The Eve of St. Agnes

POEM TEXT

St. Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;
The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:
Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told
His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
Like pious incense from a censer old,
Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,
Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.

His prayer he saith, this patient, holy man;
Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees,
And back returneth, meagre, barefoot, wan,
Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees:
The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze,
Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails:
Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat'ries,
He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails
To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails.

Northward he turneth through a little door,
And scarce three steps, ere Music's golden tongue
Flatter'd to tears this aged man and poor;
But no—already had his deathbell rung;
The joys of all his life were said and sung:
His was harsh penance on St. Agnes' Eve:
Another way he went, and soon among
Rough ashes sat he for his soul's reprieve,
And all night kept awake, for sinners' sake to grieve.

That ancient Beadsman heard the prelude soft;
And so it chanc'd, for many a door was wide,
From hurry to and fro. Soon, up aloft,
The silver, snarling trumpets 'gan to chide:
The level chambers, ready with their pride,
Were glowing to receive a thousand guests:
The carved angels, ever eager-eyed,
Star'd, where upon their heads the cornice rests,
With hair blown back, and wings put cross-wise on their breasts.

At length burst in the argent revelry,
With plume, tiara, and all rich array,
Numerous as shadows haunting faerily
The brain, new stuff'd, in youth, with triumphs gay
Of old romance. These let us wish away,
And turn, sole-thoughted, to one Lady there,
Whose heart had brooded, all that wintry day,
On love, and wing'd St. Agnes' saintly care,
As she had heard old dames full many times declare.

They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve,
Young virgins might have visions of delight,
And soft adorings from their loves receive
Upon the honey'd middle of the night,
If ceremonies due they did aright;
As, supperless to bed they must retire,
And couch supine their beauties, lily white;
Nor look behind, nor sideways, but require
Of Heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire.

Full of this whim was thoughtful Madeline:
The music, yearning like a God in pain,
She scarcely heard: her maiden eyes divine,
Fix'd on the floor, saw many a sweeping train
Pass by—she heeded not at all: in vain
Came many a tiptoe, amorous cavalier,
And back retir'd, not cool'd by high disdain;
But she saw not: her heart was otherwhere:
She sigh'd for Agnes' dreams, the sweetest of the year.

She danc'd along with vague, regardless eyes,
Anxious her lips, her breathing quick and short:
The hallow'd hour was near at hand: she sighs
Amid the timbrels, and the throng'd resort
Of whisperers in anger, or in sport;
'Mid looks of love, defiance, hate, and scorn,
Hoodwink'd with faery fancy; all amort,
Save to St. Agnes and her lambs unshorn,
And all the bliss to be before to-morrow morn.

So, purposing each moment to retire,
She linger'd still. Meantime, across the moors,
Had come young Porphyro, with heart on fire
For Madeline. Beside the portal doors,

Buttress'd from moonlight, stands he, and implores
All saints to give him sight of Madeline,
But for one moment in the tedious hours,
That he might gaze and worship all unseen;
Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss—in sooth such things have been.

He ventures in: let no buzz'd whisper tell:
All eyes be muffled, or a hundred swords
Will storm his heart, Love's fev'rous citadel:
For him, those chambers held barbarian hordes,
Hyena foemen, and hot-blooded lords,
Whose very dogs would execrations howl
Against his lineage: not one breast affords
Him any mercy, in that mansion foul,
Save one old beldame, weak in body and in soul.

Ah, happy chance! the aged creature came,
Shuffling along with ivory-headed wand,
To where he stood, hid from the torch's flame,
Behind a broad half-pillar, far beyond
The sound of merriment and chorus bland:
He startled her; but soon she knew his face,
And grasp'd his fingers in her palsied hand,
Saying, "Mercy, Porphyro! hie thee from this place;
They are all here to-night, the whole blood-thirsty race!

"Get hence! get hence! there's dwarfish Hildebrand;
He had a fever late, and in the fit
He cursed thee and thine, both house and land:
Then there's that old Lord Maurice, not a whit
More tame for his gray hairs—Alas me! flit!
Flit like a ghost away."—"Ah, Gossip dear,
We're safe enough; here in this arm-chair sit,
And tell me how"—"Good Saints! not here, not here;
Follow me, child, or else these stones will be thy bier."

He follow'd through a lowly arched way,
Brushing the cobwebs with his lofty plume,
And as she mutter'd "Well-a—well-a-day!"
He found him in a little moonlight room,
Pale, lattic'd, chill, and silent as a tomb.
"Now tell me where is Madeline," said he,
"O tell me, Angela, by the holy loom
Which none but secret sisterhood may see,
When they St. Agnes' wool are weaving piously."

"St. Agnes! Ah! it is St. Agnes' Eve—
Yet men will murder upon holy days:
Thou must hold water in a witch's sieve,
And be liege-lord of all the Elves and Fays,
To venture so: it fills me with amaze
To see thee, Porphyro!—St. Agnes' Eve!
God's help! my lady fair the conjuror plays
This very night: good angels her deceive!
But let me laugh awhile, I've mickle time to grieve."

Feebly she laugheth in the languid moon,
While Porphyro upon her face doth look,
Like puzzled urchin on an aged crone
Who keepeth clos'd a wond'rous riddle-book,
As spectacled she sits in chimney nook.
But soon his eyes grew brilliant, when she told
His lady's purpose; and he scarce could brook
Tears, at the thought of those enchantments cold,
And Madeline asleep in lap of legends old.

Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose,
Flushing his brow, and in his pained heart
Made purple riot: then doth he propose
A stratagem, that makes the beldame start:
"A cruel man and impious thou art:
Sweet lady, let her pray, and sleep, and dream
Alone with her good angels, far apart
From wicked men like thee. Go, go!—I deem
Thou canst not surely be the same that thou didst seem."

"I will not harm her, by all saints I swear,"
Quoth Porphyro: "O may I ne'er find grace
When my weak voice shall whisper its last prayer,
If one of her soft ringlets I displace,
Or look with ruffian passion in her face:
Good Angela, believe me by these tears;
Or I will, even in a moment's space,
Awake, with horrid shout, my foemen's ears,
And beard them, though they be more fang'd than wolves and bears."

"Ah! why wilt thou affright a feeble soul?
A poor, weak, palsy-stricken, churchyard thing,
Whose passing-bell may ere the midnight toll;
Whose prayers for thee, each morn and evening,

Were never miss'd."—Thus plaining, doth she bring
A gentler speech from burning Porphyro;
So woful, and of such deep sorrowing,
That Angela gives promise she will do
Whatever he shall wish, betide her weal or woe.

Which was, to lead him, in close secrecy,
Even to Madeline's chamber, and there hide
Him in a closet, of such privacy
That he might see her beauty unespy'd,
And win perhaps that night a peerless bride,
While legion'd faeries pac'd the coverlet,
And pale enchantment held her sleepy-ey'd.
Never on such a night have lovers met,
Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt.

"It shall be as thou wishest," said the Dame:
"All cates and dainties shall be stored there
Quickly on this feast-night: by the tambour frame
Her own lute thou wilt see: no time to spare,
For I am slow and feeble, and scarce dare
On such a catering trust my dizzy head.
Wait here, my child, with patience; kneel in prayer
The while: Ah! thou must needs the lady wed,
Or may I never leave my grave among the dead."

