's suggested response to melancholy. In essence, the speaker argues for an intense focus on beauty—beauty which, paradoxically, is intensely melancholic because it is impermanent.

The melancholic person should "glut" their "sorrow on a morning rose." "[M]orning" here implies the rose's beauty cannot last, that it will have withered by evening (with a possible pun on *mourning* as well). "Glut" is an interesting verb here (it means it "to consume in excess"), and applies to the rose and to the natural imagery of the following two lines. In other words, melancholy feeds on beauty, like a feast. The speaker urges the reader to deliberately indulge in beauty—particularly natural beauty—as a way of embracing melancholy. Indeed, because natural beauty *can't* last forever (since everything eventually dies), that beauty itself is a kind of melancholy.

Lines 15 to 17 have beautiful sounds weaved throughout as a way of conveying this indulgence in nature and melancholy:

Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,
Or on the wealth of globed peonies;

Or if [...]

The assonance and consonance of the short /o/, long /o/, and /or/ sounds mimics the abundance of beauty (and melancholy) in nature. The alliteration of "salt sand-wave" is also intentionally pretty, and the anaphora of the repeated "Or[s]" suggests abundance too.

Lines 18 to 20 move the discussion on, but are still focused on what the melancholic person can actively do—as opposed to what they cannot do—as a response to their melancholy. Here, the focus is on a human figure, the "mistress" (or lover) of the addressee—and the poem imagines this mistress as being angry. The melancholic person should find a kind of natural beauty even in the mistress's anger by deliberately not returning that anger, and instead looking deep into the aesthetic beauty of "her peerless eyes."

Line 20 is almost entirely assonant, using long /ee/ sounds to suggest a lingering gaze between the addressee and the mistress's eyes:

And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

The epizeuxis in the line—"deep, deep"—characterizes this stare as another form of "glut[ting]," a way of embracing melancholy through indulgence in beauty.

## LINES 21-24

*She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;*
*And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips*
*Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,*
*Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:*

The third and final stanza aims to bring the previous two together, balancing the melancholic pleasures of the second stanza with the first's focus on poison, intoxication, and impermanence.

The most likely candidate for the "She" pronoun that begins the third stanza is Melancholy as a personified figure, rather than the more minor character of the "mistress" mentioned in line 18. The speaker suggests that this personified Melancholy is present in all beautiful yet impermanent things:

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;

The combination of caesura and epizeuxis in this line ("Beauty" is repeated on either side of the em-dash) is deliberately abrupt, interrupting the pretty first half of the line with the stark fact that beauty "must die."

More specifically, the speaker says that Melancholy "dwells with" three things: "Beauty that must die"; "Joy" that is always saying goodbye because it cannot last; and "Pleasure," which is a kind of "poison" because, again, it's only temporary. These three traits—Beauty, Joy, and Pleasure—are also personified, most prominently in the figure of Joy "whose hand is ever at his lips," wishing farewell to those that experience that joy.

Essentially, the speaker argues that the *most* melancholic experiences are those that, on the surface, seem the most desirable and positive. Yet, beginning in the second stanza, the speaker suggests that a melancholic person should actively pursue such experiences as a way of embracing, rather than defeating, melancholy. All good things, in other words, are sad because they cannot last—yet that impermanence gives them a beauty that is worth pursuing.

It's also interesting to note that the word "adieu"—a French word for goodbye—appears in all but one of Keats's six odes, including this one. To say goodbye, of course, is to signal an ending of sorts, and this shows how intently Keats focuses on time and impermanence throughout these poems. Anything good, for Keats, is always tempered by the inevitability of its ending.

## LINES 25-30

*Ay, in the very temple of Delight*
*Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,*
*Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue*
*Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;*
*His soul shalt taste the sadness of her might,*
*And be among her cloudy trophies hung.*

The final six lines of the poem try to explain and wrap up what has come before. They offer the reasoning behind the advice offered in the first and second stanzas.

Beginning with the affirmative "Ay," lines 25 and 26 explain that "Veil'd Melancholy" (again personified) lives in the "very temple of Delight." Delight here can be taken as a kind of catch-all term for anything good about life, encompassing beauty, joy, and pleasure. The "temple" implies that Delight deserves worship, almost like a god. Not only does Melancholy live in this temple, but she actually rules over it too. Melancholy is like a kind of Queen, the "sovran" (sovereign) of all life's beauty, pleasure, and joy—she rules over these because they cannot last and so are cast in sadness. The enjambment between the two lines creates a short moment of dramatic tension, as the reader waits to find out just who or what resides in the "temple of Delight."

Lines 27 and 28 make a complicated but important point that expands on the relationship between "Delight" and melancholy. "Veil'd Melancholy," whose veil suggests a kind of hiddenness, can only be seen by a particular type of melancholic person (here portrayed as male, though there is no real reason why). Only those who "burst Joy's grape" against the roof of their mouth can see (or "taste") the melancholy that is at the heart of all beauty and joy. For it is in bursting the "grape" that the eater brings about its end. In doing so, these people know beauty

more intimately *and*, crucially, embrace their melancholy more fully.

The consonance and assonance in these lines create a mouthwatering effect that mirrors what the lines describe:

> Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
> Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;

It's worth saying these lines out loud to get a better sense of their deliberate and delicate beauty. It's as though the poem saves its most beautiful-sounding lines for the moment when beauty is most intense—the moment at which it is doomed to die.

The final two lines offer a kind of conclusion to the poem, depicting the personified Melancholy as victorious. The melancholic person—who embraces melancholy, beauty, and impermanence in the way the poem suggests—will "taste the sadness of her [Melancholy's] might." But they will then "be among her cloudy trophies hung," becoming a kind of symbol of Melancholy's "sovran" power. The melancholic person becomes the same kind of "troph[y]" as the head of a deer mounted in a hunter's lodge. In other words, the poem seems to argue, melancholy always wins out in the end—but it's how people react to melancholy that is most important. In fact, becoming one of Melancholy's "cloudy trophies" is perhaps a good thing, because it represents a oneness with the beauty, as much as with sadness.

