On Seeing the Elgin Marbles

POEM TEXT

My spirit is too weak—mortality
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
And each imagined pinnacle and steep
Of godlike hardship, tells me I must die
Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.
Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep
That I have not the cloudy winds to keep,
Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye.
Such dim-conceived glories of the brain
Bring round the heart an undescribable feud;
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
Wasting of old time—with a billowy main—
A sun—a shadow of a magnitude.

SUMMARY

My spirit isn't strong enough. The inevitability of death weighs me down, making me feel as if I were right on the verge of nodding off even as I try to keep my eyes open. And, in front of these craggy, mountainous statues of the gods and their struggles, I'm constantly reminded that I'm going to die one day. I feel rather like an eagle that's too sick to fly, gazing longingly at the sky. But at least I can take some comfort in the fact that I can at least cry over being unable, like that eagle, to soar on the misty winds forever, greeting every new sunrise. These mysterious, shadowy, beautiful thoughts set off a kind of wordless struggle in my heart—in just the same way that these astonishing statues make me feel both awestruck and agonized: they combine the beauty and splendor of ancient Greek art with the bluntly unkind effects of time (which wears even great statues away). They put me in mind of wild seas, and the sun itself—but they're also just shadows of something huge.

THEMES

TIME AND MORTALITY

Standing in front of the Elgin Marbles—ancient statues that once decorated the Greek Parthenon, now housed in the British Museum in London—the poem's speaker feels terribly aware of his own "mortality" and smallness. Because these glorious, powerful ancient Greek statues have outlasted their creators, he can't help but be aware they'll outlast him, too: he feels all too mortal next to them. And yet, even these astonishing works of art aren't completely immortal; they show the marks of wear and age, reminding the speaker that even the mightiest statue crumbles in the end. The poem thus reflects that death conquers all—even seemingly deathless stones.

The awesome power and beauty of the Elgin Marbles makes the speaker aware of just how "weak" his own "spirit" is in comparison. Gazing at the "godlike" beauty of these ancient statues, which have endured for well over 2,000 years, he's reminded that his own little life will be a mere blip in the grand scheme of things. He feels his "mortality" as a "weigh[t]" pressing him down: however "unwilling" he is to entertain the thought, the sheer age of the statues forces him to confront the reality and inevitability of his own death. The mere idea is enough to make him "weep."

But even these mighty statues, the speaker observes, aren't completely or uncomplicatedly immortal. "Old time" has "wast[ed]" them away, breaking and battering them. What's more, they're relics from a vanished culture, and they represent gods whom no one really believes in anymore. It seems that nothing in the world, not even carved stone, can escape death.

The speaker's encounter with these statues is thus at once moving, humbling, and chastening. The poem suggests that, if even stone statues of "godlike" might and beauty are subject to decay and death, then people have to acknowledge that they themselves are even more fragile and vulnerable. Time and death hold the ultimate power, here and everywhere.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

THE POWER AND LIMITATIONS OF ART

Visiting the ancient Greek Elgin Marbles in the British Museum, this sonnet's speaker feels overwhelmed by their glory—and moved by their decay. On the one hand, the speaker admires and envies the Marbles for their deathless artistic power: their sheer beauty can still speak to people living 2,000 years after they were carved. But on the other hand, these statues show all the signs of their age; battered by the years, they're "shadows" of their former selves. They might be enduring, but they're certainly not truly immortal. Art, in this poem, is thus both powerful and limited—and aspiring artists, as the speaker seems to be, must learn to reckon with both of these facts.

The poem's speaker is awestruck by the glory of the Elgin Marbles and feels all too aware of his own limitations in their presence. Their "godlike" beauty makes him feel very small by comparison: next to these statues, he feels like a "sick eagle looking at the sky," a frail mortal desperate to fly to the statues' artistic heights, but afraid he's far too "weak" to do so. (And the image of an eagle in particular suggests that the speaker might well long to make art this lasting himself: birds of all kinds are a common symbol for poets.) These statues have remained beautiful and moving for over 2,000 years—an astonishing feat that the speaker can only dream of matching.

But the statues are also limited, in their own way. The "wasting of old time" has broken them down and worn them away; not one statue has made it through the centuries unscathed. Now, they're a "shadow of a magnitude"—ghosts of what they once were, and some of the last remnants of a long-vanished civilization. Art might have the power to reach people across the centuries, but it isn't all-powerful: it can't defeat time, at least not forever.