So saying, she hobbled off with busy fear.
The lover's endless minutes slowly pass'd;
The dame return'd, and whisper'd in his ear
To follow her; with aged eyes aghast
From fright of dim espial. Safe at last,
Through many a dusky gallery, they gain
The maiden's chamber, silken, hush'd, and chaste;
Where Porphyro took covert, pleas'd amain.
His poor guide hurried back with agues in her brain.

Her falt'ring hand upon the balustrade,
Old Angela was feeling for the stair,
When Madeline, St. Agnes' charmed maid,
Rose, like a mission'd spirit, unaware:
With silver taper's light, and pious care,
She turn'd, and down the aged gossip led
To a safe level matting. Now prepare,
Young Porphyro, for gazing on that bed;
She comes, she comes again, like ring-dove fray'd and fled.

Out went the taper as she hurried in;
Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died:
She clos'd the door, she panted, all akin
To spirits of the air, and visions wide:
No uttered syllable, or, woe betide!
But to her heart, her heart was voluble,
Paining with eloquence her balmy side;
As though a tongueless nightingale should swell
Her throat in vain, and die, heart-stifled, in her dell.

A casement high and triple-arch'd there was,
All garlanded with carven imag'ries
Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,
And diamonded with panes of quaint device,
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;
And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,
And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,
A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings.

Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,
And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast,
As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,
And on her silver cross soft amethyst,
And on her hair a glory, like a saint:
She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest,
Save wings, for heaven:—Porphyro grew faint:
She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint.

Anon his heart revives: her vespers done,
Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;
Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;
Loosens her fragrant boddice; by degrees
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:
Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,
Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,
In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed,
But dares not look behind, or all the charm is fled.

Soon, trembling in her soft and chilly nest,
In sort of wakeful swoon, perplex'd she lay,
Until the poppied warmth of sleep oppress'd
Her soothed limbs, and soul fatigued away;
Flown, like a thought, until the morrow-day;
Blissfully haven'd both from joy and pain;

Clasp'd like a missal where swart Paynims pray;
Blinded alike from sunshine and from rain,
As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again.

Stol'n to this paradise, and so entranced,
Porphyro gaz'd upon her empty dress,
And listen'd to her breathing, if it chanced
To wake into a slumberous tenderness;
Which when he heard, that minute did he bless,
And breath'd himself: then from the closet crept,
Noiseless as fear in a wide wilderness,
And over the hush'd carpet, silent, stept,
And 'tween the curtains peep'd, where, lo!—how fast she slept.

Then by the bed-side, where the faded moon
Made a dim, silver twilight, soft he set
A table, and, half anguish'd, threw thereon
A cloth of woven crimson, gold, and jet:—
O for some drowsy Morphean amulet!
The boisterous, midnight, festive clarion,
The kettle-drum, and far-heard clarionet,
Affray his ears, though but in dying tone:—
The hall door shuts again, and all the noise is gone.

And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep,
In blanched linen, smooth, and lavender'd,
While he forth from the closet brought a heap
Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;
With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
And lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon;
Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd
From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,
From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon.

These delicates he heap'd with glowing hand
On golden dishes and in baskets bright
Of wreathed silver: sumptuous they stand
In the retired quiet of the night,
Filling the chilly room with perfume light.—
"And now, my love, my seraph fair, awake!
Thou art my heaven, and I thine eremite:
Open thine eyes, for meek St. Agnes' sake,
Or I shall drowse beside thee, so my soul doth ache."

Thus whispering, his warm, unnerved arm
Sank in her pillow. Shaded was her dream
By the dusk curtains:—'twas a midnight charm
Impossible to melt as iced stream:
The lustrous salvers in the moonlight gleam;
Broad golden fringe upon the carpet lies:
It seem'd he never, never could redeem
From such a stedfast spell his lady's eyes;
So mus'd awhile, entoil'd in woofed phantasies.

Awakening up, he took her hollow lute,—
Tumultuous,—and, in chords that tenderest be,
He play'd an ancient ditty, long since mute,
In Provence call'd, "La belle dame sans mercy":
Close to her ear touching the melody;—
Wherewith disturb'd, she utter'd a soft moan:
He ceas'd—she panted quick—and suddenly
Her blue affrayed eyes wide open shone:
Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured stone.

Her eyes were open, but she still beheld,
Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep:
There was a painful change, that nigh expell'd
The blisses of her dream so pure and deep
At which fair Madeline began to weep,
And moan forth witless words with many a sigh;
While still her gaze on Porphyro would keep;
Who knelt, with joined hands and piteous eye,
Fearing to move or speak, she look'd so dreamingly.

"Ah, Porphyro!" said she, "but even now
Thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear,
Made tuneable with every sweetest vow;
And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear:
How chang'd thou art! how pallid, chill, and drear!
Give me that voice again, my Porphyro,
Those looks immortal, those complainings dear!
Oh leave me not in this eternal woe,
For if thou diest, my Love, I know not where to go."

Beyond a mortal man impassion'd far
At these voluptuous accents, he arose
Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star
Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose;
Into her dream he melted, as the rose
Blendeth its odour with the violet,—
Solution sweet: meantime the frost-wind blows
Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet

Against the window-panes; St. Agnes' moon hath set.

'Tis dark: quick pattereth the flaw-blown sleet:
"This is no dream, my bride, my Madeline!"
'Tis dark: the iced gusts still rave and beat:
"No dream, alas! alas! and woe is mine!
Porphyro will leave me here to fade and pine.—
Cruel! what traitor could thee hither bring?
I curse not, for my heart is lost in thine,
Though thou forsakest a deceived thing;—
A dove forlorn and lost with sick unpruned wing."

"My Madeline! sweet dreamer! lovely bride!
Say, may I be for aye thy vassal blest?
Thy beauty's shield, heart-shap'd and vermeil dyed?
Ah, silver shrine, here will I take my rest
After so many hours of toil and quest,
A famish'd pilgrim,—saved by miracle.
Though I have found, I will not rob thy nest
Saving of thy sweet self; if thou think'st well
To trust, fair Madeline, to no rude infidel.

"Hark! 'tis an elfin-storm from faery land,
Of haggard seeming, but a boon indeed:
Arise—arise! the morning is at hand;—
The bloated wassaillers will never heed:—
Let us away, my love, with happy speed;
There are no ears to hear, or eyes to see,—
Drown'd all in Rhenish and the sleepy mead:
Awake! arise! my love, and fearless be,
For o'er the southern moors I have a home for thee."

She hurried at his words, beset with fears,
For there were sleeping dragons all around,
At glaring watch, perhaps, with ready spears—
Down the wide stairs a darkling way they found.—
In all the house was heard no human sound.
A chain-droop'd lamp was flickering by each door;
The arras, rich with horseman, hawk, and hound,
Flutter'd in the besieging wind's uproar;
And the long carpets rose along the gusty floor.

