Ode to Psyche

POEM TEXT

O Goddess! hear these tuneless numbers, wrung
By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,
And pardon that thy secrets should be sung
Even into thine own soft-conched ear:
Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see
The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?
I wander'd in a forest thoughtlessly,
And, on the sudden, fainting with surprise,
Saw two fair creatures, couched side by side
In deepest grass, beneath the whisp'ring roof
Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran
A brooklet, scarce espied:

'Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,
Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian,
They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass;
Their arms embraced, and their pinions too;
Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu,
As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber,
And ready still past kisses to outnumber
At tender eye-dawn of aurorean love:
The winged boy I knew;
But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?
His Psyche true!

O latest born and loveliest vision far
Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy!
Fairer than Phoebe's sapphire-region'd star,
Or Vesper, amorous glow-worm of the sky;
Fairer than these, though temple thou hast none,
Nor altar heap'd with flowers;
Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan
Upon the midnight hours;
No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet
From chain-swung censer teeming;
No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat
Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

O brightest! though too late for antique vows,
Too, too late for the fond believing lyre,
When holy were the haunted forest boughs,
Holy the air, the water, and the fire;
Yet even in these days so far retir'd
From happy pieties, thy lucent fans,
Fluttering among the faint Olympians,
I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspir'd.
So let me be thy choir, and make a moan
Upon the midnight hours;
Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet
From swinged censer teeming;
Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat
Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:
Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees
Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;
And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,
The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep;
And in the midst of this wide quietness
A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,
With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,
Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:
And there shall be for thee all soft delight
That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
To let the warm Love in!

SUMMARY

Oh, Psyche, goddess of the mind and soul! Listen to my unmusical verses, squeezed out of me by a delightful force outside my control and by fond memories. And please forgive me for singing songs about your mysteries into your own shell-like ear!

I must have been dreaming today—or did I really see the butterfly-winged goddess Psyche while I was awake? I was out meandering absentmindedly through a forest, when I was startled to see two beautiful figures sleeping next to each other in the deep grass, lying under quietly rustling trees and flowers,

which were next to a little stream I could hardly see through all the foliage.

Among quiet, cool flowers with sweet-smelling centers—flowers that were blue, silvery, and deepest purple—these two figures lay gently asleep in the grass. They had their arms and their wings around each other. While their lips weren't quite touching, it seemed as if they'd just been kissing, as if sleep had gently separated them—they would be ready to start kissing again as soon as love opened their eyes like a new dawn. I recognized the boy with wings (as Eros, the god of love): but who were you, you lovely dove-like creature? Eros's faithful bride Psyche, of course!

O Psyche, you are the youngest and most beautiful of all the old Greek gods. You're lovelier than the moon itself, or than Venus, that passionate firefly of the night sky; you're lovelier than them even though no one ever built you a temple or piled up flowers on an altar for you; even though no virgin priestesses ever worshiped you with gorgeous midnight chants; even though no one played music for you, burnt incense for you, dedicated sacred places to you, or became an entranced prophet in your service.

O, most shining goddess! It's too late now for anyone to believe in you or worship you with musical prayers, since the world has moved past the days when everything was believed to be sacred and magical. But even in these modern times, so far from ancient religion, I can see your luminous wings beating among the gods—I can see this with the inspired power of my own imagination.

So let me sing gorgeous midnight chants to you; let me be your music and your incense; let me be your sacred place, and let me speak for you like an entranced prophet.

Yes, I'll be the priest of your religion, and build you a shrine in some remote part of my own mind, where thoughts, which cause me delicious suffering as they grow, will branch like trees. Those thought-trees will spread over the wild mountains of my mind like feathers covering the wings of a bird. And those forests will be full of gentle spring breezes, little rivers, birds, and bees, which will soothe the forest spirits into a peaceful sleep in their beds of moss.

Right in the middle of this quiet landscape, I'll decorate a rose-covered temple for you, draping it with the growing vines of my active mind—with flower buds, bells, and unknown stars, and everything else that the gardener of my imagination can invent. (And my imagination never makes up the same flower twice!)

In this temple, you'll find every pleasure that I can think up: there will be a shining lantern for you, and a window open at night so you can let your beloved Eros in.

THEMES

THE POWER AND BEAUTY OF THE IMAGINATION

In "Ode to Psyche," a wandering speaker stumbles across Psyche (the goddess of the soul and the mind) sleeping in a forest, and vows to build a temple to her. He won't build it with his hands, though: this temple will be all in his imagination. That doesn't make it less beautiful or less real, the poem implies. To this speaker, the mind's creative power is an awesome force, worthy of worship in itself. The poem *uses* the power of the imagination to *praise* the power of the imagination, building an inner temple to the goddess of the inner life.

Even before the speaker encounters Psyche, he's traveling through his own imagination. Imagination, he suggests, is sometimes an even stronger force than reality: dreams can feel just as real as the outside world!

Wandering "in a forest thoughtlessly," the speaker stumbles across Psyche and her lover Eros asleep, and asks: "Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see / The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?" His uncertainty suggests the intensity of his inner vision: his imagination is so powerful that he just can't be sure whether he's imagining what he's seeing.

The speaker's imagination is also so powerful that it's able to bring vanished gods back to life, and to transform the speaker himself into many different forms. Marveling at Psyche's beauty, the speaker laments that no one truly believes in gods and goddesses anymore. *He*, however, can worship Psyche anyway, making her real with the power of his imaginative vision: "I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspir'd."

To worship this goddess, he won't just find her a nice altar and a grove and a prophet; he'll use his imagination to *become* these things. "So let me be [...] thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet [...] Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle," he says, suggesting that he'll imaginatively inhabit all of these things and give them life.

At last, the imagination becomes both a place and everything *within* that place. In short, it becomes a whole rich world. In the last stanza, the external "forest" reappears inside the speaker as "some untrodden region of my mind," where thoughts grow like trees. Here, the speaker can decorate a gorgeous temple for Psyche with the help of the "gardener Fancy"—his own personified imagination.

In fact, the imagination is so powerful that it can even out-nature nature. The speaker notes that his imagination "will never breed the same" flowers, meaning that he will never run out of creative steam when it comes to thinking up new ways to envision and honor Psyche's beauty. In other words, the speaker's visions can outstrip the outside world in creativity

and variety.

With this incredibly powerful imagination, the speaker completes a temple that houses Psyche herself. This means that Psyche (who is a symbol of the mind and soul) can live in a beautiful temple built by the speaker's mind—a temple that stands in a forest that *also* represents the mind!

In the end, then, this is a poem that *uses* the power of the imaginative mind to *praise* the power of the imaginative mind. This means that "Ode to Psyche" is also, in some ways, an ode *from* Psyche. When, at the beginning of the poem, the speaker apologizes to the goddess for singing her secrets into her "own soft-conched ear," he's perfectly right to blush a little: here, the creative, imaginative mind is singing in praise of its *own* beauties and joys.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-67

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

O Goddess! hear these tuneless numbers, wrung
By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,
And pardon that thy secrets should be sung
Even into thine own soft-conched ear:

The speaker of "Ode to Psyche" begins with a passionate cry: "O Goddess!" This direct apostrophe lets readers know that this is an ode—a poem of praise addressed directly to its subject. The subject, in this case, will be Psyche, the classical goddess of the soul; the speaker intends to treat her with all the ceremonious respect a "Goddess" deserves.

He seems to have learned his manners from the poetry of her world. This first passage of the poem works a lot like an invocation, the little prayer to a god or a muse (a goddess of art and inspiration) that often appears at the beginning of an ancient Greek or Roman poem. (The Odyssey, for instance, famously begins, "Sing to me, Muse!") Here, though, the poet isn't asking Psyche to sing to (or through) him, but asking her to listen while he sings his "tuneless numbers"—a song without music—to her.

But he seems a little sheepish about asking her to listen! In fact, he begs Psyche's pardon:

> And pardon that thy secrets should be sung
> Even into thine own soft-conched ear:

Why on earth would this singer feel like he has to apologize for singing Psyche a song of praise about herself? The clue is in what she's the goddess of. As the goddess of the soul and the mind (one can find her name even today in words like "psychology"), she's the guardian of the inner life—and, as the reader will see, this poem is going to celebrate the inner life using all the powers of that inner life. In other words, he's using his own "psyche" to praise Psyche! Maybe he's right to blush a little.