The speaker's encounter with these statues is thus also a reckoning with what art can and can't do. But perhaps art's limits are also *part* of its power. By simultaneously showing their age and remaining moving and beautiful, the Elgin Marbles manage to tell this poem's speaker a deeper truth: great art is one way of finding meaning and beauty in the world in spite of decay and death.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

My spirit is too weak—mortality
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,

The first lines of "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" might catch readers off guard. This sonnet's title suggests that this will be a poem about a visit to a famous collection of 2,000-year-old statues: the titular Elgin Marbles, named for the British ambassador who spirited them away from the Parthenon in Greece and sold them to London's British Museum, where they remain to this day.

But the speaker doesn't begin by describing those ancient, stony gods and goddesses. Instead, he describes their effect on him—his experience of looking at them for the first time. And it seems as if that experience hasn't been altogether comfortable.

"My spirit," the speaker begins, "is too weak." An abrupt caesura after those first few words leaves readers wondering: *too weak for what?*

The speaker goes on:

> [...] mortality
> Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,

In other words, looking at these statues has, for some reason, made the speaker feel terribly aware of his own inevitable death. Perhaps "mortality" itself is his spirit's "weak[ness]"—or perhaps he feels "weak" because thoughts of death leave him so shaken up.

Either way, he clearly feels powerless in the face of these thoughts. His simile here, in which "mortality" feels like "unwilling sleep," suggests that he worries he might nod off into an eternal slumber at any moment. The "heavi[ness]" of this sleep might put readers in mind of the way eyelids feel when you're trying hard not to fall asleep: so weighty they keep on shutting whether you like it or not. The enjambment at the end of line 1 evokes this heaviness as well, pulling the reader from one line to the next. Death, this speaker reflects, is just as involuntary and just as inescapable as that kind of helpless exhaustion.

The rest of this sonnet will explore why, exactly, the sight of some of the world's most beautiful statues should make the speaker so acutely aware of death—and what that awareness might suggest about the nature of art itself.

LINES 3-5

And each imagined pinnacle and steep
Of godlike hardship, tells me I must die
Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.

In these lines, the Elgin Marbles themselves appear on the scene—but veiled in mysterious language. The speaker affirms that, as the first two lines suggested, the Marbles are somehow telling him that he "must die." But listen to how he describes the statues themselves:

> And each imagined pinnacle and steep
> Of godlike hardship, tells me I must die

There's a lot happening at once here. Metaphorically, the speaker seems to be seeing the Marbles as *mountains*, with imposing "pinnacle[s] and steep[s]"—perhaps inviting him to climb, perhaps merely intimidating him. But all those "pinnacle[s] and steep[s]" are also somehow "imagined": the speaker knows it's his own mind that makes these statues into mountains.

In other words, the speaker is again describing, not what the statues look like, but how they make him feel. They strike him as beautiful, majestic, and terrifying all at once, almost too grand for his mind to handle. In other words, they're sublime, in the Romantic sense of the term.

It's no wonder, then, that the speaker feels uncomfortably aware of his own "mortality." Standing in the presence of these ancient, mighty artworks, he's forced to reckon with the fact that his own life will only be a blip in the grand scheme of time. These statues have preserved their awe-inspiring power for over 2,000 years—and the speaker knows they'll stay just this astonishing long after he's dead, too.

There's yet another complication here as well. Those mountainous "pinnacle[s] and steep[s]" don't seem to be made of stone, but of a "godlike hardship"—a kind of mighty, titanic struggle. There's a hint here that the speaker is overawed, not just by the beauty of the statues, but by the thought of the "hardship" that went into *making* them. How any tiny little mortal human could make art like this, the speaker seems to say, is a total mystery.

What's more, it seems as if the speaker might long to make art this beautiful himself—if only his "spirit" weren't so "weak." Take a look at his second simile here:

> And each imagined pinnacle and steep
> Of godlike hardship, tells me I must die
> Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.

In other words, this speaker feels like a creature built for flight—designed to soar to the height of these mountainous statues. In the context of a poem, the choice of an eagle here feels particularly telling: birds are ancient symbols for poets and poetry. But this eagle is "sick," and can only look longingly at the "sky" it can't quite reach.