## SYMBOLS

### INTOXICANTS AND POISON

In "Ode on Melancholy," poisons and intoxicants—things like alcohol and drugs—symbolize an attempt to escape melancholy by dulling the mind and giving up on life. The first five lines of the poem present different substances that melancholic people might be drawn towards. These intoxicants are: the waters of Lethe (a mythical Greek river which causes the drinker to forget), wolf's-bane (poisonous), nightshade (also poisonous), Proserpine's wine (the wine of the underworld), and yew-berries (again poisonous). Though ingesting these, the poem argues, melancholic people *think* they might find some relief from their despair.

But these substances, for the speaker, represent the wrong way to respond to melancholy, because they bring "shade to shade" (line 9)—they make life darker. Instead, paradoxically, the melancholic individual should aim to see melancholy more clearly. All of these intoxicants are tempting, and the poem uses beautifully constructed phrases to signal their allure.

Ultimately, though, the speaker cautions against them all strongly. Of course, the speaker isn't warning against these things *specifically*, but against the general principle of responding to melancholy through intoxication or suicide. Instead, the speaker wants to remain in "wakeful anguish."

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-5:** "No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist / Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine; / Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd / By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine; / Make not your rosary of yew-berries,"
- **Lines 9-10:** " For shade to shade will come too drowsily, / And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul."

### INSECTS AND ANIMALS

In lines 6-8, the speaker implores the reader not to partner up with beetles, death-moths, or downy owls. These animals symbolize death, or an unhelpful preoccupation with death. Each of these creatures has close ties with death, and accordingly the speaker is attempting to say that death is not a good response to melancholy (though it might be tempting).

The beetle most likely relates to ancient Egyptian mythology. A type of beetle called a scarab was a popular symbol in ancient Egypt, particularly in the form of amulets. European poets often associated ancient Egypt with death and the afterlife, due to the Egyptian practice of mummification and related beliefs about the afterlife. So, the beetle here can be interpreted as symbolizing death, particularly with mythological overtones.

The death-moth is probably based on the death's-head hawkmoth, a large moth which has a skull-like figure on its back. Similarly, the owl is associated with the nocturnal and supernatural world. Taken all together, these animals become somewhat supernatural symbols of death. The speaker warns not to let these animals become one's "Psyche"—not to let a desire for death to define one's inner self.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 6-8:** " Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be / Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl / A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;"

### NATURE

In the second stanza, nature symbolizes the connection between beauty and melancholy. Though the first stanza does discuss nature, it specifically focuses on intoxicants and death. The second stanza presents nature in a

different way, looking at how it can help people who are very sad. Indeed, this stanza sees nature as somewhat representative of melancholy itself, in the sense that nature's beauty is inseparable from a cycle of life and death.

In other words, the beauty of nature is impermanent—it doesn't last forever, which imbues it with a sense of melancholy; at the same time, though, this impermanence is part of what makes nature so lovely in the first place, part of what encourages people's appreciation of it.

Note how rain nourishes flowers in the way that melancholy nourishes beauty. The nourishing rain cloud is described as "weeping." Tears, after all, can be a response both to sadness *and* to something beautiful. In this way, "weeping" and beauty can help make *sense* of melancholy (or, at least, make it feel less painful). Roses, rainbows, and peonies are all presented as natural beauties that can aid the melancholic individual in embracing—and making the most of—their mood. Flowers wilt, rainbows fade; built into their beauty is a sense of sadness at their inevitable departure. In a sense, then, nature is a reminder that without melancholy, beauty would not exist.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 12-17:** " Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud, / That fosters the droop-headed flowers all, / And hides the green hill in an April shroud; / Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose, / Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave, / Or on the wealth of globed peonies;"

## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLITERATION

"Ode on Melancholy," as with Keats's other odes, is a poem rich in sound and texture. There are a number of examples of alliteration throughout. The first example is in the opening line:

> No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist

The repeated /n/ sounds emphasize the way that this first stanza is about things that the melancholic individual should *not* do. The /n/ sounds are almost like the sound of an angry parent; they also have a slightly desperate sound, hinting at the tempting qualities of those intoxicants listed during the rest of the stanza. This link between the /n/ sound and the speaker's admonishments is echoed in the "not" and "nor" found in lines 5 to 7 as well.

The last two lines of the stanza also use alliteration effectively. The phrase "shade to shade"—also an example of diacope—emphasizes the metaphorical darkness of giving in to death. The speaker thinks melancholy should be embraced, rather than dulled by intoxication or annihilated by suicide. These two "shade[s]" represent *an excess* of this darkness (contrasted with the preferred "wakeful anguish of the soul"). The two /dr/ sounds in "drowsily" and "drown" (lines 9 and 10) draw this same link too.

The next alliteration is found in line 11:

> But when the melancholy fit shall fall
> Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
> That fosters the droop-headed flowers all

The two /f/ sounds contribute to the line's shifts in tone, with the first /f/ helping give the word a sprightly and upward ring which in turn emphasizes the more imposing, downtrodden sound of "fall." The same sound is echoed in line 13, in which melancholy is compared to a "weeping cloud" that nurtures "flowers." This link between "foster[ing]" and "flowers" supports the more general relationship between melancholy and beauty.