The speaker vividly expresses his closeness to his subject in a moment of vivid imagery. He's not just singing this song into Psyche's ear, but whispering it into her "soft-conched ear." Here, he imagines that the ear looks like a shell, with whorls like a conch—but it's also *soft*. It's as if he's so close to Psyche that his lips are brushing her ear as he speaks. The gentle assonance of "soft-conched," and the sibilance of "pardon that thy secrets should be sung," heightens that feeling of whispery closeness even more. This will be an intensely intimate poem of the imagination.

LINES 5-6

Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see
The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?

With a bold rhetorical question, the speaker launches readers into a dream-world. "Surely I dreamt to-day," he begins. But maybe not! *Did* he see the "winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes"?

That depends on what he means by "awaken'd." On a surface level, the speaker seems to be saying that he *must* have been dreaming—but there's some outside possibility that he indeed met the goddess Psyche in person. (She's "winged" because she's often depicted with butterfly wings.)

But on a deeper level, perhaps the phrase "awaken'd eyes" doesn't necessarily mean that the speaker is awake. Maybe, this poem will suggest, the capacity to "see" sometimes involves seeing things that logic says can't really be there—and seeing them as richly alive as anything from the real world.

Either way, this unanswered question leaves both the speaker and the reader in a sort of between-state. It's possible that what the speaker is about to describe really happened; it's also possible that it's a dream, or perhaps it's a true dream, a vision that shows the speaker something more authentic and real than plain old everyday reality.

This is a good moment to note that the speaker often old-fashioned pronunciations for poetic effect in "Ode to Psyche." In most cases, when he uses a word that ends in "-ed," like "winged," he wants readers to pronounce it with an extra syllable: "wing-ed." When he wants "-ed" words pronounced without that extra syllable, he abbreviates them: "awaken'd." He's drawing on old poetic tradition here, using a Shakespearean voice to sing this song of a classical goddess.

LINES 7-12

I wander'd in a forest thoughtlessly,

And, on the sudden, fainting with surprise,
Saw two fair creatures, couched side by side
In deepest grass, beneath the whisp'ring roof
Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran
A brooklet, scarce espied:

The speaker narrates his dream (or vision), which began with him wandering "in a forest thoughtlessly." The idea that he meanders "thoughtlessly" suggests that one has to be in a certain kind of dreamy state to see the things the speaker is about to see. (Keats famously wrote on just this quality in one of his letters: he calls it "Negative Capability," the capacity to "be in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.")

What does he see as he wanders? "Two fair creatures," two beautiful young people, lying in the grass in a bedroom built from nature itself. Their "couch[]"—or bed—is "deepest grass"; they have a "whisp'ring roof" made of "leaves and trembled blossoms," and when they wake they can refresh themselves at a "brooklet" (a little stream).

Readers won't be surprised to discover that one of these "fair creatures" is Psyche; the other they'll recognize in a moment. What's striking in this first encounter is how completely at home this loving pair seem in nature. The world of growing things is so safe and comfortable to them that they can lie down in it and go to sleep. And indeed, plants and flowers are going to be one of this poem's most important symbols for the beauty and fertility of the imaginative soul. Keep an eye out for them—they'll be back.

Here, the speaker also makes the first of his surprising experiments with meter and rhyme. So far, the poem has been ticking along in iambic pentameter—a meter made up of five iambs, metrical feet that go da-DUM. It's common in English-language poetry, and especially familiar to many readers of Shakespeare.

The poem has also been using the same kind of back-and-forth rhyme scheme one would expect to see in a Shakespearean sonnet:

ABAB CDCD

In addition to the speaker's old-fashioned language (which was old-fashioned even when Keats was writing in the early 1800s!), the speaker's use of meter and rhyme suggest that the poem will continue in a predictable, conservative form. But suddenly, in line 12, iambic trimeter—only three da-DUM feet—breaks in. And the rhyme scheme gets a little strange starting in line 9. Instead of using an alternating rhyme scheme, the speaker uses an irregular pattern:

Saw two fair creatures, couched side by **side**
In deepest grass, beneath the whisp'ring roof
Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran
A brooklet, scarce **espied**:

The changes in the rhyme scheme happen just after the speaker feels himself "fainting with surprise" at the sight of the couple in the grass—as if the surprise has thrown him off balance. And the sudden gap in the meter in line 12 makes it seem like the speaker has stopped short to stare. This moment begins the poem's experiments with form—experiments that often mirror something that's going on in the poem's action or thought.

LINES 13-20

'Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,
Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian,
They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass;
Their arms embraced, and their pinions too;
Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu,
As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber,
And ready still past kisses to outnumber
At tender eye-dawn of aurorean love:

Startled out of his meandering walk, the speaker stops and stares at Psyche and her lover, immersing himself in the scene before him. Instead of staring at the sleeping couple, though, he looks first at the flowers they're lying in. He evokes those flowers with rich imagery. They're not just any old blossoms, but:

[...] hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,
Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian,

Notice how he works his way through four of his five senses here: hearing, touch, smell, and sight. The flowers are "hush'd," they feel "cool," they smell "fragrant," and their colors are blue, "silver-white," and purple ("Tyrian"). The only way he's not experiencing these flowers is by licking them! If this is an imaginative vision, it's a full-body one.

Psyche and her lover lie among these sensuous flowers. They're asleep, all wrapped up in each other: their "pinions," or wings, are embracing just like their arms. Their lips aren't touching, but look as if they just *finished* touching, or as if they're about to touch again. Like the speaker, they seem to be in a dream-like, liminal space.

Here again, the rhyme scheme changes to match the scene. When the speaker describes the couple, his rhymes, appropriately enough, turn to couplets: "too" and "adieu," "slumber" and "outnumber."

Perhaps the reader finds something a little voyeuristic in the way the speaker is staring at this couple—who seem to have fallen asleep in a pretty intimate moment. But if the speaker is staring, so is the surrounding environment: those "fragrant-eyed" flowers look right back at the speaker, and he imagines the sleepers awakening with the "tender eye-dawn of aurorean love"—that is, their eyes eventually opening up like rising suns. If this speaker is indeed wandering in his own visionary

imagination, it turns out that the imagination stares right back.

This intensely-imagined vision of the couple in the grass has already foregrounded many of the poem's big ideas. Not knowing if he's dreaming or not, the speaker has a vision of beautiful dreamers—a vision so intense that he can all but taste it. This is a picture of the imagination recognizing itself.

LINES 21-27

The winged boy I knew;
But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?
His Psyche true!
O latest born and loveliest vision far
Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy!
Fairer than Phoebe's sapphire-region'd star,
Or Vesper, amorous glow-worm of the sky;

At last, the speaker clarifies who, exactly, he's looking at: "The winged boy I knew," he says. From the poem's earlier allusion to Psyche, the reader can guess the identity of that "winged boy," too: in classical myth, Psyche was married to Eros, the god of love.

But there's something a little funny about how casually the speaker recognizes this beautiful god. It seems like the speaker thinks encountering Eros is no big deal—as if it's totally normal to suddenly find the god of love lying amongst the flowers. This casual reaction might make more sense if the reader is aware that Eros is also known as "Cupid." The poem's romantic speaker, it appears, has had a few run-ins with this arrow-shooting nuisance before.

He's overjoyed, though, to recognize Psyche; just look at his emphatic epizeuxis in the phrase "happy, happy dove." And again, his meter changes, shortening from iambic pentameter to iambic trimeter (three da-DUM feet) and even dimeter (just two feet) in the line in which he name-checks Psyche, mirroring his delighted surprise: "His Psych- | e true!"

Here, the speaker is recognizing not just a goddess, but an image of his own imagination. Remember, this pair of gods are like the speaker: dreamers in the woods. And Psyche herself is the goddess of the realms that dreams come from: the soul and the mind. So when the speaker sees Psyche and relishes her beauty, he's also recognizing that his *own* "psyche"—his mind and his soul—is full of deep loveliness. And in fact, it's his "psyche" that has created this vision of beauty in the first place! This is an inner hall of mirrors, in which imagination reflects on imagination.