Seeing the Elgin Marbles, in short, has made the speaker realize just how mighty and enduring art can be—and just how difficult it would be to reach anything like these statues' artistic power. What's more, the fact that these statues have preserved their power for millennia makes the speaker aware that any human life, in comparison to a great statue's, is pretty darn brief and fragile.

LINES 6-8

> *Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep*
> *That I have not the cloudy winds to keep,*
> *Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye.*

In the poem's first few lines, the speaker has been deeply moved (and shaken) by the seemingly deathless grandeur of the Elgin Marbles. Now, he finds some relief from his overwhelm in tears.

These lines form a striking contrast with the mountainous, stony "pinnacle[s] and steep[s]" of the Marbles. Where the statues were all "godlike hardship," the speaker's feelings now are "gentle" and soft. In fact, there's even something "luxur[ious]" about his weeping: there's a real pleasure, for this speaker, in being moved to tears by art, even if those tears are partly tears of grief.

This passage also deepens the speaker's eagle simile. Take a look at his airy language here:

> Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep
> That I have not the cloudy winds to keep,
> Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye.

In other words, there's a kind of pleasure for the poor "sick eagle" in crying over the fact that he can't ride the "winds" into every single new dawn. Perhaps the pleasure is in the emotional release of tears; perhaps the pleasure is in coming to terms with the deep truth that no life can last forever.

And perhaps there's even a kind of "gentle luxury" in *longing* for an unreachable "sky." Notice just how "fresh" and lively the imagery is here: in describing "cloudy winds" and the godlike "opening of the morning's eye," the speaker seems to be vividly picturing what it might be like if he *could* live eternally in the Marbles' powerful, beautiful world.

Again, *imagination* is key. First, the Marbles inspired the speaker to "imagine[]" them as sublime mountains. Now, they inspire him to imagine the heights he fears he's too "weak" and "sick" to achieve. Paradoxically, these imaginings in themselves become a kind of flight. Readers might here take a moment to reflect that the speaker seems to have left his literal surroundings—a museum in 19th-century London—far behind. He might not *believe* he can fly—but his absorption in the Marbles has spirited him (and his reader) to mountainous mythological terrain.

Formally, these lines bring an end to the sonnet's opening octave—that is, the eight-line stanza that forms the first half of the poem. By now, readers will have noticed that the poem has used a lilting, back-and-forth rhyme scheme that runs like this: ABBA ABBA. That's a standard form for a Petrarchan sonnet like this one. As the poem enters its sestet (the sonnet's closing six lines), however, that pattern will change.

LINES 9-10

> *Such dim-conceived glories of the brain*
> *Bring round the heart an undescribable feud;*

Line 9 is the beginning of the end of the poem: the start of its sestet, or closing six-line stanza, which responds to the poem's opening octave. This moment of transition is known as the sonnet's volta, or turn. And as the poem takes this new turn, the rhyme scheme snaps into a more urgent CDCDCD pattern that reflects the speaker's thoughts kicking into a new gear. In these lines, the speaker will come to a different and richer understanding of the Marbles.

In these lines, the tearful speaker feels his complex, conflicting reactions to the Elgin Marbles as a kind of inner "feud," or battle. For starters, there's the struggle between his desire to achieve the kind of artistic glory and endurance that the

Marbles have, and his sense that his "spirit" is too "weak" and mortal to do so.

That exact struggle now plays out in this very poem! Here, the speaker tries his level best to capture his experience of the statues in words, but is forced to admit that his words are always going to fall just a little short of the reality—especially in those moments when he feels artistically "weak."

Take a look at the particular language he chooses to describe his feelings at this moment:

> Such dim-conceived glories of the brain
> Bring round the heart an undescribable feud;

"Dim-conceived," "undescribable": the speaker knows that he's brushing right up against the limits of speech as he tries to recount the effect the Marbles had on him.

And consider the juxtaposition between "dim-conceived"—that is, shadowy and half-understood—and "glories." The word "glories" doesn't just suggest splendor or grandeur, but *light*: Keats himself uses the word "glory" to suggest a divine golden halo in another of his poems. The brilliant "glories" of the Marbles working on his "brain" (and his imagination), seem, oddly enough, to throw his mind into confused shadow.

In other words, something about seeing the Marbles puts the speaker in a paradoxical frame of mind. He knows that he's having a profoundly moving artistic experience—but also that he'll never quite be able to capture that experience in words. But what he *can* capture is the feeling of *not* being able to fully capture his awe and wonder. Again, he's like that "sick eagle," reaching new imaginative heights by vividly evoking what's *out* of his reach.