They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall;
Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide;
Where lay the Porter, in uneasy sprawl,
With a huge empty flaggon by his side:
The wakeful bloodhound rose, and shook his hide,
But his sagacious eye an inmate owns:
By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide:—
The chains lie silent on the footworn stones;—
The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans.

And they are gone: ay, ages long ago
These lovers fled away into the storm.
That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,
And all his warrior-guests, with shade and form
Of witch, and demon, and large coffin-worm,
Were long be-nightmar'd. Angela the old
Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform;
The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,
For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold.

SUMMARY

It was the night before the feast day of St. Agnes in late January—and oh, it was cold! Even the feathery owl felt the chill. The shivering hare hopped feebly through frosty grass, and the sheep were quiet in their pen. The Beadsman (a holy man paid to pray for the souls of a noble family) felt his fingers going numb on his prayer beads. His breath looked like incense smoke, or as if it were flying up to heaven like a spirit (though he hadn't died); it rose up past an image of the Virgin Mary as he prayed.

This long-suffering, pious old beadsman finished his prayers, then took his lamp, got up, and made his way (scrawny, barefoot, and pale) slowly through the church. The stone tombs on either side of the aisle, carved to look like the dead people they contained, seemed frozen too, and looked as if they were trapped in Purgatory behind their iron railings. There were statues of knights and ladies, who all seem to be silently praying in their little chapels as the beadsman passed them. He felt frightened as he thought of how cold those statues must be in their frigid stone clothes and armor.

The beadsman turned north through a small door, and had barely taken three steps before a surge of gorgeous music moved this pitiful old man to tears. But it was too late for him; he was on the verge of death; all the delights of life were past him now. He had a steep price to pay on the evening of St. Agnes's festival. He didn't go toward the music, but instead went and sat in the cold ashes of a fire, praying constantly for sinners' souls.

That old beadsman had heard musicians warming up because all the doors in the castle were open as people scurried around, preparing. Soon, from up above, harsh trumpet music began to play, and the castle's elegant rooms were lit up, ready for a huge

party. Watchful stone angels stared down from the ceiling, with their hair streaming back and their wings crossed over their chests.

Soon the silvery, glittering partiers rushed in, decked out in feathers and crowns and all kinds of luxurious clothing. There were so many of them that they were like shadows of childhood memories—memories of reading bright, beautiful stories of knights and chivalry. But let's turn aside from those memories and focus on a single lady who was attending this party. That whole day, she had been thinking hard about love, and especially about the legend of St. Agnes, which she'd heard from old women a thousand times.

Those old women had told this lady that, on St. Agnes's Eve, unmarried young women would be visited by their true loves in their sweet midnight dreams if they correctly performed this ritual: they had to go to bed without dinner, lie their beautiful selves down on their backs, and never look around them, but instead look up and pray to Heaven for their desires to be fulfilled.

The lady, Madeline, couldn't stop thinking about performing this ritual. The powerful, longing music hardly touched her. Her beautiful eyes stared at the floor, where many gorgeous dresses swept by, but she didn't notice them at all. And without success, plenty of lovestruck knights crept up to her and were rebuffed (though their desire wasn't muted by her indifference to them)—she didn't even see them. Her heart was somewhere else. She just wanted to have her St. Agnes dream, the best dream of the whole year.

She spent the whole party dancing without seeing anything around her, looking nervously tight-lipped and breathing fast. It was almost the holy hour for her bedtime ritual. She sighed amongst the jingle of tambourines and amongst the crowd's angry or joking whispers, amongst glances of love, resistance, hate, and disdain. She was so blinded by the magic of her imagination that she was dead to everything but the thought of St. Agnes and the woolly lambs that are her symbol, and all the delights she would get from her dreams before the next morning.

Lost in her imagination this way, though she intended to go to bed any second, she stayed on at the party. Meanwhile, across the wild open countryside, the young knight Porphyro had traveled, spurred on by his blazing love for Madeline. He hid in the shadows by the castle's front doors, and begged the saints to show him just a glimpse of his beloved, even just one moment out of all these long dull hours, so that he could stare at her and adore her secretly. Maybe he could even speak to her, or kneel to her, or touch her, or kiss her—truly, that kind of thing happens sometimes!

He crept into the castle. There couldn't be even a whisper or a glimpse of him, or myriad enemies would stab him right in the heart, the fortress of all his burning love. This castle's rooms were full of bloodthirsty foes, hyena-like enemies, and hot-tempered noblemen; even their dogs would have barked curses at Porphyro and his whole family. Not a single person in that rotten castle had any kindness for him—except one frail old lady.

What luck! Here came that old lady came now with her ivory walking stick, past where Porphyro was hiding behind a pillar, far away from the sounds of partying and sweet music. He surprised her, but she quickly recognized him, and grabbed his hand with her own ancient shaking one, crying, "Oh my goodness, Porphyro! Get out of here! They're all here tonight, Madeline's whole murderous family!

"Get out of here! Get out! There's the malformed, shrunken Hildebrand; he had a feverish illness recently, and while he was convulsing he cursed you and your family and your home. Then there's old Lord Maurice, who hasn't gotten any gentler now that he's going gray. Oh no! Hurry! Hurry away like a ghost." "Oh, my dear chatty old lady, we're perfectly safe. Sit down in this comfy chair and tell me—" "By the saints! No, not here. Come with me, young man, or this stony hallway will be your deathbed."

Porphyro followed the old woman through a low arch, catching his feathered hat on the cobwebs, while she mumbled "Oh dear, oh dear!" They came to a tiny moonlit room, lit faintly by a latticed window and as cold and silent as the grave. "Tell me, where's Madeline?" said Porphyro. "Come on, Angela, tell me, in the name of the sacred loom upon which nuns weave the wool consecrated to St. Agnes."

"St. Agnes! That's right! It's St. Agnes' Eve. But sacred days don't stop men from killing each other. You must be some sorcerer, able to carry water in a sieve, or the King of the Fairies himself, to show this kind of crazy bravery. It amazes me to see you, Porphyro! St. Agnes' Eve—so help me God. My lady Madeline is pretending she's a magician tonight—and here's hoping the kindly angels will trick her with the vision she wants! But you've got to let me laugh a little, I'll have plenty of time to be sad."

Angela laughed weakly in the moonlight, while Porphyro looked at her in confusion, like a little kid looks at an old woman who won't share her wonderful jokebook while she sits reading, wearing her glasses, in her cozy spot by the fire. But soon, his eyes shone, when Angela described Madeline's St. Agnes ritual. He could hardly hold back tears as he thought about the spells Madeline was trying to cast, and imagined her deep in her enchanted sleep.

A new thought struck him like a rose suddenly blooming, making him blush and setting his heart pounding. He suggested his big idea to Angela, and she jumped with shock: "You're a nasty, impertinent man! Let sweet Madeline say her prayers and go to sleep alone with the angels, left alone by jerks like you. Get out of here! I see you can't be the man I thought you

were."

"I swear by the saints I won't hurt her," said Porphyro. "Let me be damned to Hell on my deathbed if I touch a hair on her head, or look at her with brutish lust. Angela, believe me, in the name of the tears I'm crying—or I'll shout and let all my enemies know I'm here, and fight them all, even if they were as fierce as wild animals."