Skipping ahead, lines 26 to 29 use a number of alliterating /s/ sounds (also known as sibilance). These come as the poem is building to its peak, describing a kind of climax of pleasure/enjoyment of beauty which, at the same time, represents an intense moment of melancholy:

> Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine
> Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
> Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
> His soul shalt taste the sadness of her might,

These lines also focus on the act of tasting. The /s/ sounds have a kind of mouthwatering quality that helps bring out this focus on taste, capturing the way "Joy's grape" feels as its bursts in the mouth.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "N," "n," "n," "n," "t"
- **Line 2:** "t," "p"
- **Line 3:** "p"
- **Line 4:** "P"
- **Line 5:** "n"
- **Line 6:** " N," "b," "n," "d," "b"
- **Line 7:** "n," "d"
- **Line 9:** "sh," "sh," "dr"
- **Line 10:** "dr"
- **Line 11:** "f," "f"
- **Line 12:** "f"
- **Line 13:** "f," "h," "f"
- **Line 14:** "h," "h"
- **Line 15:** "r"

- **Line 16:** "r," "s," "s," "w"
- **Line 17:** "w"
- **Line 20:** "d," "d"
- **Line 21:** "d," "B," "B," "d"
- **Line 23:** "P"
- **Line 24:** "p"
- **Line 26:** "h," "h," "s"
- **Line 27:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 29:** "s," "s"

## ALLUSION

"Ode on Melancholy"—as with Keats's other odes—is full of allusions. These mostly occur in the first stanza. First of all, though, it's worth noting that the poem is strongly influenced by Keats's reading of Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (first published in 1621). It's fair to say that the poem's title—and its general focus on melancholy—is in part an allusion to this earlier work (which is somewhere between philosophy and a medical textbook).

The first stanza offers its first allusion in the very first line. The speaker instructs the addressee *not* to go to Lethe, a river in the ancient Greek mythological underworld. Drinking the waters of this river result in a kind of total forgetfulness, an oblivion of the mind. This contrasts with the "wakeful[ness]" that the speaker advocates in line 10.

The next allusion is in line 4. Here, the speaker implores the addressee not to drink the "ruby grape of Proserpine." The "ruby grape" here is the berry of the deadly nightshade plant, which is poisonous. Proserpine is basically the Roman equivalent of the Greek goddess Persephone, daughter of Zeus and Demeter (goddess of the harvest) who is kidnapped by Hades (god of the underworld) and made queen of the underworld. According to myth, Persephone is allowed to return to the earth's surface every year, which creates springtime. She is the goddess of vegetation and grain in addition to being strongly associated with the underworld. The "ruby grape" thus can also be read as representing the wine of the underworld. Not drinking Proserpine's poisonous wine, then, is part of the same warning in line 1: the addressee should not head for the underworld but instead should embrace melancholic earthly life.

The mention of the "rosary" in line 5 is a brief allusion to Christian traditions. Rosary beads feature prominently in the Catholic Church, and yew-berries are another poisonous plant. A "rosary of yew-berries" thus suggests a poisonous kind of ritual.

The beetle in line 6 is a possible allusion to Egyptian mythology. In ancient Egypt, a type of amulet in the shape of a beetle, called a scarab, was very popular both among the living and the dead. However, Europeans have often associated ancient Egypt with rituals relating to death and the afterlife—so, the beetle in this poem can be seen as a mythological symbol for death.

Soon after this allusion, the speaker returns to classical Greece, comparing the "death-moth" (most likely the death's-head hawkmoth) to Psyche. Psyche was a mortal woman who became a God, and is a figure of eternal love. So, the speaker is saying that the addressee shouldn't become wed—metaphorically speaking—to death. Psyche is also often depicted with wings and her name itself is the Greek word for "soul"—a person's inner psychological state.

Finally, it's possible that the personified version of "Melancholy" that appears in the last stanza is an allusion to the Greek goddess Oizys—the goddess of misery. The poem never explicitly states this, but its repeated references to Greek mythology can't help but bring it to mind, especially for readers immersed in Greek mythology (as Keats and his fellow writers were). The allusion to Oizys is additionally supported by the original intention behind the poem: a hero-quest in which the speaker searches for the goddess of Melancholy. Keats, though, deleted the poem's original first stanza—which is perhaps why it's not overly clear to whom the poem is actually addressed.

**Where Allusion appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Lethe"
- **Line 4:** "Proserpine"
- **Line 5:** "rosary"
- **Line 6:** "beetle"
- **Line 7:** "Psyche"
- **Line 26:** "Melancholy"

## ANAPHORA

In the first stanza, the speaker uses anaphora in repeating the word "nor" at the start of successive clauses in lines 1 and 2. This helps the speaker list the various temptations of drugs and intoxicants. The repetition underscores the forcefulness of the speaker's argument. The speaker passionately cautions against consuming these substances.

Meanwhile, stanza two is more about what the melancholic individual *can* do in their condition—as opposed to what they shouldn't do. It lists the beautiful things one can gaze upon:

> Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,
> Or on the wealth of globed peonies;
> Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,

The anaphora suggests abundance. The repeated "Or[s]" and "Or on the[s]" suggest that the melancholic individual, perhaps to the individual's surprise, has a whole range of options at their disposal. These are mostly linked to natural beauty and the way that such beauty is connected to melancholy (because it can never last). The anaphora makes it sound as if these are just three examples among many, as though the speaker could

select a hundred more examples if they so wanted.

**Where Anaphora appears in the poem:**

- **Line 6:** "Nor," "nor"
- **Line 7:** "nor"
- **Line 16:** "Or on the"
- **Line 17:** "Or on the"
- **Line 18:** "Or"

## ASSONANCE

Keats's odes are among the most beautiful-sounding poems in the English language, and "Ode on Melancholy" is no exception. It's strongly advised that readers attempt speaking the poem out loud to get a better sense of the poem's rich and almost virtuosic control of sound.

Assonance begins the poem:

> No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist

The long /o/ sounds introduce the poem on a hypnotic note, anticipating the temptation of the intoxicants listed in the rest of the stanza. "Lethe"—pronounced to rhyme with "leafy"—chimes with "neither" to double down on this enticing sound. Indeed, it's fair to say that the assonance in the rest of the stanza up till line 9 is intended in the same way: to create a sense of luxurious, enticing, but deadly beauty and temptation:

> Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd
> By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;
> Make not your rosary of yew-berries,
> Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be
> Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl
> A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;

The total effect is to weave a kind of sonic spell on the reader, mimicking the hold that such poisons/intoxicants have on their consumers. The final assonance in the stanza links the "drows[iness]" of such intoxicants with the "drown[ing]" of the "wakeful [...] soul."