The speaker finds this image of Psyche (and the "psyche") so lovely that it can beat any other beauty. In the next stanza, he calls Psyche the "loveliest" of all the goddesses—more beautiful than Phoebe, a goddess of the moon, or Vesper, also known as Venus, goddess of love and sex. (And those goddesses are both pretty beautiful: notice the speaker's rich imagery of the "sapphire-region'd" moon and metaphor of the planet Venus as an "amorous glow-worm.")

LINES 28-35

Fairer than these, though temple thou hast none,
Nor altar heap'd with flowers;
Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan
Upon the midnight hours;
No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet
From chain-swung censer teeming;
No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat
Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

If Psyche is the loveliest goddess of them all, she's also the most neglected, this speaker feels. She was indeed "latest born," one of the last additions to the Greek and Roman pantheon, and the speaker is right: she *didn't* have temples and cults dedicated to her in the same way that earlier goddesses did.

Here, the speaker gets swept up in a vision of the past. He moves from a direct encounter with Psyche to images of what she has never had:

> No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet
> From chain-swung censer teeming;
> No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat
> Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

But these images undercut themselves. It's the "don't imagine an elephant" principle: as the speaker lists all these honors that Psyche never received, he also vividly evokes them. He thus creates a reality out of something that wasn't previously there, once again using his imagination to honor Psyche—the very goddess of imagination itself.

That imagination draws on stories of the ancient Greek and Roman world. The speaker sees not a church, but a "temple"—not a priest, but an "oracle." He's deeply immersed in a vision of the classical world, and he imagines that these tokens of honor and worship are all directed at Psyche, celebrating her in ways she's never been celebrated.

His sounds and his imagery here are rich and intense. Again, he moves into a back-and-forth pattern of iambic pentameter and trimeter (five da-DUMs vs. three da-DUMs). This metrical rhythm swings just like the "chain-swung censer" (a smoking incense-burner) that he imagines.

The speaker also uses assonance and alliteration to call attention to important images. Take, for example, the assonant /ee/ sound and alliterative /p/ sound in lines 34 and 35:

> [...] no heat
> Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

The strong /p/ alliteration makes it sound as if the prophet's pale mouth is popping open in awe, while the /ee/ assonance

(which also turns up at the end of previous lines in "sweet" and "teeming") weaves this vision together.

The image of the prophet also feels strange: after all, what *is* the "heat" of a "pale-mouth'd prophet"? There's no clear answer. But perhaps the image suggests that intense visions rise from this prophet like ripples of heat. The fact that the prophet's mouth is "pale" suggests that the prophet's face is drained of blood, perhaps because the prophet is so immersed in a vision or dream about Psyche.

And yet, the speaker says that there *is* no "pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming" about Psyche. This vivid imagery simply underlines the fact that Psyche has gone underappreciated. Fortunately for her, the speaker seems to have taken on the responsibility of making up for this lack of worship.

LINES 36-43

O brightest! though too late for antique vows,
Too, too late for the fond believing lyre,
When holy were the haunted forest boughs,
Holy the air, the water, and the fire;
Yet even in these days so far retir'd
From happy pieties, thy lucent fans,
Fluttering among the faint Olympians,
I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspir'd.

Having just intensely conjured a whole religion for Psyche, the speaker laments that it's too late: no one now truly believes in goddesses, and no one will celebrate Psyche with him.

He seems to feel nostalgia for a time he never lived in. Underlining his point with intense epizeuxis and diacope, he mourns that it's now:

> Too, too late for the fond believing lyre,
> When holy were the haunted forest boughs,
> Holy the air, the water, and the fire;

He feels that the whole world was once full of imaginative belief: people could see even the air as "holy."

But he's not going to let modern-day cynicism get him down. While sincere ancient religious belief doesn't exist anymore, he can still use the power of his imagination. "[E]ven in these days," he says, he sees Psyche and her "lucent fans," her luminous wings:

> [...] thy lucent fans,
> Fluttering among the faint Olympians,
> I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspir'd.

Perhaps these lines give readers a clue as to why this speaker is singing his "Ode to Psyche" in the first place. If the world he lives in feels deflated and empty of the "holy," the only way to rescue that world is through imagination—a power that belongs to the mind and the soul, which are the exact things Psyche herself symbolizes. If the speaker can't look outward into the world and find holiness, he can look inward and, "inspir'd" by his "own eyes," imbue the world with magic that way.

LINES 44-49

So let me be thy choir, and make a moan
Upon the midnight hours;
Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet
From swinged censer teeming;
Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat
Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

Here, the speaker repeats not just a few words or phrases, but a whole long passage—with a twist. He returns to the chanting lines in which he imagined all of the forms of worship that Psyche never got. But this time, he becomes those forms of worship. "So let me be thy choir," he says, "and make a moan / Upon the midnight hours," offering to sing for Psyche all night long. But he won't just be a singer—he'll be everything she's been deprived of: a "lute," a "pipe," a "shrine," and a "grove" as well as a "prophet" and an "oracle."

This suggests that the speaker's imagination doesn't just help him conjure visions, but also lets him inhabit them. He can transform into anything from a sound to a smell to a place to a whole other person. And at last, he becomes that "pale-mouth'd prophet," a figure who has been completely caught up and entranced by his own visions. The poem therefore does exactly what it describes. Like any poem, the "Ode to Psyche" captures a poet's moment of inner vision. But here, the poet is writing about that process: this is a poem about how poetry-writing works!

And it's also about how the imagination itself works. The first time this passage appeared (in the third stanza), the speaker drew on old stories about the ancient world: beliefs and practices many young men from Keats's era would have studied in school. But in this second version of the passage, he puts himself into those images. Imagination thus seems to give things from the outer world a new life in the inner world—an idea that will be important in the poem's final stanza.

LINES 50-57

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:
Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees
Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;
And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,
The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep;

In the last stanza, the speaker returns to the "forest" from the beginning of the poem. But this time, the forest is definitely and

explicitly a place in his own mind.

This is an "untrodden region," wild and mountainous, where "branched thoughts" grow like trees in thick, dark forests. It's a place just as "holy" as the ancient world the speaker imagined in the previous stanza, haunted by "Dryads" (tree-spirits). But it's also intensely natural, full of gentle breezes, "streams, [...] birds, and bees."

This passage brings together all the different visions of the world that have come before: mystical holiness and pure natural beauty don't just coexist, but combine into a new place in the speaker's inner landscape. Listen to the way the sounds in this passage reflect these new combinations:

> Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees
> Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;
> And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,
> The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep;

The speaker returns to an ABAB rhyme scheme here—but he also uses the same /ee/ assonance at the end of every line, and sometimes within the line, weaving this vision seamlessly together. The liquid /l/ consonance in the last line "lull[s]" the reader in the same way that the sleepy Dryads themselves are "lull'd to sleep." This is a seductively lovely landscape—but also a huge and dangerous ones. The diacope of "steep by steep" makes these beautiful mountains seem to stretch out all around—and the trees that cover them are "dark-cluster'd" and a bit ominous.

The imagination is powerful enough to make one mind into a whole world, this passage suggests. That power is delicious and natural as the "birds" and "bees," but possibly a little dangerous, too. And this tension between inspiration and fear is a perfect representation of what it might feel like to stumble upon a goddess and her lover.

LINES 58-63

And in the midst of this wide quietness
A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,
With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,
Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:

Right in the middle of the "wide quietness" of his own mental landscape, the speaker will build a temple to Psyche. He thus enthrones the goddess of the inner world inside his inner world: another example of the imagination reflecting on itself.

Here, the speaker delves deeper into metaphor. The temple he'll build for Psyche will be decorated with "the wreath'd trellis of a working brain." This image suggests that the brain is a structure for plants to grow on, but it also suggests that the brain is a plant that wraps around that same structure. Again, there's a feeling of infinite reflections here: all of the things the speaker describes here are both images inside his imagination and the *workings* of that imagination. In this case, the mind is both the "trellis" and the "wreath" that wraps around it.