"Oh! Why are you trying to frighten me, a frail old woman? I'm nothing but a feeble old lady who might die before the clock even strikes midnight. And I pray for you every day!" Angela's pitiful whining made the impassioned Porphyro a little gentler. And in fact, he made such a tragic and moving speech that Angela ended up promising to do whatever he asked her, whether it brought her good fortune or bad.

Porphyro's plan was this: Angela would lead him to Madeline's bedroom, and hide him in a closet. From there, he could secretly gaze on Madeline's beauty, and perhaps win her for his wife while she laid in bed, with the fairies who bring dreams walking over her blankets, and magic keeping her asleep. There had never been a night like this for lovers to meet since the wizard Merlin was locked up by his beloved Vivien.

"Okay, we'll do it the way you want," said Angela. "It'll be easy to stash some delicious treats from the party in Madeline's room, and you'll find Madeline's lute over by her embroidery frame. There's no time to waste: I'm slow and frail, and I can hardly trust myself to help you carry this plan out. Wait here patiently, young Porphyro, and say your prayers. Oh! You'll have to marry Madeline, or may I go straight to Hell."

With those words, she limped fearfully away. Porphyro waited for minutes that felt like an eternity until she came back, and whispered that he should follow her, with her old eyes reflecting her deep fear that they might be discovered. Finally, they came to a safe place, after walking through many dusty old halls: Madeline's bedroom, luxuriously soft, quiet, and unvisited by men. Here, Porphyro hid himself in a closet, delighted. Angela scurried away, sick with worry.

Angela was feebly trying to find her way down the dark stairs when Madeline, still wrapped up in her St. Agnes' Eve spell, came up the stairs like a ghost. By candlelight, she turned and lovingly led Angela downstairs to the safety of the ground floor. Now, Porphyro, get ready to look at Madeline in bed! She was on her way back to her room, hurrying like a frightened dove.

Her candle went out as she came into the room, and its last wisp of smoke disappeared in the pale moonlight. She closed the door behind her, breathing fast, as if she herself were a spirit or a vision. She couldn't say a word, or, terrible fate, her spell would be broken. But her heart had plenty to say to itself, pounding as if speaking in her sweet chest. Her heart was like a mute songbird trying to sing, but failing, and dying of its unexpressed feelings in the woods.

There was a high, three-arched window in the room, lavishly ornamented with carved fruits and flowers and plants, and with diamond-shaped decorative windowpanes of countless gorgeous colors, as variegated as a tiger-moth's wings, which look like rich embroidery. In the middle of these decorative windows, among images of family crests and dimly-lit saints and faint images, there was a noble coat of arms red as royal blood.

The winter moon shone straight in through this window and made Madeline's chest glow a rich red as she knelt down to say her prayers. Rosy pink light illuminated her praying hands; soft purple light fell on the silver cross she wore; and a golden halo fell around her head, as if she were a saint. She looked like a glorious angel, just raised to heaven (all except the wings). Porphyro felt dizzy to see her kneeling there, so holy-looking and so pure.

He recovered quickly when Madeline finished her prayers and started loosening her hair from its garlands of pearls. She unfastened her jewelry (warmed from her skin) piece by piece, and unlaced her perfumed dress. Little by little, her elegant clothing fell to her knees. Half-undressed and partly hidden by her fallen clothes, like a mermaid in a patch of seaweed, Madeline got lost in her imagination, and imagined that St. Agnes herself was in bed behind her—but she didn't turn around and look, for fear of spoiling the enchantment.

Soon, shivering in her soft, cold bed, in a kind of waking dream, Madeline lay entranced, until the opium-like warmth of sleep weighed down her body, and her soul slipped exhaustedly away, flying off as lightly as a thought until tomorrow. She was pleasurably safe from both delight and unhappiness, closed up by sleep as tightly as a Catholic prayer-book is locked shut in a Muslim country; she was equally unresponsive to sun and storms, as if a rose in full bloom could wrap itself up and be a bud once more.

Hidden secretly in the paradise of Madeline's bedroom, hypnotized by the beauty of what he had just seen, Porphyro stared at Madeline's dress where it lay on the floor, and listened to the sound of Madeline's breathing to hear when it sounded like she was asleep. As soon as he heard that she was sleeping, he rejoiced, and let his own breath out. Then, he snuck out of the closet, silent as fear itself in a forbidding landscape, and tiptoed over the carpet to peek between the bed curtains, where—see there! How deeply Madeline was asleep.

By Madeline's bedside, in the dim moonlight, Porphyro quietly set up a table, and with almost painful care, he spread it with a tablecloth of rich red, gold, and black. He wished he had some magic token that might make sure Madeline would keep dreaming! The music of the party's horns, drums, and distant pipes frightened him, though they came from far away—but then, a door shut somewhere in the hall, and the noise died down again.

Madeline slept deeply on under her blue-veined eyelids, lying in bleached, soft, lavender-scented linen, while Porphyro went

into the closet again and brought out a pile of candied fruits, jellies even smoother and softer than those fruits' flesh, and clear sweet cinnamon syrups; he brought out sweet manna resin and dates, shipped from the city of Fez in Morocco; he brought out a thousand delicate spiced treats from all across the world, from luxurious Samarcand to cedar-forested Lebanon.

With hands that seemed to shine, he piled these treats on silver and gold dishes. This delicious banquet glowed in the night, filling the cold room with soft scents. "And now, my darling, my beautiful angel, wake up! You are my paradise, and I am a monk who worships you. Open your eyes, for the sake of gentle St. Agnes, or I'll lie down and die right next to you, my soul hurts so much."

As he whispered this, Porphyro leaned over Madeline so that his warm, nervous arm sunk into her pillow. Madeline dreamed on in the shadows of her bedcurtains; her sleep was so deep it was enchanted, as unmeltable as a frozen stream. The shining dishes glinted in the moonlight; the carpet's golden fringe lay still. Porphyro felt as if he'd never be able to wake Madeline up from the deep enchantment of her dream, so he just pondered her for a while, tangled up in the web of his own imagination.

After a moment, he came back to himself, and grabbed Madeline's lute in a frenzy of emotion. With a few sweet chords, he struck up an old song, now long-forgotten, a French Provencal song called "The beautiful lady without pity." He played it close to Madeline's ear—and at last, she stirred, and moaned quietly. Porphyro stopped playing, Madeline breathed hard, and all at once her frightened blue eyes opened wide. Porphyro fell to his knees, as pale as a marble statue.

Though Madeline's eyes were open now, what she saw, awake, was the same thing that she'd seen while she was asleep. But that vision was terribly changed, and almost destroyed the joys of her dream. Madeline started crying and babbling nonsense words, still staring at Porphyro—who was on his knees, clasping his hands together and looking sad and worried, afraid to move or say anything while Madeline looked so much as if she were still dreaming.

"Oh, Porphyro!" she said. "Just a second ago I heard your voice quavering in my ear, musically promising everything I desired, and your sad eyes were angelic and untroubled. But you're so different now! You look so pale, cold, and dismal! Sing to me again the way you did in my dream, Porphyro: give me back that angelic look and those sweet songs! Don't leave me in this bottomless misery: because if you die, my darling, I have no idea what I'll do."