A similar paradox will shape his next insight about the nature of the Marbles—which, he's about to realize, aren't actually any less mortal than he is.

LINES 11-13

> *So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,*
> *That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude*
> *Wasting of old time*

In lines 9-10, the speaker tried his best to describe what it's like to have an "undescribabl[y]" moving artistic experience. Now, he discovers a related paradox in the Elgin Marbles themselves.

Like the "dim-conceived glories" he reached for in the previous lines, he says, "these wonders"—that is, the Marbles—give him a "dizzy," disorienting "pain."

And that's because, as he suddenly sees, the Elgin Marbles *aren't* immortal, not really. They might have survived for over 2,000 years and they might have inspired and awed generations of viewers, but, still, they can only ever:

> [...] mingle[] Grecian grandeur with the rude
> Wasting of old time [...]

In other words, the "Grecian grandeur" of the Marbles is far from pristine: "old time" has "wast[ed]" the statues away. And any reader who's seen the Marbles for themselves can confirm that's perfectly true. All those stone gods are broken and battered; some are just a severed limb or a headless torso. They aren't immortal any more than the speaker is: even stone "dies" in the end. (And notice how the growling alliteration of "Grecian grandeur" evokes the rough edges of all that broken marble.)

But, as the speaker realizes now, it's partly the fact that the statues *haven't* survived unscathed that makes them so artistically powerful. If they were perfectly preserved, they'd be awe-inspiring "wonders," certainly. But there's something differently moving about seeing the marks of time on what at first seems to be deathless artwork. It's the *wear* on the statues that brings the speaker to his profound realization about "mortality": it's not just the speaker, but everyone and everything, that will eventually die.

In a way, then, the statues' imperfections thus give them power. Through their beauty and their brokenness, they manage to speak both of the "godlike" heights that human artistry can reach, and of the inevitability of death at the same time. Their damage makes them truthful; that truthfulness makes them even more moving.

LINES 13-14

> *with a billowy main—*
> *A sun—a shadow of a magnitude.*

This sonnet has, so far, traced the speaker's dawning realization that even the greatest and longest-lived art is just as mortal as he is—and that this fact can actually help art to speak even more movingly. In these closing lines, the paradoxical realization that mortal weakness is part of what makes the Elgin Marbles powerful seems to lift the speaker right off the ground into a whole new kind of imaginative experience.

The "dizzy pain" of realizing that the Marbles are mortal makes the speaker envision, not just the combination of "Grecian grandeur" and the "wasting of old time," but also:

> [...] a billowy main—
> A sun—a shadow of a magnitude.

In other words, something about his insight into mortality is *transporting*. Already lost in thought, carried far from the museum where he stands, the speaker now seems to glimpse the bright, "billowy" Greek sea of the Marbles' ancient world.

That "main" is lit, not by the sun, but by "a sun"—a definite article that suggests there's something special and different about this sun in particular. Readers might here envision the

different flavors of sunlight in different parts of the world; a Greek sun, one has to imagine, shines hotter and clearer than the gentle sun of the speaker's London. The slow caesurae here leave each of these images hanging in midair for a moment, inviting readers to imagine that "sun" and that "main" along with the speaker.

All these bright visions, the speaker concludes, are a mere "shadow of a magnitude": the dim silhouette of much greater "glories." And so, of course, are the broken, time-worn Marbles themselves; and so is this very poem, which tries to capture a "dim-conceived" trace of the speaker's profound artistic experience.

Neither humanity nor art, this poem suggests, can escape time and death—at least not forever. But through art, perhaps people can find meaning and beauty within the limits of mortality.

SYMBOLS

THE ELGIN MARBLES

The Elgin Marbles themselves are a complex symbol, representing both the height of human artistic achievement and the inevitability of death and decay.

The poem's speaker is overawed by the beauty of the Marbles: their sheer "Grecian grandeur" makes him feel helplessly small and weak in comparison. It's astonishing to him that any human being could have created art this powerful.

But at the same time, the Marbles aren't what they used to be. "Old time" has worn away at them, leaving them a "shadow" of their former selves. Even these mighty statues can't "live" forever.