Earlier in the poem, the speaker immersed himself in the sensuous imagery of flowers. Those flowers return in this section, but now they're more symbolic than literal. These are flowers bred by "the gardener Fancy"—a personification of (surprise!) the speaker's own imagination. And that gardener, when he breeds flowers, will "never breed the same" flower twice.

This, the poem suggests, is just how the imagination works. The speaker has returned to all the images that came to his mind earlier in the poem, and brought them together in one place: his own mind. Putting all those images together means he can "breed" something entirely new.

If the products of the imagination are like flowers, they're totally natural, growing from the earth. But if they're bred by the "gardener Fancy," they're also works of creation—almost as if they're pieces of art! The imagination, the speaker suggests, has the power to use the raw material of the outside world to create visions more strange and diverse than anything nature has ever come up with on its own.

LINES 64-67

And there shall be for thee all soft delight
That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
To let the warm Love in!

In the poem's final lines, the speaker turns back to Psyche herself, addressing her in a direct apostrophe:

> And there shall be for thee all soft delight
> That shadowy thought can win,
> A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
> To let the warm Love in!

At last, Psyche comes home to rest in the internal world the speaker has created for her.

But she won't be alone there. She'll have a lantern, and a "casement" (a window) that opens to "let the warm Love in." That "warm Love" is Eros, her beloved; this is an allusion to the myth of Psyche and Eros, in which Eros visits his bride by night.

Remember that Psyche is herself a symbol of the soul and the mind. For the inner self to really be fulfilled, this image suggests, it needs a window to "let the warm Love in": a point of connection with the wider world. Just like the "gardener Fancy" who "breeds" brand-new flowers around Psyche's temple, the inner world needs to open its window and lovingly meet the beauty outside. Here, the speaker's "psyche" has met the loveliness of nature and the myths of ancient Greece and Rome—and by letting them through the "casement" of his own

imagination, he has turned them into a whole new inner world.

It's worth noting that in the myth of Psyche and Eros, the couple have a child in the end: a daughter named "Voluptas," which means "delight." The imagination itself has that power to give birth to delight, too—"all soft delight / That shadowy thought can win," as the speaker puts it in line 64. Even if it's "too late" for that kind of meaning in the everyday world, the imaginative mind can turn even a normal walk in the woods into a rich, meaningful new creation. And it's that transformative power that this poem simultaneously describes, demonstrates, and praises.

SYMBOLS

PSYCHE AND EROS

This isn't the only poem in which Psyche and Eros symbolize the mind/soul and love, respectively. By alluding to these classical figures, Keats draws on a long symbolic tradition.

The story of Eros and Psyche (which you can read here) suggests that Keats is using these two gods not just as symbols for the soul and love, but as a picture of how the imagination helps fulfill the soul. By imaginatively housing Psyche in a beautiful temple where she can "let the warm Love in" for nightly visits, the speaker creates a fertile connection between the inner and outer world. Somehow, imagination allows the "psyche" to creatively engage with the "love" that only something *other* than the isolated self can provide.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "O Goddess!"
- **Line 6:** " The winged Psyche"
- **Lines 21-23:** "The winged boy I knew; / But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove? / His Psyche true!"
- **Lines 41-43:** "thy lucent fans, / Fluttering among the faint Olympians, / I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspir'd."
- **Lines 66-67:** "A bright torch, and a casement ope at night, / To let the warm Love in!"

FLOWERS AND PLANTS

Plants and flowers often symbolize creativity, fertility, beauty, and new life, and that's exactly the role they play here. Flowers and plants pop up twice in this poem: first in the maybe-real, maybe-imaginary forest the speaker wanders through in the first half of the poem, then in the definitely-imaginary "untrodden region of [his] mind" that he explores in the last stanza. In both of these places, the flowers are lush, brilliant sources of delight. And often, they're brand-new ones, "buds" that the "gardener Fancy" has only recently bred.

The images of flowers and plants in this poem suggest that nature and the imagination have something in common. Both love to create fresh new life. But the imagination might even have one up on nature: when "breeding flowers," it "will never breed the same." Nature, on the other hand, just keeps making the same old roses, whereas the imagination can make an infinite number of new flowers.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-12:** "deepest grass, beneath the whisp'ring roof / Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran / A brooklet, scarce espied:"
- **Lines 13-15:** "'Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed, / Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian, / They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass;"
- **Lines 52-57:** "Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain, / Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind: / Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees / Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep; / And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees, / The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep;"
- **Lines 59-63:** "A rosy sanctuary will I dress / With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain, / With buds, and bells, and stars without a name, / With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign, / Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:"

THE CASEMENT

The casement (or window) at the end of the poem symbolizes the point of connection between the inner and outer world. Keats was fond of using windows to mark a division between reality and imagination. In fact, he invented the most famous "casements" in literature: the "magic casements opening on the foam / Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn" that appear in his "Ode to a Nightingale." This poem's casement, like that one, is a point of transition: a place where the "warm Love" can fly in, where the "psyche" (the mind and soul) can come into contact with everything that exists beyond and outside it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 66-67:** "a casement ope at night, / To let the warm Love in!"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration, like its cousins assonance and consonance, gives this poem both music and meaning. Besides simply sounding good, repeated sounds evoke this poem's world and draw attention to important moments.

For instance, take a look at the sibilant alliteration in lines 3-4:

> And pardon that thy secrets should be sung
> Even into thine own soft-conched ear:

The alliterated /s/ sounds just like the whispered secrets it describes—and like the softness of Psyche's ear, a vividly intimate image that suggests how close the speaker is getting to the goddess he praises. It's as if his lips are brushing her skin as he speaks.

Later on, alliterative /m/ sounds follow the speaker as he goes deep into an imaginative trance:

> So let me be thy choir, and make a moan
> Upon the midnight hours;

That repeating /m/ makes the speaker's words sound like a chant—and links that "moan," the sacred song, to the "midnight," so that the song and the night both seem enchanted.

Since it sounds a little different than everyday speech, alliteration can also direct the reader to meaningful moments. That "pale-mouth'd prophet" who turns up at the end of the third and fourth stanzas is already an unexpected, striking image—and the repeated /p/ sound draws even more attention to him.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "secrets," "sung"
- **Line 4:** "soft"
- **Line 5:** "Surely," "see"
- **Line 8:** "sudden," "surprise"
- **Line 9:** "Saw," "creatures," "couched," "side," "side"
- **Line 13:** "flowers, fragrant"
- **Line 14:** "Blue," "budded"
- **Line 15:** "breathing," "bedded"
- **Line 18:** "soft," "slumber"
- **Line 24:** "latest," "loveliest"
- **Line 25:** "faded"
- **Line 26:** "Fairer," "Phoebe's"
- **Line 30:** "make," "moan"
- **Line 31:** "midnight"
- **Line 33:** "swung censer"
- **Line 35:** "pale," "prophet"
- **Line 38:** "holy," "haunted"
- **Line 41:** "fans"
- **Line 42:** "Fluttering," "faint"
- **Line 43:** "see," "sing"
- **Line 44:** "make," "moan"
- **Line 45:** "midnight"
- **Line 47:** "swinged censer"
- **Line 49:** "pale," "prophet"
- **Line 52:** "pleasant pain"
- **Line 53:** "pines"
- **Line 56:** "birds," "bees"
- **Line 60:** "With," "wreath'd," "working"
- **Line 61:** "buds," "bells"
- **Line 62:** "Fancy," "feign"

ALLUSION

"Ode to Psyche" is full of vivid allusions to classical mythology, starting with Psyche herself. Psyche was the goddess of the soul and mind in Greek and Roman myth. In her story, she marries a mysterious, invisible figure who only visits her at night. When at last she gets too curious, she secretly holds up a lamp—and is so startled to discover that her husband is the beautiful Eros, god of love, that she spills hot oil on him! Burnt, Eros flies away in pain and fury, and Psyche must undergo a series of mythic trials to win him back.

Keats's poem seems to take place after Eros and Psyche have reunited. They sleep together in the forest, all wrapped up in each other's arms (and "pinions," since Eros was often depicted with feathery wings, and Psyche with butterfly wings).