Given the passion of a god by Madeline's delicious words, Porphyro got to his feet, looking as intensely spiritual and shining as a pulsating star in the depths of the night sky. He sank into Madeline's dream (and her arms), and the two mingled like the scent of a rose mixing with the scent of a violet into a sweet new combination. Meanwhile, the icy wind blew like a warning from the god of Love, rattling sleet against the window: the moon of St. Agnes' Eve had gone down.

It was dark: the storm-blown sleet rattled against the window. "This isn't a dream, my bride-to-be, my Madeline!" It was dark: the icy winds kept wailing and lashing. "No, it isn't a dream! Oh no! And that's what makes me miserable! Porphyro, you'll abandon me here to fade away as I long for you. You're so unkind! What kind of treachery could have brought you here? But I don't blame you, because I'm so deeply in love with you, though I expect you to abandon me; I'll be like a lost dove with a broken wing when you go."

"Dearest Madeline! My sweet dreamer! My gorgeous bride-to-be! Please, let me be your lucky servant forever. I'll be the protector of your beauty, like a shield in the shape of a big red heart. Oh, my silvery temple, I'll rest at your feet like a weary, starving religious wanderer, rescued by the miracle that is you. I've come to your bed, but I won't steal anything—except you yourself, if you're willing to trust yourself to me, believing I'm no unfaithful jerk.

"Listen! That's an enchanted storm blowing outside. It sounds ugly, but for us it's a piece of good fortune. Get up quick! It's almost morning, and the drunken partiers won't hear us. Let's get out of here, darling, as fast as we can. There's no one around to hear us or see us—they're all sleeping off their German wines and honey-beer. Get up! Get up, my darling, and have no fear: I've prepared a home for you across the southern wilderness."

Believing his words, Madeline hurried out of bed, though she was terrified: her bloodthirsty relatives were all around them, dangerous as dragons. Maybe there were even some still awake, prepared with weapons. But together, Madeline and Porphyro crept down the dark stairs. The castle was perfectly silent. Lamps hung from chains by the doors, and the tapestries (depicting hunting scenes) flapped in the winds from the storm outside, and the carpets billowed up in the gusts.

The lovers moved like ghosts into the hall, and like ghosts they went out to the great iron entrance of the castle. The doorman was drunkenly asleep there, with a big empty tankard next to him. His dog woke up and shook itself, but it recognized Madeline and didn't bark. One by one, the door's bolts slid easily, and its chains lay undisturbed on the worn stone floor. The key turned, and the door creaked open.

And with that, the lovers were gone: yes, long, long ago, the lovers escaped into the stormy night. That evening, the Baron had nightmares, and all his bloodthirsty guests were haunted by dreams of witches, devils, and maggots. Old Angela died twitching, with her shriveled face misshapen by paralysis. The Beadsman, having said a thousand Hail Marys, died, forever unnoticed, in the cold ashes of his fire.

THEMES

THE POWER OF PASSION

In "The Eve of St. Agnes," two young lovers, Madeline and Porphyro, find themselves in a *Romeo and Juliet* dilemma: they come from families whose hatred for each other is as icy-cold as the winter snows outside. The young couple's passion for each other, however, creates a brief refuge from these terrible surroundings. Through this respite, the poem suggests that love and desire have the power to light up an otherwise cruel world. Love can create moments of pure beauty and warmth within a harsh reality—and maybe even make life worth living.

When Madeline and Porphyro aren't together, the world feels like an icy and menacing place. Surrounded by the "sculptured tombs" of the dead, Madeline's "hyena"-like and bloodthirsty family, and the "bitter chill" of the winter night outside, the couple live in a pretty unforgiving environment.

But when Madeline and Porphyro come together, their passion creates moments of gorgeous, life-giving respite. Peeping at his beloved Madeline as she says her evening prayers and gets undressed, Porphyro sees her lit up "like a saint" and is sensuously hypnotized by the thought of her "warmed jewels" and "fragrant boddice." Because he loves her so intensely, her simple, everyday act of getting ready for bed becomes a moment of transcendent, timeless loveliness for him. He becomes "entranced," pulled out of normal reality into a world of beauty.

Madeline's passion for Porphyro is just as powerful and consoling. In a dream, she sees him as a figure with "looks immortal": her love for him makes him seem like a god to her, bigger and better than everyday people. And when she wakes up and sees him, while she's at first upset to find that he's mortal after all (and therefore killable by her bloodthirsty relatives), the intensity of the love Porphyro hears in the "voluptuous accents" of her voice makes him "above a mortal man impassion'd far": as the two embrace and "melt" into each other, they share a moment of heavenly passion that *does* seem to make them briefly immortal, taking them far away from the cruel reality of death.

The poem doesn't argue that love solves every problem: at the end of the poem, when Madeline and Porphyro escape the castle, readers never learn whether they make it to their new "home" or merely disappear into the storm, and the poem ends with the ugly, lonely deaths of Angela and the Beadsman—frail old people, just like Porphyro and Madeline will be one day if they survive. But while passion isn't a cure-all, it's a deep and important consolation in a world that's often cold and cruel. The world might be beset with death, disease, and hatred, the poem suggests, but love can create moments of enchanting consolation that provide a refuge from harsh reality.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-45
- Lines 46-54
- Lines 55-72
- Lines 73-81
- Lines 82-89
- Lines 133-135
- Lines 136-138
- Lines 138-198
- Lines 199-207
- Lines 224-225
- Lines 226-234
- Lines 235-243
- Lines 244-252
- Lines 271-279
- Lines 280-288
- Lines 289-297
- Lines 298-306
- Lines 307-315
- Lines 316-324
- Lines 334-342

DREAMS VS. REALITY

The events of "The Eve of St. Agnes" center on a dream: Madeline's elaborate ritual is meant to give her a bedtime vision of her future husband. She gets the dream she wanted, but she also gets more than she bargained for: when she wakes up and finds her real-life dream-lover staring right at her, she cries, upset that he's a regular old mortal man rather than an immortal figure of perfection. Dreams and the imagination, the poem suggests, may be more enchanting and enticing than real life, but they're also more fragile. Their delightfulness is also their danger: get too seduced by a dream, and real life might look pretty disappointing in comparison!

An important part of Madeline's dream ritual is that she never look behind her as she gets ready for bed. Dreams, this image suggests, are fragile things, always on the verge of being broken open by reality. As she undresses, Madeline has a feeling that St. Agnes herself—the saint who's supposed to grant young maidens a vision of their future husbands—is actually in her bed waiting for her, "But dares not look behind or all the charm is fled." Looking directly at an imaginative vision, this moment suggests, can make it evaporate completely.

And in fact, the "charm" of dreams seems to be fleeting even when they come true. When Madeline wakes up and finds the literal man of her dreams next to her, she's not delighted, but upset to the point of tears. Seeing him in the flesh reminds her that he's not a godlike, immortal lover, but a human man who will one day die. Plain old reality, the poem suggests, always looks a bit disappointing after a beautiful dream.