The Marbles thus illustrate how even the greatest human creations are subject to the power of time.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "each imagined pinnacle and steep / Of godlike hardship,"
- **Lines 11-14:** "So do these wonders a most dizzy pain, / That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude / Wasting of old time—with a billowy main— / A sun—a shadow of a magnitude."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

Allusions to the Elgin Marbles are this poem's bedrock.

The Elgin Marbles (now usually known as the Parthenon Sculptures) are a collection of marble statues and friezes that the British ambassador Lord Elgin spirited away from the ruins of the ancient Greek Parthenon between the years of 1801 and 1805. (See the Historical Context section of this guide for more on the controversies around that!) While battered and broken both by "old time" and by years of war, these statues were (and are) acclaimed as some of the most beautiful and powerful extant examples of classical art.

At the time Keats wrote this poem, the Elgin Marbles had only just gone on display in the British Museum (though they began their tenure there in a shed, not the grand hall they're shown in today). When this poem was published in *The Examiner* newspaper in 1817, the general reading public might very well have been to see these statues themselves and thus have known precisely what Keats was talking about.

The allusions to the Marbles here are thus, fittingly enough, both topical and timeless! In drawing on the Elgin Marbles in particular, Keats evokes both a mysterious ancient world and his own exact (and fleeting) moment in history.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "each imagined pinnacle and steep / Of godlike hardship,"
- **Lines 11-14:** "So do these wonders a most dizzy pain, / That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude / Wasting of old time—with a billowy main— / A sun—a shadow of a magnitude."

PARADOX

This poem's central paradox has to do with the simultaneous mortality and immortality of art:

- On the one hand, the speaker observes, the Elgin Marbles have achieved artistic immortality by just about any standard. Not only have they survived for over 2,000 years, they're still just as powerful, affecting, and beautiful as they ever were, moving the living as they must have moved the dead. The Marbles manage to speak for a whole lost world—a world they've considerably outlasted.
- On the other hand, even these astonishing "wonders" are showing signs of wear! Battered by the "rude / Wasting of old time," the statues are just "a shadow" of their former selves. Readers who have visited the British Museum, where the Marbles are still housed, will know that plenty of the grand gods of the Parthenon are missing, well, most of themselves: some are just fragments of torsos or limbs.

Now, here's where the paradox comes in: the statues' signs of weakness and decay are, in this poem's view, actually a big part of what makes them so powerful and so moving. Seeing the

marks of time on mighty art that represents immortal gods, the speaker is stirred to reflections about his own mortality, and *everything's* mortality: the wear on the statues actually reveals to him a profound truth about the nature of the world. The statues' weaknesses thus become a new element of their artistic power.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-13:** "So do these wonders a most dizzy pain, / That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude / Wasting of old time"

SIMILE

The poem's two similes conjure up the speaker's frustration, helplessness, and longing.

The first simile the speaker uses is an old one: death as a kind of "unwilling sleep," an image that evokes the heavy-eyelid, nodding-off helplessness of complete exhaustion. The word "unwilling" is important here; while Keats will later write of being "half in love with easeful Death," this poem's speaker seems pretty committed to staying awake and alive! But alas, that choice isn't his to make. In this simile, not only is "mortality" unavoidable, it's as easy and everyday as dozing off.

The second simile is similarly poignant. Here, the speaker imagines himself as "a sick eagle looking at the sky," a magnificent creature stripped of its powers of flight. This rich image suggests that the speaker feels he has it in himself to soar to the same artistic heights that these statues reach. (Not incidentally, birds of all kinds are a common Romantic symbol for poets and poetry.) But his own "spirit" and its frailty seems to hold him back like a disease. If the speaker is a "sick eagle," he's both *full* of potential and *robbed* of potential—and perhaps all the more dejected because he knows it's not impossible he could achieve the artistic greatness he yearns for, if only he could shake off his "weak[ness]."

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "mortality / Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,"
- **Line 5:** "Like a sick eagle looking at the sky."

CAESURA

The poem's caesurae create pauses in which ideas can sink in. Take the caesura that appears in the very first line:

> My spirit is too weak— || mortality

That strong break suggests the speaker's own frustration with his too-weak "spirit," and it also creates a moment of mystery, inviting readers to wonder: *too weak for what?*

The speaker goes on to answer that question at length: his spirit, the next lines reveal, can neither live forever nor reach the kind of artistic heights he aspires to. Another caesura helps to makes this point crystal clear:

> And each imagined pinnacle and steep
> Of godlike hardship, || tells me I must die

That comma closes off the speaker's admiration for the statues with the blunt declaration that he "must die."