Not only is the poem framed around this symbolic goddess, Psyche, it's also set in her world. The poem's forests are full of "virgin-choir[s]" (a reference to ancient virgin priestesses), Dryads (forest spirits), and "all Olympus' faded hierarchy"—that is, all the gods of the Greek pantheon. And the speaker wants to become an oracle for Psyche, a "pale-mouth'd prophet" who can sing of her mysteries like the famous Oracle of Delphi.

This speaker is nostalgic for the imagined ancient world he alludes to—a time and place when "the air, the water, and the fire" were all "holy," and the gods walked on earth. Luckily for him, his imagination can bring all of these places—and all of these gods—back to life.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "O Goddess!"
- **Line 6:** "The winged Psyche"
- **Line 14:** "Tyrian"
- **Line 20:** "aurorean"
- **Lines 21-23:** "The winged boy I knew; / But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove? / His Psyche true!"
- **Lines 24-27:** "O latest born and loveliest vision far /

Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy! / Fairer than Phoebe's sapphire-region'd star, / Or Vesper, amorous glow-worm of the sky;"

- **Lines 28-35:** "Fairer than these, though temple thou hast none, / Nor altar heap'd with flowers; / Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan / Upon the midnight hours; / No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet / From chain-swung censer teeming; / No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat / Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming."
- **Lines 36-49:** "O brightest! though too late for antique vows, / Too, too late for the fond believing lyre, / When holy were the haunted forest boughs, / Holy the air, the water, and the fire; / Yet even in these days so far retir'd / From happy pieties, thy lucent fans, / Fluttering among the faint Olympians, / I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspir'd. / So let me be thy choir, and make a moan / Upon the midnight hours; / Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet / From swinged censer teeming; / Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat / Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming."
- **Lines 56-57:** "And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees, / The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep;"
- **Lines 64-67:** "And there shall be for thee all soft delight / That shadowy thought can win, / A bright torch, and a casement ope at night, / To let the warm Love in!"

APOSTROPHE

Odes are always directed to some subject; Keats wrote famous odes to a vase and a bird, among other things. Here, his apostrophe addresses someone a little more likely to respond: the goddess Psyche herself.

This whole poem is a song in Psyche's honor. The speaker praises her as the "brightest" and most beautiful among "all Olympus' faded hierarchy." She may have been "latest born," the last of the gods to join the Greek and Roman pantheon; she may not have gotten the "altar heap'd with flowers" she deserved; but to this speaker, she's the "loveliest" goddess of them all. His adoration for her is made obvious by just how close he gets to sing this song of praise: the first stanza makes it seem as if he's whispering right into her "soft-conched ear."

The reader might find it strange that the speaker starts the poem by asking Psyche's "pardon" for all this praise. After all, who needs to be forgiven for calling someone the "loveliest vision far / Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy"? But this might make a bit more sense when the reader considers what Psyche symbolizes: the mind and soul themselves. In other words, the apostrophe here means that the speaker is using the imaginative inner self to praise...well, itself! Perhaps it's right for him to blush a little.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "O Goddess! hear these tuneless numbers, wrung / By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear, / And pardon that thy secrets should be sung / Even into thine own soft-conched ear:"
- **Lines 24-25:** "O latest born and loveliest vision far / Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy!"
- **Line 28:** "Fairer than these, though temple thou hast none,"
- **Line 36:** "O brightest!"
- **Lines 41-43:** "thy lucent fans, / Fluttering among the faint Olympians, / I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspir'd"
- **Lines 44-49:** "So let me be thy choir, and make a moan / Upon the midnight hours; / Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet / From swinged censer teeming; / Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat / Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming."
- **Line 50:** "Yes, I will be thy priest,"
- **Lines 64-65:** "And there shall be for thee all soft delight / That shadowy thought can win,"

ASSONANCE

Assonance works a lot like alliteration, making the poem sound musical while also helping establish its gorgeous atmosphere. (There's a longer discussion of how this works in the Alliteration section of this guide.)

One vivid example comes in lines 54 through 57, when the speaker envisions the enchanted landscape of his own mind:

> Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees
> Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;
> And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,
> The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep;

The repeated /ee/ sounds weaving through these lines make them sound seamless as a dream—as if the speaker is sinking deep into his visions, lost in his inner world.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "numbers," "wrung"
- **Line 2:** "sweet," "dear"
- **Line 3:** "secrets"
- **Line 4:** "Even," "soft," "conched," "ear"
- **Line 5:** "Surely," "see"
- **Line 6:** "Psyche," "eyes"
- **Line 8:** "surprise"
- **Line 9:** "side"
- **Line 10:** "deepest," "beneath"
- **Line 11:** "leaves"
- **Line 13:** "cool," "rooted"

- **Line 17:** “bade,” “adieu”
- **Line 32:** “sweet”
- **Line 33:** “teeming”
- **Line 42:** “Fluttering,” “among”
- **Line 43:** “my,” “eyes,” “inspir’d”
- **Line 46:** “incense”
- **Line 47:** “swinged”
- **Line 54:** “trees”
- **Line 55:** “steep,” “steep”
- **Line 56:** “streams,” “bees”
- **Line 57:** “sleep”
- **Line 58:** “wide,” “quietness”
- **Line 64:** “be,” “thee”
- **Line 66:** “bright,” “night”

CAESURA

"Ode to Psyche" uses many caesurae, mid-line breaks contribute to the poem's slow, musing, swinging pace. They also allows the speaker to control the flow of language so that the words sound carefully chosen, making it easier to call attention to and thoughtfully frame the poem's powerful imagery.

For instance, take a look at the way caesura works in the poem's hypnotic list of the honors Psyche never received, back in the days when people truly believed in the Greek and Roman gods:

> No voice, || no lute, || no pipe, || no incense sweet
> From chain-swung censer teeming;
> No shrine, || no grove, || no oracle, || no heat
> Of pale-mouth’d prophet dreaming.

These breaks give each item in the speaker's list its own little space to rest in. And the back-and-forth between the lines broken up by caesurae and the longer descriptive lines gives those longer lines some extra punch: after brief mentions of "shrine," "grove," and "oracle," that "heat / Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming" feels especially strange and powerful.

The poem also uses caesurae to set off moments of special intensity, often alongside repetitions. The caesurae that break up the epizeuxis of "happy, || happy dove" (line 22) and "Far, || far around" (line 54) only give those repetitions more weight. It's as if the speaker is pausing to slowly roll these words around in his mouth.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “Goddess! hear,” “numbers, wrung”
- **Line 5:** “to-day, or”
- **Line 8:** “ And, on,” “sudden, fainting”
- **Line 9:** “creatures, couched”
- **Line 10:** “grass, beneath”
- **Line 11:** “blossoms, where”
- **Line 12:** “brooklet, scarce”
- **Line 13:** “hush'd, cool-rooted,” “flowers, fragrant-eyed”
- **Line 14:** “Blue, silver-white, and”
- **Line 16:** “embraced, and”
- **Line 17:** “not, but”
- **Line 22:** “thou, O”
- **Line 27:** “Vesper, amorous”
- **Line 28:** “these, though”
- **Line 32:** “voice, no lute, no pipe, no”
- **Line 34:** “shrine, no grove, no oracle, no”
- **Line 36:** “brightest! though”
- **Line 37:** “Too, too”
- **Line 39:** “air, the water, and”
- **Line 41:** “pieties, thy”
- **Line 43:** “see, and sing,”
- **Line 44:** “choir, and”
- **Line 46:** “voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy”
- **Line 48:** “shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy”
- **Line 50:** “Yes, I”
- **Line 52:** “thoughts, new”
- **Line 54:** “Far, far”
- **Line 56:** “zephyrs, streams, and birds, and”
- **Line 61:** “buds, and bells, and”
- **Line 63:** “flowers, will”
- **Line 66:** “torch, and”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment often carries "Ode to Psyche" smoothly along, making lines flow into each other like the waters of the "brooklet" mentioned in line 12. But it also sometimes leads the reader to stumbling blocks and unexpected moments of silence.

Take a look at the enjambments in lines 44 through 49 for one good example:

> So let me be thy choir, and make a moan
> Upon the midnight hours;
> Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet
> From swinged censer teeming;
> Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat
> Of pale-mouth’d prophet dreaming.