The assonance in the second stanza is, in fact, not dissimilar to the first. It conjures a sense of beauty, abundance, and richness—but the key difference is that these are examples of things that the melancholic individual *can* enjoy, as a way to embrace their melancholic state (rather than things to avoid). In the stanza's final line, long stretched-out /ee/ sounds convey a deep, lingering stare (as part of a way to embrace the melancholic state):

> "And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes."

The third stanza also uses assonance to beautiful effect. In lines 22 and 23, "Joy" is personified as a figure "whose hand is ever at his lips / Bidding adieu." The shared short /i/ vowels feel almost formal, as though they somehow embody the act of saying goodbye ("adieu"). In line 27, the assonance of "tongue" with the "none" earlier in the line creates a satisfying sound, anticipating the "burst[ing]" of joy's grape in the following line.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "o," "o," "o," "e," "e," "ei"
- **Line 2:** "o," "oi"
- **Line 3:** "o," "a," "o"
- **Line 4:** "i," "a," "a," "i"
- **Line 5:** "a," "ou," "y," "e," "ie"
- **Line 6:** "o," "e," "ee," "o," "ea," "e"
- **Line 7:** "ou," "ou," "e," "o," "o," "y," "o"
- **Line 9:** "a," "a," "ow," "y"
- **Line 10:** "ow," "a," "a"
- **Line 11:** "e," "e," "o," "a"
- **Line 12:** "u," "e," "o," "e"
- **Line 14:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 15:** "o," "o," "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 16:** "O," "o," "ai," "o," "a," "a"
- **Line 17:** "O," "o," "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 18:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 19:** "a," "a"
- **Line 20:** "ee," "ee," "ee," "ee"
- **Line 21:** "eau," "eau"
- **Line 22:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 23:** "i," "a," "a"
- **Line 25:** "Ay," "e," "e," "i"
- **Line 27:** "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 29:** "a," "a"
- **Line 30:** "e," "o," "y," "i," "u"

## CAESURA

Caesura is used frequently in "Ode on Melancholy." It's most notable in the first stanza. The first eight lines list different temptations that might confront the melancholic individual, whether it's drinking from the self-annihilating waters of the River Lethe, taking "wolf's-bane," drinking Proserpine's wine, or giving into death. The numerous caesurae make this section seem jam-packed with examples of things that might entice the melancholic individual. But by interrupting the syntax and the way that these eight lines unfold, the caesurae also suggest a vexed and troubled state of mind—as if the phrases refuse to settle into proper lines.

Contrast this with the second stanza, which does precisely the opposite of the first. Whereas the first stanza had eight lines packed with caesura and then two with none, the second stanza has none in the first eight lines and two in its final two lines. This subtly hints at the way the second stanza is the opposite of the first, particularly in the way that it seems to offer things

that the melancholic individual *can* do rather than can't. The caesurae in line 20 facilitates the repetition of "deep" (which itself is a technique called epizeuxis).

Line 21's caesura mirrors the one in line 20. However, this sudden repetition of "Beauty" has a subtle violence to it, the speaker suddenly shifting the focus from the delights of such beauty to the fact that it "must die." In contrast, the caesura in line 23 has a much gentler effect: coming after "Bidding adieu," this caesura is beautifully placed, creating a small but significant sense of absence that mirrors the mention of goodbye.

**Where Caesura appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** “,” “,” “,”
- **Line 2:** “,” “,”
- **Line 4:** “,”
- **Line 6:** “,”
- **Line 7:** “,”
- **Line 19:** “,”
- **Line 20:** “,”
- **Line 21:** “—”
- **Line 22:** “,”
- **Line 23:** “;”
- **Line 25:** “,”

## CONSONANCE

As with Keats's other odes, "Ode on Melancholy" is full of beautiful sound. Most of this is achieved through consonance, assonance, and alliteration. In truth, there's hardly a line in this poem that *doesn't* contain some form of consonance. The first line uses alliterative /n/ sounds (discussed in the alliteration section of this guide), and two delicate /th/ sounds in "Lethe" (pronounced to rhyme with "leafy") and "neither." The consonance in this line anticipates the rich and luxurious list of intoxicants to follow, with the poem's sound casting its own spell on the reader to match.

The second line is tightly organized in terms of its sound, as though it too, like the wolf's-bane," is rooted in the ground:

> Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;

Then, the pleasant-sounding /p/ sounds in the next line—"ruby grape of Proserpine"— anticipate the bursting of "Joy's grape" in the poem's conclusion (as well as contributing to the stanza's overall sound of tempting intoxication).

In line 5, there are numerous /r/ sounds:

> Make not your rosary of yew-berries

The repetition of these sounds mimics the purpose of rosary beads (which is to help the religious count their prayers). In line 6, delicate /t/ sounds evoke the smallness of the "beetle," and the breathy /th/ sounds convey the delicate wings of the "death-moth."

The second stanza is also full to the brim with consonance. Here it's also used to convey beauty, but this is beauty of a kind that the speaker feels is more relevant to the melancholic individual. Indeed, the consonance seems to intensify in some of these lines, such as the last:,

> And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

Such abundance indicates that what's discussed represents something that is *more* beautiful than the admittedly tempting things described in the first stanza.

The third stanza continues this consonance in its attempt to bring the first two stanzas into some kind of resolution. The word "sips" in line 24 is beautifully placed, the /p/ chiming with "poison" and "Pleasure," and the two /s/ sounds ringing out consonantly even within the space of one small word. The /n/ sounds in line 27 are intense, conveying the effort required to embrace both beauty and melancholy simultaneously. Ultimately the poem's lush consonance helps unify it and capture the speaker's belief in the relationship between beauty and melancholy.