But perhaps the most mysterious and meaningful caesurae here appear in the last two lines:

> Wasting of old time—|| with a billowy main—
> A sun—|| a shadow of a magnitude.

Here, mid-line breaks evoke an experience almost too powerful to put into words. As the speaker marvels at the way that these statues can be at once broken and glorious, mortal and mighty, he seems to be grasping at fragments of images the Marbles conjure up: the "billowy main" and "sun" of a long-vanished ancient world seem to be right on the edge of his consciousness here. The caesurae set these images off, giving each their own little pocket of attention.

The final caesura also makes room for the poem's powerful closing words: "a shadow of a magnitude" hangs there alone, summing up all the speaker's reflections.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "weak—mortality"
- **Line 4:** "hardship, tells"
- **Line 13:** "time—with"
- **Line 14:** "sun—a"

ENJAMBMENT

This sonnet's many enjambments help to create the sense that the speaker is lost in thought.

For example, take a look at the way enjambments shape the first four lines of the poem:

> My spirit is too weak—mortality
> Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
> And each imagined pinnacle and steep
> Of godlike hardship, tells me I must die

As the first quatrain of a poem called "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," these lines might at first seem perplexing: aside from a cryptic allusion to mountainous "pinnacle[s] and steep[s]" of "godlike hardship," this passage seems like it has a lot more to do with the speaker's own inevitable death than with statuary!

But by making the lines flow continuously into each other, the

enjambments here help readers to understand that the statues have almost hypnotized the speaker, carrying him into deep waters. Rather than simply describing the statues, he describes how the statues make him *feel* and *think*—and enjambment suggests that those feelings and thoughts are absorbing ones.

Enjambment can also create moments of surprise. Consider these lines:

> So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
> That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
> Wasting of old time

Here, the enjambment puts two stressed syllables—"rude" and "wasting"—on a collision course with each other, throwing the poem's meter off-kilter. That's pretty fitting for a description of "old time" and its "rude," abrupt, discourteous behavior! Here, the enjambment creates a little shock to match the shock of the statues' decay.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "mortality / Weighs"
- **Lines 3-4:** "steep / Of"
- **Lines 4-5:** "die / Like"
- **Lines 6-7:** "weep / That"
- **Lines 9-10:** "brain / Bring"
- **Lines 12-13:** "rude / Wasting"

ASSONANCE

Assonance gives this poem some thoughtful music.

For example, listen to the way the long /ee/ and /i/ sounds thread through these lines:

> And each imagined pinnacle and steep
> Of godlike hardship, tells me I must die
> Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.

These weaving sounds are just plain euphonious and pleasing, suggesting that looking at images of "godlike hardship" and thinking about death might be this speaker's idea of an afternoon well and enjoyably spent. But the assonance here also refuses to let readers forget the speaker's central point: "I must die," and not even profoundly great art (or great art-making) can alter that fact.

And listen to what assonance gives to the poem's closing lines:

> [...] the rude
> Wasting of old time—with a billowy main—
> A sun—a shadow of a magnitude.

Again, the alternation of long /ay/ and short /ah/ sounds is simply beautiful. But it also means that the "main" and the "wasting," the "shadow" and the "magnitude," feel intimately connected.

In other words, the assonance here underlines the paradox of these statues: the very fact that they're broken and battered gives them a whole different kind of artistic power than they'd have if they were in pristine condition. It's by being both enduring and somehow mortal that these statues remind the speaker of a great truth: everything dies. But perhaps death doesn't take as much away from the meaning of art as one might imagine.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "sleep"
- **Line 3:** "each," "steep"
- **Line 4:** "godlike," "I," "die"
- **Line 5:** "Like," "sky"
- **Line 9:** "conceived," "glories"
- **Line 13:** "Wasting," "main"
- **Line 14:** "shadow," "magnitude"

ALLITERATION

Like assonance, alliteration gives the poem music and meaning.

For example, listen to the alliterative moments in the poem's last four lines:

> So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
> That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
> Wasting of old time—with a billowy main—
> A sun—a shadow of a magnitude.