Here, enjambment throws the reader straight into a new pattern of meter. Lines 36 through 43 trot along in steady iambic pentameter (five da-DUM feet per line) up to this point. But between lines 44 and 45, the poem suddenly launches into iambic trimeter (three da-DUMs), leaving a gap of empty space. In fact, every time an enjambed line comes up in this passage, so does a switch from pentameter to trimeter. The enjambments here keep the lines running swiftly forward, only for the reader to have to stop and catch their breath when the short lines come. Enjambment thus inserts mystical, hushed pauses into the poem's fabric.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "wrung / By"
- **Lines 3-4:** "sung / Even"
- **Lines 5-6:** "see / The"
- **Lines 9-10:** "side / In"
- **Lines 10-11:** "roof / Of"
- **Lines 11-12:** "ran / A"
- **Lines 19-20:** "outnumber / At"
- **Lines 24-25:** "far / Of"
- **Lines 30-31:** "moan / Upon"
- **Lines 32-33:** "sweet / From"
- **Lines 34-35:** "heat / Of"
- **Lines 40-41:** "retir'd / From"
- **Lines 44-45:** "moan / Upon"
- **Lines 46-47:** "sweet / From"
- **Lines 48-49:** "heat / Of"
- **Lines 50-51:** "fane / In"
- **Lines 54-55:** "trees / Fledge"
- **Lines 59-60:** "dress / With"
- **Lines 64-65:** "delight / That"

IMAGERY

The vivid imagery of this poem helps bring its imaginative world to life. The speaker gets things off to a vivid start with his image of Psyche's "soft-conched ear." Here, there's both the vivid picture of the ear as a "conch," like the whorls of a seashell, and the *softness* of that "conch." It's as if the speaker has his lips so close to Psyche's ear he can feel the peach fuzz.

That intimate imagery follows Psyche all through the first and second stanzas, where the poet imagines not only the goddess and Eros asleep with their arms and wings wrapped around each other, but the "hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed, / Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian" that they lie among. The speaker experiences those flowers with four of his five senses: hearing, touch, smell, and sight all get a mention in the space of two lines.

Later, that same intensity returns as the speaker first *sees* and then *becomes* an imagined ritual that worships Psyche. The speaker doesn't just include a "prophet" among the crowd of worshipers, but the "heat / Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming." That intense "heat" sits strikingly alongside the prophet's pale mouth: it's as if the prophet is so deeply entranced that the blood had drained from their face as their visions rise up like steam.

The poem's imagery comes to a climax in the final stanza, where the speaker sees thoughts spreading like trees over "the wild-ridged mountains" of his imagination and watches "moss-lain" forest nymphs as they sleep among "zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees." Here, he worships the power of the imagination *using* the power of the imagination—and that imagination takes sensuous delight in everything from "shadowy thought" to "warm Love."

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Line 4
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 17-18
- Lines 26-27
- Lines 30-35
- Lines 41-42
- Lines 44-49
- Lines 50-67

PERSONIFICATION

When the poem's speaker personifies his imagination as "the gardener Fancy" in line 62, he makes it into a caretaker of the mind—but also a creative artist. If "Fancy" is a gardener, his job is not just to decorate the speaker's mind with flowers, but to "breed" those flowers. The flowers this gardener creates, the speaker says, are "never [...] the same"—meaning that the gardener never grows the same thing twice.

This personified imagination is thus both powerful and humble. As a "gardener," "Fancy" is a laborer, a person working in the dirt with his hands. And in "breeding" flowers, he's working with what he's given. He's not a magician conjuring new "buds" out of thin air; he takes two existing flowers and makes something utterly new out of them. But that in itself is a mighty creative feat. He's creating a garden of infinite beauty and variety out of the raw material of experience.

Perhaps, then, this "gardener Fancy" gives the reader some clues about the poem's philosophy in general. If the gardener creates something new out of two different flowers, the imagination makes new things by recombining things that are already there. And, as the end of the poem suggests, Love (personified earlier as the god Eros) and the mind and soul (Psyche herself) have to come together to make new creations, too. In classical myth, the child of Psyche and Eros was called Voluptas, or "delight." And making delight is also the task of the "gardener Fancy," who takes inspiration from myth and nature to "breed" this very poem.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-18:** "Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu, / As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber,"
- **Lines 62-63:** "With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign, / Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:"

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors reflect the imagination's vast, vital, transformative power. (Metaphor itself, of course, is a way of

transforming one thing into another!)

The biggest extended metaphor in the "Ode to Psyche" treats the speaker's mind as a place. At the end of the poem, the speaker visits "some untrodden region of [his] mind," and finds there many of the things he's seen in earlier parts of the poem: the forest, the flowers, and the classical mythology of the previous stanzas all return here. If the speaker's mind is a place, it can house everything that he encounters in the outside world.

But the mind can also transform his real-world experiences into something new. In the speaker's inner landscape, the trees become "branched thoughts," and flowers decorate "the wreath'd trellis of a working brain." In other words, within the metaphorical "landscape" of his mind, thoughts and visions "grow" as naturally and beautifully as plants.

This metaphorical inner landscape also houses a personified imagination: the "gardener Fancy." This gardener grows flowers—and those flowers are never the same twice. Here, flowers are a metaphor for creative visions, "bred" by the imagination itself. Imagination, the metaphor of the gardener suggests, has a power even beyond that of nature: nature makes versions of the same plants over and over, but the imagination can "breed" two different ideas or experiences to make something completely new.

When the speaker at last says he'll house the goddess Psyche in a metaphorical temple, he's creating an image of the inner world celebrating itself! Psyche is the goddess of the soul and mind, and therefore the protector of all the inner landscapes the speaker describes. The "rosy sanctuary" he builds for her is a metaphor for his own creative reverence: he's giving Psyche a special "place" in his own mind, a corner of his being dedicated to her worship.

The speaker's inner landscape is full of flowers and stars and temples, but also "dark-cluster'd trees" and "wild-ridged mountains." All of these metaphors suggest just how vast and awe-inspiring the imaginative mind can be.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "O Goddess!"
- **Lines 10-11:** "beneath the whisp'ring roof / Of leaves and trembled blossoms"
- **Lines 50-55:** "Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane / In some untrodden region of my mind, / Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain, / Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind: / Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees / Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;"
- **Lines 60-63:** "With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain, / With buds, and bells, and stars without a name, / With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign, / Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:"
- **Lines 66-67:** "A bright torch, and a casement ope at night, / To let the warm Love in!"

REPETITION

"Ode to Psyche" uses many flavors of repetition—all of which deepen the poem's dreamy, visionary quality.

One of the most striking moments of repetition in the poem is the return of a whole long passage. In the third stanza, the speaker makes a chanting list of all the honors Psyche never received, even back when people still truly believed in goddesses:

> Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan
> Upon the midnight hours;
> No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet
> From chain-swung censer teeming;
> No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat
> Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

All of these imaginings return, in almost exactly the same words, in the fourth stanza. But this time, the speaker imagines not just that he'll provide these things for Psyche, but that he'll become them: "So let me be thy choir [...] Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe [...]," he says. (The reader might note that he delicately makes no claim to be a "virgin-choir.") This repetition suggests the transformative power of the imagination. First, the speaker calls up all these mysterious images; next, he inhabits them, giving them his own life.

Other kinds of repetition help cast spells here, too. For instance, take a look at the first lines of the fourth stanza:

> O brightest! though too late for antique vows,
> Too, too late for the fond believing lyre,
> When holy were the haunted forest boughs,
> Holy the air, the water, and the fire;

The epizeuxis of "Too, too" makes this passage sound mournful. It's not just "too late" to honor Psyche with true religious belief, it's "Too, too" late. The world has moved on, the speaker suggests, from those times when everything seemed "holy." But the diacope on the word "holy" makes the speaker's very lament sound like the "delicious moan" of the musical worship he imagines.