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** “N,” “n,” “n,” “t,” “t,” “th,” “th,” “t,” “w,” “t”
- **Line 2:** “W,” “n,” “t,” “t,” “t,” “t,” “s,” “n,” “s,” “w,” “n”
- **Line 3:** “N,” “r,” “ff,” “r,” “f,” “d,” “d”
- **Line 4:** “d,” “r,” “r,” “p,” “P,” “r,” “r,” “p”
- **Line 5:** “y,” “r,” “r,” “s,” “r,” “y,” “b,” “rr,” “s”
- **Line 6:** “r,” “t,” “th,” “b,” “t,” “th,” “th,” “th,” “b”
- **Line 7:** “r,” “r,” “n,” “n,” “r,” “n”
- **Line 8:** “r,” “r,” “r,” “rr,” “s,” “r,” “s”
- **Line 9:** “sh,” “d,” “sh,” “d,” “ll,” “dr,” “l”
- **Line 10:** “dr,” “l,” “l”
- **Line 11:** “n,” “l,” “n,” “ch,” “l,” “f,” “ll,” “ll”
- **Line 12:** “n,” “f,” “n,” “l,” “k,” “cl”
- **Line 13:** “f,” “r,” “d,” “r,” “h,” “d,” “d,” “f,” “l,” “rs,” “ll”
- **Line 14:** “d,” “h,” “d,” “r,” “n,” “h,” “ll,” “n,” “n,” “l,” “d”
- **Line 15:** “Th,” “l,” “th,” “s,” “rr,” “r,” “r,” “s”
- **Line 16:** “r,” “n,” “r,” “n,” “s,” “s,” “n,” “w”
- **Line 17:** “r,” “w”
- **Line 18:** “s,” “ss,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 19:** “n,” “t,” “n,” “d,” “n,” “d,” “t”
- **Line 20:** “d,” “d,” “d,” “p,” “d,” “p,” “p,” “n,” “r,” “p,” “r,” “ss,” “s”
- **Line 21:** “d,” “w,” “w,” “B,” “t,” “B,” “t,” “t,” “t,” “d”
- **Line 22:** “n,” “d,” “s,” “n,” “d,” “s,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 23:** “dd,” “d,” “d,” “P”
- **Line 24:** “n,” “p,” “n,” “s,” “p,” “s”
- **Line 25:** “v,” “t,” “pl,” “f,” “l,” “t”
- **Line 26:** “ V,” “l,” “l,” “h,” “h,” “s,” “v,” “r,” “n,” “r,” “n”
- **Line 27:** “s,” “n,” “n,” “n,” “s,” “s,” “s,” “n,” “s”

- **Line 28:** “n,” “r,” “s,” “t,” “s,” “g,” “r,” “p,” “g,” “nst,” “p,” “t,” “n”
- **Line 29:** “s,” “s,” “t,” “t,” “st,” “s,” “ss,” “m,” “t”
- **Line 30:** “m,” “ng,” “ng”

## ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used regularly throughout "Ode on Melancholy." In the first stanza it combines with caesura to create a tension in the way that the phrases begin and end. In the first line, for example, it creates a tension with the verb "twist"—which needs the following line to complete its sense. The same effect is achieved at the end of line 6 and 7. This stanza is about the *wrong* way to respond to melancholy, and the tense, twisting sound of the stanza—in part owing to the enjambment—creates the sound of a troubled mind.

Enjambment is used only once in the second stanza: at the end of line 11. This creates a moment's dramatic pause after the word "fall"—and it's in this moment that the reader's eyes have to fall down the page to the next line. Otherwise, this stanza avoids enjambment (in contrast to the previous stanza), suggesting the assertiveness with which the speaker offers ways to cope with melancholy.

In the third stanza, line 22's enjambment is especially beautiful, creating an air of finality around the "Bidding adieu" of line 23 (which is helped by the caesura that follows). Lines 25 and 27 are also enjambed, and in a sense mirror one another. That's because both pairs of lines (25 and 26; 27 and 28) are about the way that melancholy is most intensely present in life's greatest beauty and joy—and each enjambment brings with it both a sense of satisfaction (as the sense of the phrase is completed) and deflation as the tension of the line is released (and the pleasure dies away).

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-2:** “twist / Wolf's-bane”
- **Lines 3-4:** “kiss'd / By”
- **Lines 6-7:** “be / Your”
- **Lines 7-8:** “owl / A”
- **Lines 11-12:** “fall / Sudden”
- **Lines 22-23:** “lips / Bidding”
- **Lines 25-26:** “Delight / Veil'd”
- **Lines 27-28:** “tongue / Can”

## REPETITION

Repetition appears throughout the poem in various forms, including anaphora (which we discuss in its own entry), epizeuxis, and diacope. This discussion focuses on these latter two devices.

Epizeuxis is used three times in "Ode on Melancholy." The first example is at the very beginning: "No, no." The effect here is to intensify the speaker's warnings. One "no" is not enough to emphasize how ill-advised it is to go to "Lethe," which would result in self-annihilation. The melancholic individual really shouldn't—in the speaker's opinion—be tempted by oblivion or intoxication. The double "no" also speaks to the strong appeal of such intoxicants, the speaker subconsciously acknowledging their strong effect on melancholic people.

The next instance of epizeuxis is in line 20 through the repeat of "deep." This emphasizes the depth of the stare between the addressee and their angry mistress—a stare that looks beyond the anger and finds beauty in the mistress's eyes. The final is then in line 21, immediately after the previous instance, thereby acting as a kind of mirror of the previous line. Here, though, the effect is much more dramatic. The speaker sounds as though he will continue on the subject of "Beauty," but makes an abrupt turn to talk about the inextricable link between beauty and melancholy—because all beauty "must die." The epizeuxis—combined with the caesura in the line—thus signals an abrupt change in direction.

Diacope, meanwhile, is used in line 9 (though the repetitions of the word "nor" in the first stanza have a similar effect). They create a long list of things that the addressee of the poem specifically should *not* do when faced with a melancholy mood. The diacope of "shade to shade" distinguishes between two different kinds of shade. There is the shade of the melancholy mood itself—which the speaker thinks should be embraced—and then there is the undesired shade of intoxicants and even death. These latter two responses are *too much* shade, "drown[ing the wakeful anguish of the soul."