"'How chang'd thou art! How pallid, chill, and drear!'" Madeline cries when she sees Porphyro's living face. Her real lover, she understands, is mortal—and that means that she can lose him. This "painful change" makes her long for his "'looks immortal'" back: she prefers her dream-Porphyro to the real deal!

Nevertheless, Madeline's dreams of true love with Porphyro also motivate her to escape her bloodthirsty family. The two young lovers' dreams do have a real-world power, giving them the courage to get out the door into the world beyond. Dreams might be fragile and fleeting, the poem finally suggests, but they also have the power to shape the solid world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 39-41
- Lines 46-54
- Lines 55-63
- Lines 70-72
- Lines 168-171
- Lines 235-243
- Lines 294-306
- Lines 307-315
- Lines 316-324
- Lines 325-333
- Lines 372-378

DEATH AND MORTALITY

"The Eve of St. Agnes" surrounds its lush, sensuous romance with stark images of death. From the icy "sculptur'd" stone tombs at the beginning of the poem to the old nursemaid Angela's grim and twitchy demise at the end, death is a constant presence here, warning readers that even beautiful young lovers like Madeline and Porphyro end up old (if they're lucky!) and dead—and encouraging them to embrace life while they can.

Beginning and ending with images of tombs and bodies, the poem reminds readers that death is the ultimate reality: everyone ends up in the grave one day. At the outset, the elderly Beadsman (a holy man charged with constantly praying for the souls of Madeline's family) creeps between rows of the dead in their "sculptur'd tombs": "knights and ladies" who were once young and beautiful, just like Madeline and Porphyro. And at the end of the poem, both the Beadsman and Angela (Madeline's old maidservant) have died deeply unromantic deaths: Angela dies "palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform," shriveled, ill, and misshapen. And the Beadsman dies utterly alone, "unsought for" among cold ashes. The "Baron" (Madeline's father) and his party guests, meanwhile, dream of "coffin-worm[s]," the maggots that will devour them all one day.

The poem's repeated focus on the decay of Angela's and the Beadman's frail old bodies, often called "meagre," "frail," and "weak," forms a harsh contrast with its images of Madeline's and Porphyro's fresh, warm young "beauties." Youth is brief, the poem reminds readers, and infirmity and death come to everyone. But that's also why passion and the imagination matter. Deeply embrace sensuous youth and gorgeous visions, the poem urges: they don't last forever, and death is the final reality.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-9
- Lines 10-18
- Lines 22-27
- Line 90
- Lines 91-92
- Line 97
- Lines 107-108
- Lines 118-119
- Lines 154-156
- Lines 183-185
- Lines 361-362
- Lines 370-378

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-9

St. Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;
The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:
Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told
His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
Like pious incense from a censer old,
Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,
Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.

"The Eve of St. Agnes" begins in the countryside around a castle, deep in a merciless winter. The festival the poem is named after—the day sacred to St. Agnes, the patron saint of young women—falls at the end of January, and in this poem's world, it seems to have been a particularly harsh month. Night has fallen, and everything is "silent" and "bitter chill": the whole world is anxiously frozen. Even the "owl" and the "hare" are shivering as they make their way through the frosty landscape.

From these pitiful animals, the poem turns to another sorry figure: the Beadsman, a religious servant hired to pray ceaselessly for the souls of a noble family (who presumably have better things to do than praying for their souls themselves). He's called a "Beadsman" because his job is to say the rosary over and over—a kind of prayer counted out on beads. His arrival lets readers know that this poem is set in a distant English past (the ancient Catholic tradition of his flavor of constant prayer died out after the Reformation in the 15th century).

The poem's stanza form also hints that this poem is going to take place in a long-ago world. The eight lines of iambic pentameter (that is, lines of five iambs, metrical feet that go da-DUM) capped with one line of iambic hexameter (*six* iambs) identifies this as a Spenserian stanza: a form invented and popularized by the Renaissance poet Edmund Spenser in his great verse romance *The Faerie Queene*. (See the Form, Meter, and Rhyme Scheme sections for more on that.) That story, with its knights and fair ladies, is going to be a big influence on this one: "The Eve of St. Agnes" is a dyed-in-the-wool romance. That doesn't mean it's a love story—though it will also be that!—but a legendary tale of medieval chivalry and magic.

Right from the beginning, the poem immerses its reader in this romantic world with rich sensory imagery: the "silen[ce]" of the sheep, the "trembling" of the hare, and the "frosted breath" of the poor old Beadsman as he prays in a frigid chapel. The first of the poem's many vivid similes also appears:

> [...] his frosted breath,
> Like pious incense from a censer old,
> Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death
> Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.

Here, the Beadsman's breath looks like the incense one might burn during a Catholic Mass—a pretty fitting thing for a holy man's breath to look like. But it *also* looks like a spirit ascending to heaven. This complex simile prepares readers for another of the poem's themes: dreams and the imagination. This is a world in which everything is like a dream, layered with mysterious meanings.

LINES 10-27

> *His prayer he saith, this patient, holy man;*
> *Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees,*
> *And back returneth, meagre, barefoot, wan,*
> *Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees:*
> *The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze,*
> *Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails:*
> *Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat'ries,*
> *He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails*
> *To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails.*
> *Northward he turneth through a little door,*
> *And scarce three steps, ere Music's golden tongue*
> *Flatter'd to tears this aged man and poor;*
> *But no—already had his deathbell rung;*
> *The joys of all his life were said and sung:*
> *His was harsh penance on St. Agnes' Eve:*
> *Another way he went, and soon among*
> *Rough ashes sat he for his soul's reprieve,*
> *And all night kept awake, for sinners' sake to grieve.*

Pausing in his prayers for a moment, the creaky old Beadsman gets up and creeps out of the chapel. Here, readers get their first glimpse of the medieval castle in which this poem is set—and of one of the poem's major juxtapositions.

The Beadsman, who is "meagre, barefoot, wan," is the very image of aged decrepitude. His whole life seems to take place in the icy chapel, where "the sculptur'd dead" (tombs in the shape of their inhabitants) seem frozen and imprisoned behind "black, purgatorial rails" (iron railings that evoke purgatory, the section of the Catholic afterlife in which souls do painful penance in preparation for heaven). Everything is dark, frozen, and dead (or dying) here; readers even learn that the Beadsman's "deathbell" has already "rung," meaning that he'll die this very night.

But as this poor old man goes through "a little door" between the chapel and the main part of the castle, he's suddenly moved to tears by "Music's golden tongue"—that is, by Music itself, personified like a god. That "golden" music speaks of life, beauty, movement, and warmth. As the reader will soon discover, the inhabitants of this castle are preparing for a lavish party—and young lovers are about to meet.

Life and death, these two stanzas suggest, rest side by side. And perhaps the dead are a little too close for comfort sometimes. After all, the "Knights" and "ladies" in those tombs once danced in this very castle.