Finally, take a look at the parallelism and anaphora in lines 59 through 62:

> A rosy sanctuary will I dress
> With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,
> With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
> With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,

This sequence of lines, all built the same, evokes the glorious overflow of the imagination's garden: it's as if the speaker can't stop adding new delights to his list.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 16-17:** " Their arms embraced, and their pinions too; / Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu,"
- **Line 22:** "O happy, happy dove?"
- **Lines 30-35:** "Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan / Upon the midnight hours; / No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet / From chain-swung censer teeming; / No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat / Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming."
- **Line 37:** "Too, too"
- **Line 38:** "holy"
- **Line 39:** "Holy"
- **Lines 44-49:** "So let me be thy choir, and make a moan / Upon the midnight hours; / Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet / From swinged censer teeming; / Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat / Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming."
- **Line 54:** "Far, far"
- **Line 55:** "steep by steep"
- **Lines 60-62:** "With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain, / With buds, and bells, and stars without a name, / With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem's rhetorical questions evoke the speaker's wonder, as well as the world-creating power of his imagination.

The first of these questions leaves both speaker and reader in the same in-between, mysterious place:

> Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see
> The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?

The speaker never quite answers that question—and neither can the reader. The speaker's imagination is so powerful that he can't decide whether he saw Psyche with "awaken'd eyes" or not: the scene of Psyche and Eros asleep in the forest is at once so vivid and so strange that it leaves the speaker caught between belief and disbelief.

Later, even deeper in his visions, he asks,

> The winged boy I knew;
> But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?
> His Psyche true!

Here, the speaker seems to recognize Psyche with slow-dawning delight. He identifies her first because she's lying with Eros—a "winged boy" this speaker seems to have met a time or two already (perhaps a hint that he's no stranger to romance). That rhetorical question makes it sound as if he's asking, "Is that Eros? Could it be? Yes, it is! It's Psyche!" As the epizeuxis of "happy, happy dove" makes clear, this recognition brings the speaker joy and wonder: Psyche is precisely the goddess he might have hoped to run into.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see / The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?"
- **Line 22:** "But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?"

VOCABULARY

Tuneless Numbers (Line 1) - "Numbers" here means verses, and refers to poetic meter, with its countable beats. If these verses are "tuneless," they might be silent, not set to music—or perhaps the speaker is just being modest about the quality of his "singing"!

Wrung (Line 1) - Squeezed out. (Think of "wringing out" a wet towel.)

Enforcement (Line 2) - Forced compliance (though here, that force is "sweet").

Remembrance (Line 2) - Memory.

Thy, Thine, Thou, Thee (Line 3, Line 4, Line 22, Line 28, Line 44, Line 46, Line 48, Line 50, Line 64) - "Thy" and "thine" are both old-fashioned, poetic ways of saying "your," while "thou" and "thee" are the subject and object form of "you."

Soft-Conched Ear (Line 4) - An image comparing Psyche's ear to the spiral pattern of a conch shell.

Psyche (Line 6, Line 23) - The ancient Greek goddess of the soul, often depicted with butterfly wings. In Greek mythology, she was married to Eros, the god of love.

Thoughtlessly (Line 7) - Absentmindedly; without thinking.

Couched (Line 9) - Lying down, as if on a bed or couch.

Brooklet (Line 12) - A little stream.

Scarce Espied (Line 12) - Barely visible.

'Mid (Line 13) - Amid—that is, among.

Fragrant-Eyed (Line 13) - Having sweet-smelling centers.

Tyrian (Line 14) - A deep, velvety purple color—named after an expensive dye made in Tyre, a coastal city in Lebanon. The dye was made out of sea snails, and plays an important role in a later poem about Keats!

Bedded (Line 15) - Flattened to make a bed.

Pinions (Line 16) - The feathers of a bird's wings. Both Psyche and Eros were usually depicted with wings.

Bade Adieu (Line 17) - Said goodbye.

Disjoined (Line 18) - Pulled apart.

Eye-Dawn (Line 20) - An image of eyes opening up as if they were rising suns.

Aurorean (Line 20) - To do with the dawn. "Aurora" was the goddess of dawn in Roman mythology.

The Winged Boy (Line 21) - An allusion to Eros, also known as Cupid: the Greek god of love, and Psyche's husband. Eros was often depicted as a young man or a boy, usually with feathery wings, and sometimes with a blindfold; after all, love is blind.

Olympus (Line 25) - The sacred mountain that was the home of the Greek gods. "Olympus" can also be a metonym for the gods themselves.

Hierarchy (Line 25) - A system in which people or groups are organized by rank, one above the other. For instance, Zeus, king of the gods, was at the top of the Olympian hierarchy.

Fairer (Line 26, Line 28) - More beautiful.

Phoebe's Sapphire-Region'd Star (Line 26) - In Greek mythology, Phoebe was the mother of the important gods Apollo and Artemis, and was sometimes considered a moon goddess. Her "sapphire-region'd star" is the moon itself, surrounded by the sapphire blue of the night sky.

Vesper (Line 27) - Another name for the planet Venus—itself named after the Roman goddess of love.

Amorous (Line 27) - Loving or lustful.

Virgin-Choir (Line 30) - An allusion to the Vestal Virgins, a sect of ancient Roman priestesses devoted to the goddess Vesta—or to ancient virgin priestesses in general!

Make Delicious Moan (Line 30, Line 44) - To sing beautiful, haunting songs of praise. (There's something more than a little sexual in this phrasing, too!)

Lute (Line 32, Line 46) - A stringed instrument that was like an early version of the guitar.

Incense Sweet From Chain-Swung Censer Teeming (Lines 32-33, Lines 46-47) - "Incense" is a fragrant resin burned to make scented smoke in religious ceremonies, and a "censer" is the hollow metal ball—often swung from a chain—that the incense is carried in. If incense is "teeming" from a censer, it's rushing out.

Oracle (Line 34) - A prophetic priest or priestess who spoke to the gods and told the future.

Pale-Mouth'd Prophet (Line 35) - A "prophet" is one who sees the future. The idea of a "pale-mouthed" prophet conjures the image of a face that has been drained of blood in the midst of a visionary trance.

Antique (Line 36) - Belonging to ancient history (in this case, Greek and Roman history in particular).

Fond (Line 37) - Naive or overly optimistic.

Lyre (Line 37) - A kind of harp, often associated with ancient Greek poets and singers. It can even be a symbol for poetry itself.

Pieties (Line 41) - Religious beliefs.

Lucent Fans (Line 41) - An image of Psyche's butterfly wings. "Lucent" means luminous or glowing, while "fans" suggests that Psyche's wings move gently back and forth like fans churning the air.

Olympians (Line 42) - Greek gods and goddesses (so called because they lived on Mt. Olympus).

Fane (Line 50) - A temple.

Fledge (Line 55) - To cover, in the way that feathers cover wings. (A bird is said to be a "fledgling" when its first feathers come in.)

Zephyrs (Line 56) - Gentle spring breezes.

Dryads (Line 57) - Female tree spirits, guardians of the forests in Greek mythology.

Sanctuary (Line 59) - A safe, secluded spot.

Wreath'd Trellis (Line 60) - A "trellis" is a framework for vines and flowers to grow over; if it's "wreath'd," that means it's covered in plants.

Fancy (Line 62) - Imagination—here personified as a gardener!

A Casement Ope at Night (Line 66) - A "casement" is a window, and "ope" means open; the speaker is imagining Psyche's temple has a window she can open at night to let in her lover, Eros.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The "Ode to Psyche" is—surprise!—an ode, a poem of praise written directly to its subject, as if the speaker were talking to the person or thing the poem celebrates. Keats wrote a famous sequence of six odes that honored everything from a Greek vase to his own desire to lie around and daydream. "Ode to Psyche" is the first of this sequence, and its address to a symbolic Greek goddess aligns it with the content and thematic material found in many traditional odes.

Odes often experiment with form and use intense, heightened language—and this one is no exception. The poem is made up of five stanzas, and they're all a little different. The stanzas slowly expand as the poem goes on; the last stanza, in which the speaker visits the wild, enchanted forests of his own mind, is considerably longer than the first. The fact that the stanzas slowly stretch out mirrors the way the speaker sinks deeper into his own imagination. (More on the poem's experiments with shape and sound in the "Rhyme Scheme" and "Meter"

sections.)