**Where Repetition appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** “No, no”
- **Line 9:** “shade,” “shade”
- **Line 20:** “deep, deep”
- **Line 21:** “Beauty—Beauty”

## PERSONIFICATION

Personification is used throughout "Ode on Melancholy." In the first stanza, it's used to attribute a kind of evil intent to the intoxicants of the natural world. The deadly nightshade plant is capable of "kiss[ing];" beetles and "death-moths" are able to join humans as their mythological symbols of death; and a "downy owl" can be a "partner in [...] sorrow's mysteries." "Shade" too can "drown" the soul. All in all, these are figures of intoxication and temptation—and the personification makes it seem as if they are actively trying to entice the melancholic individual towards them.

Personification is also used in the second stanza. Clouds are described as "weeping"—an image that emphasizes the poem's focus on melancholy and sadness. Hills can wear an "April shroud" of rain, an image that ties in with the weeping clouds.

The personification is then ramped up in the final stanza.

Indeed, it's a little confusing in some ways, because the "She" of line 21 doesn't relate to the "mistress" in the end of the second stanza. Instead, this "She" is "Melancholy" herself, a kind of personified and deified figure (i.e. turned into a god/goddess). The original design for the poem was for it to be a hero-quest in which a young man seeks out the goddess Melancholy—and in this context, the personification here might have been less jarring.

Beyond this context, this stanza engages in a lot of personification: "Beauty" is also personified because it is capable of dying; "Joy" is a male figure eternally bidding goodbye; and "Pleasure" can "ache" (though this doesn't have to be read as personification). Melancholy is then explicitly personified in line 26, making sense of the "She" that begins the stanza. This Melancholy is a kind of goddess Queen, ruling over the "temple of Delight." Finally, Melancholy proves to be the ultimate victor in the relationship between people, beauty (and any other good things in life), and melancholy. The "soul[s]"of those who "taste the sadness of her might" are "hung" "among her cloudy trophies."

**Where Personification appears in the poem:**

- Lines 3-4
- Lines 6-8
- Lines 9-10
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Lines 21-30

## SIMILE

Simile is used once in "Ode on Melancholy," in line 11 to 14. This simile characterizes the "melancholy fit"—the arrival of the melancholic mood—as a kind of storm raining down from "heaven" (the skies). The relationship between this mood and the rain is made clear in the personification of "weeping cloud"—both are linked to water (tears are like rain). The simile allows the speaker to make the argument that this kind of melancholy, if allowed, has a kind of nurturing and cultivating effect on life.

This simile also opens up the discussion of nature and beauty that follows in the stanza, allowing for the natural world to be offered as a kind of way of embracing melancholy rather than fighting it. In a way, the simile can inform the reader's understanding of the whole stanza. That is, it doesn't have to be nature specifically that is used as a way of embracing melancholy. What's important is looking intently and intensely at the world. Indeed, this thinking seems to be behind the stanza's last three lines, which argue for a kind of aesthetic beauty even in the face of another person's "rich anger."

**Where Simile appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 11-14:** "But when the melancholy fit shall fall / Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud, / That fosters the droop-headed flowers all, / And hides the green hill in an April shroud;"

## VOCABULARY

**Lethe** (Line 1) - *Lethe* (LEE-thee) is a river in the mythological underworld of Ancient Greece. Those that drink its waters enter a state of oblivion—they forget their past.

**Wolf's-bane** (Line 2) - This is a type of poisonous plant that features in classical mythology.

**Tight-rooted** (Line 2) - This relates to the wolf's-bane having strong roots in the ground and therefore requiring effort to pull it out.

**Thy** (Line 3) - An archaic form for "your."

**Nightshade** (Line 4) - The deadly nightshade, or *atropa belladonna*, is a poisonous plant.

**Ruby Grape of Proserpine** (Line 4) - *Proserpine* is the Roman equivalent of the Greek goddess Persephone. She is the goddess of wine and closely affiliated with the underworld. The "ruby grape" refers to the berry of nightshade, which is notoriously poisonous and will send anyone who eats it to join Proserpine in the underworld.

**Rosary of Yew-berries** (Line 5) - *Rosary* beads are a string of beads, like a garland or necklace, used to aid prayer. They are prominent in the Catholic tradition. The *yew-berry* is another poisonous plant/fruit. This widens the poem's cultural scope to include Christianity as well as the world of classical myth already mentioned.

**Death-moth** (Line 6) - Most likely the death's-head hawkmoth, a type of moth with a figure on its back that looks like a skull.

**Psyche** (Line 7) - *Psyche* is a greek Goddess (who was once a mortal) that is often depicted with wings, hence the link between her and the beetle/death-moth. Like Proserpine, she has links with the underworld—reinforcing the speaker's argument that the melancholic person should not see death as a solution to their sadness. *Psyche* is also the Greek word for the soul or spirit.

**Downy** (Line 7) - This means soft and feathery.

**Wakeful Anguish** (Line 10) - *Wakeful* here means attentive. The speaker argues that the melancholic individual should actively embrace their *anguish*, or suffering, not try to suppress or nullify it.

**Fosters** (Line 13) - This relates to nurture and cultivation. The rain aids the flowers, who are nearing death ("droop-headed"),

to be full of life once more.

**Droop-headed Flowers** (Line 13) - The flowers' heads hang low because they are in need of water.

**Shroud** (Line 14) - A cloth wrap that goes around a head or body, associated both with sheets used to cover the dead as well as clothing for the living.

**Glut** (Line 15) - If someone *gluts* themselves it means that they fill themselves to excess. For example, someone might glut themselves on ice cream. Here, "sorrow" itself seems to feast on the beauty of nature.

**Sand-wave** (Line 16) - This is just Keats's way of describing a wave on the coast.

**Globed Peonies** (Line 17) - *Globed* here relates to a spherical shape, and peonies are a type of flower. It should also be noted that, in Keats's writing, the -ed in past tense verbs like "globed" should be pronounced—i.e. "globèd."