Besides just being pleasing to the ear, these repetitions are subtly evocative. The strong /gr/ sounds of "Grecian grandeur," for instance, feel as stony-firm as the statues these words describe—and perhaps even suggest the roughness of their broken edges. The gentler, more meditative /m/ sound that meanders through these lines, meanwhile, provides a hushed backdrop that might put readers in mind of a quiet museum.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "weak"
- **Line 2:** "Weighs," "unwilling"
- **Line 5:** "sick," "sky"
- **Line 7:** "cloudy," "keep"
- **Line 11:** "most"
- **Line 12:** "mingles," "Grecian grandeur"
- **Line 13:** "main"
- **Line 14:** "magnitude"

VOCABULARY

Mortality (Line 1) - The state of being mortal—that is, doomed to die!

Pinnacle (Line 3) - The highest point of a tower or a mountain.

Steep (Line 3) - A mountainside, a slope.

Dim-conceived (Line 9) - Shadowy or half-formed in the imagination.

Glories (Line 9) - Wonders, marvels.

Feud (Line 10) - Dispute, argument.

Mingles (Line 12) - Combines, mixes.

Rude (Line 12) - Rough, abrupt, ungentle.

Wasting (Line 13) - Shriveling, sickening, fading.

A billowy main (Line 13) - That is, an ocean ("main") rocked by big waves (or "billows").

Magnitude (Line 14) - Something very great, grand, or large.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" is a Petrarchan sonnet, also known as an Italian sonnet. That means that it's built from an eight-line introduction (the octave) and a six-line conclusion (the sestet), and that it uses a strict rhyme scheme and meter (more on those in their respective sections of this guide). It's also an ekphrastic poem—a poem that responds to a work of art.

This form suits the subject matter! Keats chooses a rigorous, bounded, and traditional art form to describe his experience of stony, imposing, enduring works of art.

The sonnet is also a traditional form for working through a problem or a question—often one with a twist in its tail. Here, the speaker uses the octave to reflect on just how weak, small, and mortal he feels in the face of this seemingly immortal art, and the sestet to observe that even these majestic statues aren't immune to the ravages of time. Line 9 here marks the poem's *volta*, or turn: the moment when it switches gears to respond to the opening octave.

METER

"On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," like nearly all English-language sonnets, is written in iambic pentameter. That means that every line uses five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in line 9:

Such dim-| concei- | ved glor- | ies of | the brain

(Note that, in this poem, "conceived" is pronounced with three syllables: *con-SEE-ved*)

But like a lot of sonnets, this one plays around with this steady, pulsing meter for effect. For instance, listen to the rhythm of line 5:

Like a | sick ea- | gle look- | ing at | the sky.

Keats begins this line with a strong trochee—the opposite foot to an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm. Then, even more emphatically, he introduces a spondee, a foot built from two stresses in a row (DUM-DUM). These choices give this striking image some extra force.

RHYME SCHEME

As a Petrarchan sonnet, "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" uses a traditional rhyme scheme that runs like this:

ABBA ABBA CDCDCD

Alert readers might notice that this rhyme scheme divides the poem into two sections: an eight-line octave (built from two four-line quatrains) with dreamier, slower rhymes, and a six-line sestet with a more intense, swiftly alternating rhyme pattern. That movement of rhymes works right alongside the speaker's energies as he turns from melancholy thoughts of death to the powerful, shadowy energy of the great Greek statues he's admiring.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is almost certainly John Keats himself. Keats wrote this sonnet after a real-life visit to the Elgin Marbles at the British Museum—a pilgrimage he would eventually make many times, and one that would inspire more than one of his most famous poems. And the themes and ideas the speaker discusses here were ones that Keats would return to over and over: a pressing awareness of death, a longing for artistic greatness, a delight in classical art, and a reverence for the power and depth of the imagination.

Whether or not the reader interprets this speaker as Keats, the speaker is certainly a poetic soul. This is someone who's deeply moved by both the enduring power of these ancient statues, and by their woefully battered state. To this speaker, the Elgin Marbles speak of both immortal greatness and the inevitability of death and change.

SETTING

While the speaker doesn't say so explicitly, readers who know the story of the Elgin Marbles (now usually known as the Parthenon Marbles) can assume that this poem takes place in the British Museum in London. At the time Keats wrote this sonnet, the Marbles had only recently gone on public display

and were the talk of the town. Keats made many visits to the museum to admire these beautiful, powerful sculptures.