As the Beadsman creeps past the icy statues, he imagines that their dead inhabitants are *suffering*, "ach[ing] in icy hoods and mails." He seems to have a lot more in common with the dead than with the living, and while the beauty of the music moves him deeply, he turns away from it, feeling that "the joys of all his life were said and sung," done already. All that's left to the Beadsman is "penance"—repetitive ruminations that the poem evokes with its anadiplosis on the words "His prayer he saith" (the phrase that also closed the previous stanza). Life's "joys," it seems, pass all too quickly, and leave only regret behind.

This passage also subtly introduces one of the poem's strongest allusions. The imagery of this Gothic chapel, with its generations of noble corpses, brings Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to mind—specifically, the *end* of *Romeo and Juliet*, when the two young lovers die in the Capulet family tomb. Keep an eye out for references to *Romeo and Juliet* as the poem goes on: much of the story here responds to that play's ideas and themes.

LINES 28-36

> *That ancient Beadsman heard the prelude soft;*
> *And so it chanc'd, for many a door was wide,*
> *From hurry to and fro. Soon, up aloft,*
> *The silver, snarling trumpets 'gan to chide:*
> *The level chambers, ready with their pride,*
> *Were glowing to receive a thousand guests:*
> *The carved angels, ever eager-eyed,*
> *Star'd, where upon their heads the cornice rests,*

With hair blown back, and wings put cross-wise on their breasts.

From the gloomy, freezing chapel, the poem turns to the warm inner chambers of the castle, where a huge party is just getting into gear: servants "hurry to and fro," preparing the house to "receive a thousand guests." The juxtaposition between bright liveliness and chilly death gets even stronger here. But there's another, subtler change in mood, too: from a "patient" and "holy" world to one of "pride" and violence.

The music that was personified as a "golden-tongue[d]" god in the previous stanza now becomes something rather more dangerous. "[S]ilver, snarling trumpets" begin to "chide" (or scold): this is menacing music, not a gentle melody. And the "chambers," or rooms, of the castle aren't just decorated and illuminated, but "ready with their pride," haughtily waiting to impress everyone who attends the party. Perhaps part of the reason the family who lives in this castle needs a Beadsman to pray for their souls is that their thoughts are very much fixed on the concerns of *this* world. Even before readers even meet any members of this family, there's the sense that they're a proud and violent people, dedicated to proving that they're better than anyone else. (Again, there's a hint of *Romeo and Juliet* here: think of the arrogant and violent Montagues and Capulets.)

Watching over this scene are a host of "carved angels, ever eager-eyed," "star[ing]" eternally down at everything that happens below, frozen in midair with their "hair blown back." Take a look at the rich imagery the speaker uses in describing these silent watchers:

> The carved angels, ever eager-eyed,
> Star'd, where upon their heads the cornice rests,
> With hair blown back, and wings put cross-wise on
> their breasts.

The speaker spends a lot of time here vividly imagining these statues, prompting readers to wonder why they might be important. One reason might be plain old scene-setting: these stone angels place readers in an ornate and rather sinister medieval castle. Another might be to remind readers of the "sculptur'd dead" in the chapel: where those statues *preserve* the memory of dead people, these ones *create* fantastical beings. Art, these two kinds of statues suggest, has the strange power to bring dead matter to life.

But perhaps the most important thing the angels do here is to introduce one of this poem's big ideas: *watching*. These angels, "ever eager-eyed," seem to have been intently watching the goings-on below them for centuries. Hovering above the scene, looking eagerly at what's going on below, they have an awful lot in common with the reader! The pleasure of looking on, taking things in from a distance, is going to be a big deal; watch out for scenes of watching as the poem goes on.

LINES 37-45

At length burst in the argent revelry,
With plume, tiara, and all rich array,
Numerous as shadows haunting faerily
The brain, new stuff'd, in youth, with triumphs gay
Of old romance. These let us wish away,
And turn, sole-thoughted, to one Lady there,
Whose heart had brooded, all that wintry day,
On love, and wing'd St. Agnes' saintly care,
As she had heard old dames full many times declare.

This stanza introduces the party guests, a mysterious Lady, and, indirectly, the speaker. As the "argent revelry" (the silvery, sparkling party guests) "burst" onto the scene, the speaker says that they're:

> Numerous as shadows haunting faerily
> The brain, new stuff'd, in youth, with triumphs gay
> Of old romance.

This complex simile does something clever. Here, the speaker is saying that these enchanting party guests are like the magical characters who "haunt[]" the "brain" of a kid who's obsessed with "old romance"—which, remember, means stories of knights and legends. But shadowy characters straight out of an "old romance" are exactly what these party guests *are!* The speaker is writing a romance even now, and populating it with characters and images from that youthfully "stuff'd" brain. This is a kind of tribute poem: a poem that's about the speaker's *love* of "old romance" as much as it *is* an "old romance."

Here, the speaker reminds readers that, well, the speaker exists, and is writing this poem as an omniscient third-person storyteller. That might make readers think back to those watchful angels. After all, part of the pleasure of reading a story or a poem is the feeling of looking on omnisciently, seeing everything—and especially getting to see things that one doesn't get to see in everyday life, like a medieval castle full of lords and ladies decked out in "plume, tiara, and all rich array." The speaker and the readers get to share this "eager-eyed" imaginative view.

The speaker makes this point even more clearly when reaching directly out to readers in a subtle apostrophe:

> These let **us** wish away,
> And turn, sole-thoughted, to one Lady there,

Joining the speaker in watching, readers focus all their attention on one person: a lovelorn "Lady" who has spent the whole day thinking about a legend that "old dames" (old women) have told her about a blessing St. Agnes is said to bestow on young women like her. Reminded that this poem is an "old romance," readers can guess that this Lady must be a beautiful damsel—and that her love story will be at the poem's

heart.

LINES 46-54

They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve,
Young virgins might have visions of delight,
And soft adorings from their loves receive
Upon the honey'd middle of the night,
If ceremonies due they did aright;
As, supperless to bed they must retire,
And couch supine their beauties, lily white;
Nor look behind, nor sideways, but require
Of Heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire.

The speaker has just reminded readers that this poem takes place in an imagined world of "old romance." Now, the speaker looks at a legend within a legend: the stories that the people in this storybook world believe.

The Lady of the previous stanza (whose name, readers will learn soon, is Madeline) has been distracted all day by a story old ladies tell around the fire. On the night before St. Agnes's holiday, the story goes, young girls who perform a particular ritual will be visited by their lovers in their dreams. Those visits, the sensuous imagery here hints, might get pretty sexy:

> They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve,
> Young virgins might have visions of delight,
> And soft adorings from their loves receive
> Upon the honey'd middle of the night,

The "visions of delight" here seem like they're not just *visions*, but fully sensuous experiences: young women who perform this ritual will *feel* the "soft adorings" of their lovers, and perhaps even *taste* the "honey'd" sweetness of their night together.

In order to experience these dreamy pleasures, young women have to do three things: go to bed "supperless" (without dinner), lie "supine" (on their backs), and never look around them, but only "upward," counting on heaven to give them what they want. In other words, they have to be empty, receptive, and trusting!

All of these ideas touch on some of the most famous words Keats ever wrote: his theory of "Negative Capability." This, he says, is the quality one needs to be a great poet: the ability to "be in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." In other words, to be a great imaginative artist, a poet has to not try to figure things out all the time, but patiently accept what comes to them, trusting in the independent power of their visions.