**Emprison** (Line 19) - Another spelling of "imprison."

**Rave** (Line 19) - This means to rant and shout, perhaps with a hint of madness.

**Peerless** (Line 20) - This means "without comparison," but is also a slight pun the *peering* action of looking at something deeply.

**Dwells** (Line 21) - To *dwell* somewhere is to live there.

**Bidding Adieu** (Line 23) - This means saying goodbye, from the French word for goodbye. Interestingly, only one of Keats's group of odes *doesn't* contain the word *adieu*, hinting at his obsession with impermanence and the shortness of life.

**Nigh** (Line 23) - This means "near."

**Ay** (Line 25) - An affirmative expression, meaning something like "yes" or "indeed."

**Veil'd** (Line 26) - This just means covered with a *veil* (a small piece of cloth).

**Sovran** (Line 26) - *Sovran* is an archaic spelling of "sovereign," or ruler. Melancholy is the monarch of Delight, meaning she rules over it with her sovereign power. A *shrine* is a holy place where a divine figure can be worshipped. Melancholy thus becomes the ruling god in the "temple of Delight."

**Strenuous** (Line 27) - To do something *strenuously* is to do it with considerable effort, usually of a physical nature. The "strenuous tongue" thus has to work hard to burst the grape.

**Palate** (Line 28) - The roof of someone's mouth, but also their ability to discern—and enjoy—different flavors.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

As the title suggests, this poem is an ode. The ode is a verse form that dates back to Ancient Greece. Keats's poem consists of three stanzas, each with 10 lines.

In its original form, the ode was often celebratory; this ode is markedly different in tone, however. Likewise, Keats's poem does not fit into the more traditional formats originally established for odes (associated with the ancient poets Homer and Pindar). Keats developed his ode form because he felt that the other established forms did not quite fit what he wanted his poems to do.

The poem has a fairly clear progression from start to finish. The first stanza outlines things that the melancholic individual should *not* do as a response to their state of mind (e.g. intoxication and death). The second offers more positive advice as to what can be done: embrace melancholy by perceiving it in the beauty of nature and life. The third stanza strives to make sense of the previous two, arguing that all that's best about life is suffused with melancholy precisely because it cannot last.

It's worth noting that Keats originally intended for the poem to be about a hero's quest to find the goddess Melancholy. He deleted the first stanza, completely altering the tone and meaning of the poem. For readers that want to see it, it's copied below:

> Though you should build a bark of dead men's bones,
> And rear a phantom gibbet for a mast,
> Stitch creeds together for a sail, with groans
> To fill it out, bloodstained and aghast;
> Although your rudder be a Dragon's tail,
> Long sever'd, yet still hard with agony,
> Your cordage large uprootings from the skull
> Of bald Medusa; certes you would fail
> To find the Melancholy, whether she
> Dreameth in any isle of Lethe dull.

Deleting this stanza made the poem more ambiguous and mysterious. It also made the addressee of the poem (the "you") far less specific. As a result, the poem is capable of applying to many more people's lives, and it takes on a quieter, more introspective tone.

### METER

As with Keats's other odes, "Ode on Melancholy" is written in iambic pentameter. This is a line with five poetic feet, each comprised of a da DUM (unstressed-stressed) syllabic pattern. A good example of this would be line 15:

> Then glut | thy sor- | row on | a mor- | ning rose,

There are numerous variations to this metrical scheme spread throughout the poem, some more significant than others. The first two lines, for example, are actually quite irregular, starting the poem on a tense footing (no pun intended):

No, no, | go not | to Leth- | e, nei- | ther twist
Wolf's-bane, | tight-root- | ed, for | its poi- | sonous wine;

The lines have a kind of gnarled and difficult quality to them, suggesting the troubles of a melancholic mind. As is often the case with Keats's verse, this is not the only way of scanning these lines, though it is perhaps the most intuitive.

Another important variation is in the trochee that appears in the first foot of line 12. A trochee puts the stress on the first syllable (DUM-da):

Sudden | from heav- | en like | a weep- | ing cloud,

Beginning with a stressed syllable brings a suddenness to the line, mirroring the description of the onset of the melancholy "fit."

Another variation is in line 23, when the personified "Joy" is said to have his hand at his lips "Bidding | adieu." This has a lilting quality to it that seems to convey the act of saying goodbye.

As a minor note, any time Keats uses the past tense -ed form of a verb, as in the phrase "globed peonies" in line 17, the -ed should be pronounced—i.e., "globèd" When he inserts an apostrophe instead, the word can be pronounced as normal, as in "to be kiss'd" in line 3.

So, as with Keats's other odes, the iambic pentameter in "Ode on Melancholy" is flexible. It plays with stress to emphasize certain phrases and images, yet it always returns to its basic da-DUM structure.

## RHYME SCHEME

"Ode on Melancholy" is a formally organized poem that uses metrical and rhyming patterns. The first stanza is rhymed:

ABABCDECDE

The second follows suit. But the third stanza is rhymed:

ABABCDEDCE

This subtle shift in the rhyme scheme of the last stanza—the C and D rhymes switch spots in lines 28 and 29—draws attention to the physicality of the final lines, as if the rhyme itself "burst[s]" like "Joy's grape."

Generally speaking, the elaborateness of the rhyming pattern helps make the poem sound beautiful. This isn't just done for the sake of sounding nice, however—beauty is at the heart of the poem's subject matter, particularly in the relationship between beauty and melancholy. In the first stanza, the rhymes are part of the *sound* of intoxication—which the speaker warns against. In the second, they are part of the overall picture of nature's beauty. And in the third, they help demonstrate the close relationship between the two.

## SPEAKER

The speaker in "Ode on Melancholy" isn't given a specific identity. The odes are often taken to be the voice of Keats himself, but deciding one way or another isn't necessary for understanding or enjoying of the poems. What's important to note is that the speaker has a clear mission in this poem—to warn, advise, and inform.