But the poem doesn't feel as if it were set in London. Instead, the sight of the Marbles seems to carry the speaker far away from the museum and the city. Much of the real action here takes place in the speaker's imagination—a place of rocky crags, tormented eagles, and rolling seas. For this speaker, the Elgin Marbles seem to capture some shadow of "Grecian grandeur," and to put him in contact with the myth and mystery of the ancient world.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Keats (1795-1821) is often seen as an archetypal Romantic poet: a dreamy, sensuous soul who died tragically young. But Keats was also a vigorous, funny writer, a working-class kid making inroads into a literary scene dominated by more aristocratic figures like Lord Byron. He died obscure and poor, never knowing that he would become one of the world's best-loved poets. But he had a quiet faith in his own genius: in an early letter, he once declared, "I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death."

Much of Keats's poetry deals with his love of ancient Greece. Keats saw in the classical world a kind of imaginative richness he felt had been lost in his own time and often set his poems in a mythological dreamscape that drew on Greek tales. He was also deeply moved by classical art; this sonnet is, in fact, only one of his poems inspired by the Elgin Marbles (and far from the most famous of the bunch).

In these preoccupations, Keats fit right in with his Romantic contemporaries. Like many of the Romantic poets, Keats was interested in the power of myth and magic. Both played a big part in the Romantic worldview, which turned away from the Enlightenment rationalism of the 18th century to embrace the mysteries of the imagination.

Keats met or corresponded with most of his fellow Romantics, but never got too close to any of them. As a young writer, for instance, he was inspired by William Wordsworth, the granddaddy of English Romanticism—but was dismayed to find him pompous and conservative in person. And while Percy Shelley admired Keats's work, Keats never quite fell in with him and his elite clique; Byron, Shelley's close friend, was actively contemptuous of Keats. Keats's real circle was instead built from earthier London artists like Charles Lamb, Leigh Hunt, and Benjamin Haydon.

In spite of being something of an outsider in his time, Keats has indeed landed "among the English Poets" since his death. Ever since later Victorian poets like Tennyson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning resurrected his reputation, he's been one of the most beloved and influential of poets.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" was a timely poem, appearing not long after those famous statues were first displayed in London's British Museum in 1817. The ambassador Lord Elgin either rescued or looted the Marbles (depending on whom you ask) from the ruined Greek Parthenon, an ancient temple. Elgin saw himself as the Marbles' savior: these astonishing works of art had been badly damaged over the years by warfare and neglect, and he believed he was preserving them from further decay by removing them.

Elgin's choice to remove the Marbles fits right into both the political and artistic values of early 19th-century Britain. At the time, Britain was well on its way to becoming a vast empire, and the British often liked to think of themselves as the world's stewards and civilizers. And a lot of that self-image was founded on a reverence for classical ideals: the British educational system was built around the study of Latin and Greek, and much public architecture in the period was modeled on the pillars and pediments of Greek and Roman temples. The Marbles were a much-discussed sensation, seen as perfect examples of classical harmony and beauty; Keats was only one of thousands of visitors to be moved by them.

Controversially, the Marbles (now usually known as the Parthenon Sculptures) are on display in the British Museum to this day. Greece has many times requested that the Marbles be returned, even building a museum with space to house them. The British Museum has, so far, firmly refused.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Keats and the Marbles — Read about Keats's personal experiences with the Parthenon Marbles. (https://johnkeats.uvic.ca/1817-03-02.html?href=poem_on_seeing_the_elgin_marbles)
- More on the Parthenon Marbles — Visit the British Museum's website to learn more about the history of (and controversies around) the Parthenon Marbles. (https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/parthenon-sculptures)
- Keats's Influence — Read a recent reflection on Keats's enduring importance; 2021 marked 200 years since his death, and he remains a deeply beloved and influential poet. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/feb/19/poetry-world-prepares-to-mark-bicentenary-of-john-keats)
- The Debate Over the Marbles — Read a letter to the

editor of The Guardian newspaper that discusses Keats's role in the ongoing debate over where the Parthenon Marbles should be housed. (https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/feb/03/the-parthenon-marbles-had-a-time-and-a-rightful-place-for-keats)

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/ygZo3jscYwM)
- A Short Biography — Learn more about Keats's life and work via the British Library's website. (https://www.bl.uk/people/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 on Melancholy
- Ode to a Nightingale
- Ode to Psyche
- On First Looking into Chapman's Homer
- On the Sea
- The Eve of St. Agnes
- To Autumn
- When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be

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