But this ode isn't just innovative in the way it changes, but in the way it repeats itself. A chanting, mysterious passage from the end of the third stanza appears again, slightly altered, at the end of the fourth, marking an imaginative transformation. First, the speaker thinks of all the beautiful forms of worship that no one ever offered Psyche. Later, he imagines himself not just giving her offerings, but becoming those offerings. The return of this passage shows just how powerful and flexible the speaker's imagination—and the shape of the ode—can be.

METER

"Ode to Psyche" plays creatively with meter. The poem's mixture of longer and shorter lines tracks the speaker's movement from enchantment to surprise—from dreaminess to awe.

In general, each stanza starts out in iambic pentameter—that is, lines with five feet that go da-DUM. This is one of the most common meters in English poetry; Keats learned it from reading Shakespeare, whose plays are mostly in iambic pentameter. Take a look at the first lines to get a feel for how it sounds:

> O God | -dess! hear | these tune- | less num- | bers wrung
> By sweet | enforce- | ment and | remem- | brance dear,

For the most part, the early parts of each stanza are in perfect, steady iambic pentameter. But towards each stanza's end, the meter changes. The lines get shorter, dipping into iambic trimeter (three da-DUMs), or even dimeter (two da-DUMs)! Sometimes those short lines make it sound as if the speaker is surprised, like this:

> The wing- | ed boy | I knew;
> But who | wast thou, | O hap- | py, hap- | py dove?
> His Psy- | che true!

(Note that the speaker is using old-fashioned pronunciation in this poem, giving words that end in "-ed" an extra syllable: wing-ed. When he wants a word ending in "-ed" to be pronounced without that extra syllable, he cuts the "e," as in "touch'd.")

Sometimes, though, these shorter lines, mixed in among lines of pentameter, sound like a chant or a magic spell. Consider, for example, lines 46 and 47:

> Thy voice, | thy lute, | thy pipe, | thy in- | cense sweet
> From swing- | ed cen- | ser teeming;

Caught up in the trance of his imagination, the speaker breaks his rhythm and leaves a brief, enchanted silence. Controlling the rhythm of the language thus enables the speaker to play with the poem's tone and emotionality.

RHYME SCHEME

Like its meter, the poem's rhyme scheme plays with familiar forms—and then breaks them in surprising ways. The speaker of this poem doesn't fit his visions into a rhyme scheme, but shapes his rhymes so that they mirror his visions!

The first few lines of the poem work with a familiar ABAB CDCD rhyme scheme—the same that readers would expect to see in a sonnet. But at the end of the stanza, everything gets peculiar. The first stanza in its entirety runs like this:

> ABABCDCDEFGE

That G line (which doesn't actually rhyme with anything) comes out of nowhere, disrupting the neat, familiar back-and-forth pattern that readers have just settled into. And that makes a lot of sense—just as the rhyme scheme gets strange, so does the scene. The speaker has stumbled across a pair of sleeping gods, which is surely enough to throw anyone off their rhyme scheme.

But in the second stanza, some of those strange dangling rhymes begin to build new patterns. The first line of the second stanza rhymes with the final line of the first stanza ("eyed" and "espied"), and line 14 reaches back to line 11 ("Tyrian" and "ran"). Of all the rhymes in the first stanza, only "roof" dangles alone without a partner. It's as if the stanzas are twining into each other, like the "cool-rooted flowers" and foliage they describe.

But then, as the speaker looks at Psyche and Eros entwined in the grass, the poem starts to use rhyming couplets—"too" and "adieu," "slumber" and "outnumber." This, too, makes sense: if the speaker is describing a loving "couple," a "couplet" seems like a pretty appropriate form!

All through the poem, the speaker doesn't adhere to one rigid rhyme scheme, but changes his rhyme to match what he describes: couplets to describe a couple, a strange break in a pattern when a strange sight interrupts a forest stroll. While this rhyme scheme is unpredictable, it's always meaningful: it grows like "branched thoughts" out of the beautiful images the speaker envisions.

SPEAKER

While the speaker of "Ode to Psyche" doesn't say much about himself directly, he bears a more than passing resemblance to Keats himself—so much so that we're calling him "he" in this guide. Reflective, dreamy, and enthralled by the creative power of his own mind, this speaker revels in visions of gods sleeping in the woods and "pale-mouth'd prophet[s] dreaming".

He seems to have fed his imagination on Greek and Roman mythology, and it's made him a little wistful: he longs for a mythical golden age when the world was imbued with magic. But he has plenty of internal magic to keep him company. His own mind is rich with "all soft delight / That shadowy thought can win," full of sensuous pleasures and gorgeous visions.

SETTING

The "Ode to Psyche" is set in a forest—but a forest of the mind. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker leaves readers uncertain about whether he's wandering through the woods or only through his imagination. But by the end, he's certainly exploring a forest deep inside himself, a place "in some untrodden region of [his] mind" where thoughts grow like trees.

Real or dreamed, the forest is a magical place, haunted by sleeping gods and lush with gorgeous flowers. The fertile, mythological mystery of these enchanted woods suggests the richness and power of the speaker's mind and soul.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Over the course of his short life, John Keats (1795-1821) wrote some of the most beloved poetry in the English language. "Ode to Psyche" was the first in his series of six major odes, all of which were published in his final volume of poetry, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems*. This collection came out in 1820, the last full year of Keats's life; readers and critics either ignored or scorned it, and when Keats died of tuberculosis at 25, he believed he'd left no permanent mark on poetry. But, as he prophetically said in his youth, he would be "among the English poets after [his] death."

Keats, along with Lord Byron and Percy Shelley, was a member of the so-called "Second Generation" of English Romantic poets, who followed in the footsteps of old-school Romantics like Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. Keats was deeply influenced by Wordsworth in particular, picking up on the older man's interest in folklore, nature, and the power of the imagination. But Keats brought his own expansive, generous personality to these interests, eventually rejecting what he thought of as Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime" in favor of a quality he called "Negative Capability": the capacity to "be in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." That embrace of the mysterious is on full display in the shifting mind-forest of the "Ode to Psyche."

While Keats died in obscurity, he didn't stay there for long. The Victorians rediscovered him, and artists like Tennyson championed his poetry until he was one of the best-known and best-loved of all English poets. Recent commemorations of the 200th anniversary of his death show that he's still influencing readers and writers to this day.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Keats wrote "Ode to Psyche," his interest in Greek and Roman mythology wouldn't have seemed too unusual. Classical myth was an important part of any English schoolchild's education at the time—and even the young Keats, a lower-middle-class kid going to a local day school, would have had a grounding in the poetry, stories, and languages of ancient Greece and Rome.

But though Keats was educated (and brilliant), he found it hard to get ahead in the world he was born into. Nineteenth-century England was a place of intense class divides, not just between the wealthy and the poor, but between those with "noble" ancestry and those considered "common." And commoners were not expected to be artists. Keats's detractors loved to snobbishly insult him and his friends by calling them "Cockney poets"—that is, folks from the wrong side of the tracks in East London.

But England was changing. George IV, a wildly unpopular and self-indulgent king, was destabilizing the monarchy, and the American and French revolutions made the downtrodden English commoners feel that a better and more democratic world might be just over the horizon. And while another revolution didn't come to England, the 19th century was indeed the last in which English monarchs were anything more than figureheads.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — Hear the poem performed aloud by an actor in character as Keats. (https://youtu.be/2zt-ijwiKIY)
- The Keats Letters Project — Visit the Keats Letters Project, where you can read scholars' responses to Keats's touching, funny letters. Keats often discussed his poetry in his letters—and made some pretty good jokes. (http://keatslettersproject.com/)
- A Short Essay on the Poem — Read scholar Carol Rumens's reflection on "Ode to Psyche." (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2008/jul/14/poemoftheweek47)
- A Brief Biography — Read the Poetry Foundation's short biography of Keats, and find links to more of his poetry. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-keats)
- The Keats-Shelley Museum — Visit the website of the Keats-Shelley Museum in Rome (housed in the apartment

where Keats died) to find more information about Keats's life and work. (https://ksh.roma.it/)

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 on Melancholy
- Ode to a Nightingale
- On First Looking into Chapman's Homer
- On Seeing the Elgin Marbles
- On the Grasshopper and Cricket
- On the Sea
- The Eve of St. Agnes
- To Autumn
- When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be

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