It's not clear who the poem is addressed to, but the speaker spends the first stanza advising the reader on what intoxicants to avoid and cautioning against choosing death over life. These, according to the speaker, are not good responses to melancholy. Instead, the speaker feels that the addressee (perhaps standing in for anyone who is melancholic) should maintain "wakeful anguish" and embrace melancholy. One of the ways this can be done, argues the speaker in the second stanza, is to see the beauty and melancholy in nature. Indeed, in the third stanza the speaker explains that beauty and melancholy are inextricably linked: all beauty is ultimately melancholic, because nothing can last forever.

## SETTING

"Ode on Melancholy" is not really set in one specific place or time. However, there are a few features of the poem's overall atmosphere that it's important to take note of.

First off, the poem is an address from a speaker to a listener or reader. The speaker is advising the un-specified addressee (the "you") on how to respond to melancholy. In this way, the setting can be thought of as the space between the speaker and reader—the imaginative space of the poem.

Within this imaginative space, the poem summons a great deal of natural imagery. In the first stanza, this imagery is linked to poisonous plants while also alluding to mythology. These allusions range from Classical Greek mythology in the first couple of lines, to Christian and ancient Egyptian allusions later in the stanza. So, while talking about melancholy, the speaker infuses images of nature with a mythological atmosphere.

In the second stanza, the speaker describes a "weeping cloud" and a series of beautiful sights, such as "globed peonies." Again, these images are summoned as illustrative examples—the speaker mentions them to make a point about the relationship between beauty and melancholy. Still, they contribute to the sense that natural landscapes are an important part of the poem's setting.

The third stanza places the personified Melancholy within the "temple of Delight," characterizing her as a kind of Queen of all that's good about life. This stanza might be thought of as taking place in that "temple of Delight," a mythological space where the gods and goddesses of Beauty, Joy, Pleasure, and Melancholy mingle. That said, the speaker never lets the reader

forget that this is an imagined space. It's concocted by the speaker in order to illustrate the nature of melancholy.

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

John Keats is now one of the most celebrated poets in the English language, and this one of his most celebrated poems. In his own lifetime, however, Keats struggled for recognition, overshadowed by more successful poets like William Wordsworth. "Ode on Melancholy" was written in an astonishing burst of creativity during the spring of 1819, during which Keats also wrote his other odes (except for "To Autumn," which was written slightly later, in September of the same year). These other odes include the equally famous "To Autumn" and "Ode to a Nightingale."

Keats is generally considered a key member of the Romantic poets, in particular of the second generation which included writers like Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Romanticism doesn't mean the same thing as "romantic"—instead, it is characterized, loosely speaking, by a deep-rooted belief in the power of the imagination, the transformative role of poetry in society, the importance of nature, and political engagement. Keats's writing was not well received during his lifetime, and he was the victim of snobbery from those who considered him to be an artistic imposter. However, his reputation quickly rose in the centuries after his death. He died in 1821 from tuberculosis, at the age of just 25.

"Ode on Melancholy" has a couple of specific literary influences to consider. The first of these was one of Keats's favorite and most reread books: Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. This was first published in 1621 and was marketed as a kind of medical textbook on the subject of melancholy (which is a kind of catch-all term for different types of sadness and negative feeling). Burton himself had a wide-ranging definition of melancholy:

> we call [those people] melancholy, that [are] dull, sad, sour, lumpish, ill-disposed, solitary, any way moved, or displeased.

According to Burton, no one alive was immune to such feelings. Crucially, he linked these feelings to mortality—and this relationship between melancholy and impermanence is key to Keats's poem.

Classical mythology is also an important part of the literary context of this poem. The first stanza makes three allusions to Greek/Roman myth: Lethe, Proserpine, and Psyche. This helps ground the poem in a kind of timelessness, as if Keats's argument applies to all of human history, not just to Keats's time period. Mythology also informs the personifications in the final stanza—of Beauty, Joy, Pleasure, Delight, and, most importantly, Melancholy. These figures are depicted almost like gods. Indeed, Melancholy even has a shrine in the "Temple of Delight."

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Keats wrote this poem not long after the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789, which facilitated Napoleon's rise to power. The early 19th century can be considered a period during which people rethought the way that individuals relate to society. The influential poet/critic William Wordsworth was particularly interested in the idea of civil liberties, though he became more conservative as he grew older.

Keats certainly had more than his fair share of bad luck during his lifetime, partly informing his focus on melancholy and—in particular—the impermanence of life and beauty. He had already lost both parents and an infant brother, and would himself be dead from tuberculosis within a couple of years of writing this poem. He also struggled financially throughout his life, and was frequently the subject of scorn from the literary establishment.

Indeed, the odes were written during a period when Keats thought he would soon be ceasing his writing life. Having borrowed money from his brother, George, and now unable to return the favor, Keats intended to get more financially stable work and give up poetry—but not before writing a few more poems, which turned out to be some of the best written in the English language.

## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Portrait of John Keats by Joseph Severn — A painting done of Keats by his friend and contemporary, Joseph Severn. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw03558/John-Keats)
- The Anatomy of Melancholy — A link to a book that Keats read frequently, published by Robert Burton in 1621. (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/10800/10800-h/10800-h.htm)
- A Contemporary's Review of Keats — A link to John Gibson Lockhart's snarky review of Keats's poetry in 1818. (http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu/TextRecord.php?textsid=36160)
- A Reading of "Ode on Melancholy" — A reading brought to you by the Keats Foundation. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7iRKk8wGm0)
- More by Keats — A link to a detailed biography of Keats as well as more poems, including his other odes.

(https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-keats)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN KEATS POEMS

- Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art
- La Belle Dame sans Merci
- Ode on a Grecian Urn
- Ode to a Nightingale
- Ode to Psyche
- On First Looking into Chapman's Homer
- To Autumn
- When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Howard, James. "*Ode on Melancholy.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 May 2019. Web. 20 Jan 2021.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*Ode on Melancholy.*" LitCharts LLC, May 8, 2019. Retrieved January 20, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/john-keats/ode-on-melancholy.