Madeline's St. Agnes's Eve ritual asks her to behave like a poet. Her job isn't to sit down and try to imagine her lover, but to make herself an empty vessel and wait for a vision to fill her. The rewards will be a sensuous imaginative experience beyond anything she could have *tried* to invent.

LINES 55-72

Full of this whim was thoughtful Madeline:
The music, yearning like a God in pain,
She scarcely heard: her maiden eyes divine,
Fix'd on the floor, saw many a sweeping train
Pass by—she heeded not at all: in vain
Came many a tiptoe, amorous cavalier,
And back retir'd, not cool'd by high disdain;
But she saw not: her heart was otherwhere:
She sigh'd for Agnes' dreams, the sweetest of the year.
She danc'd along with vague, regardless eyes,
Anxious her lips, her breathing quick and short:
The hallow'd hour was near at hand: she sighs
Amid the timbrels, and the throng'd resort
Of whisperers in anger, or in sport;
'Mid looks of love, defiance, hate, and scorn,
Hoodwink'd with faery fancy; all amort,
Save to St. Agnes and her lambs unshorn,
And all the bliss to be before to-morrow morn.

Madeline is so caught up in the idea of summoning a visit from her dream-lover that she barely notices the party going on around her. She seems swept away by her imagination: she has "vague, regardless eyes" and breathes "quick and short," and she notices neither the "sweeping train[s]" of elegant ladies nor the hesitant, "tiptoe" attempts of "amorous cavaliers" (lovestruck knights) to dance with her. Perhaps more dangerously, she doesn't notice the "looks of love, defiance, hate, and scorn" all around her.

Here, there's yet another strong juxtaposition, this time between the competitive social world and Madeline's rich inner world. The imagination, this passage suggests, has the power to steal people right away from the everyday things around them. In fact, Madeline is "Hoodwink'd," blinded or even deceived, by the mere anticipation of "Agnes' dreams." There's danger as well as pleasure in this kind of blinding: this castle seems like a place in which it might be wise to know what's going on around you!

These two stanzas use a parallel structure: both move from images of the distracted Madeline, to images of the elegant party, to images of the dream Madeline longs for. This repetition both suggests the patterned movements of the dance and the shape of Madeline's experience: everything just returns and returns to St. Agnes and the dreams she brings.

The allusions to St. Agnes here might make her seem like a rather strange figure to bring dreams of love. Agnes was a virgin saint who was martyred for refusing to marry, and her symbol, as the speaker notes, is the lamb, the picture of sweet innocence. But the dream ritual the speaker refers to is a genuine Christian folk belief, one that young women still sometimes practice today. Perhaps the speaker chooses to

write about this ritual precisely *because* it implies that there's something holy and pure about physical passion—even if that's not the way that the world often thinks about it (especially not when that passion belongs to women!).

LINES 73-81

> *So, purposing each moment to retire,*
> *She linger'd still. Meantime, across the moors,*
> *Had come young Porphyro, with heart on fire*
> *For Madeline. Beside the portal doors,*
> *Buttress'd from moonlight, stands he, and implores*
> *All saints to give him sight of Madeline,*
> *But for one moment in the tedious hours,*
> *That he might gaze and worship all unseen;*
> *Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss—in sooth such things have been.*

As it turns out, Madeline isn't longing for just any old dream-lover. She's hoping to be visited in her visions by her true love: a young man called Porphyro. His name, which comes from "porphyry" (a costly, reddish-purple stone often used for busts of Roman emperors), suggests that he's deeply noble: a true knight to match this dreamy damsel.

And what a coincidence: he himself has come galloping "across the moors" (through the wilderness) on this very evening in the hope of merely catching a glimpse of Madeline. Again, the poem reminds readers of the pleasures of seeing: all Porphyro wants is to "gaze and worship all unseen," to look lovingly on Madeline from a distance, just as the storyteller and reader do.

Well, perhaps that's not *all* he wants:

> Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss—in sooth such things have been.

That list of things Porphyro might possibly get to do with Madeline uses asyndeton to draw attention to how swiftly his desire mounts as he thinks of getting closer and closer to her. "In sooth such things have been," the speaker observes: surely a loving knight gets to kiss his lady every once in a while.

Here, the poem is playing on the tradition of "courtly love." This was an idealized medieval form of love in which a knight would swear himself to a beloved lady's service, though the two might rarely speak and never touch. In one sense, Porphyro is doing exactly what a chivalrous knight in a romance was meant to do: he braves difficulty and danger for the pleasure of a mere glimpse of his lady-love. The well-worn metaphor of his "heart on fire" fits perfectly into that traditional picture: he's burning with sacred love.

On the other hand, Porphyro wants more than just to look. The thought of looking at Madeline also makes him want to "touch" and to "kiss"—in other words, to do just what he might be doing in Madeline's dreams. Here again, the speaker seems to stand up for sexual passion as a potentially noble and sacred thing rather than something degrading. Just as the holy St. Agnes might give young women sacredly sexy dreams, Porphyro's desire to "worship" Madeline might also come to noble fruition with a kiss.

LINES 82-90

> *He ventures in: let no buzz'd whisper tell:*
> *All eyes be muffled, or a hundred swords*
> *Will storm his heart, Love's fev'rous citadel:*
> *For him, those chambers held barbarian hordes,*
> *Hyena foemen, and hot-blooded lords,*
> *Whose very dogs would execrations howl*
> *Against his lineage: not one breast affords*
> *Him any mercy, in that mansion foul,*
> *Save one old beldame, weak in body and in soul.*

As Porphyro creeps into the castle, readers are reminded of *Romeo and Juliet* once again. For, as it turns out, Madeline and Porphyro come from warring families, families with an ancient grudge against each other. Even the dogs in this castle, the speaker says, would "howl" curses at Porphyro and his whole family if they knew he was here. And Madeline's family themselves are "hyena foemen," merciless and brutal as wild dogs, altogether prepared to rip Porphyro limb from limb.

The only person besides Madeline who has any love for Porphyro in this castle is "one old beldame, weak in body and soul"—an old lady whose name, the reader will shortly learn, is Angela. Angela cements the poem's allusions to *Romeo and Juliet*. As a foolish old woman who helps to bring the young lovers together, Angela plays exactly the same role here as Juliet's nurse.

The reader who's noticed that this poem has a lot in common with *Romeo and Juliet*—a play that ends in a series of heart-wrenching deaths—might start getting a little worried at this point. Porphyro's heart may be a "fev'rous citadel," a metaphorical city burning with lovesickness—but that city might easily be overthrown by "a hundred swords," a metonym for the dangerous party guests. Readers might also think back to all those cold tombs in the first stanzas, a warning that death is all around the young lovers.

The speaker invites readers to feel that unease fully, warning, "let no buzz'd whisper tell" of Porphyro's presence, and hinting that the readers, like Porphyro, should hold their breaths and keep quiet, lest they alert his enemies to his presence. Getting imaginatively involved in a story isn't just a mental exercise, the speaker suggests: it's a full-body experience, just like Madeline's dream or Porphyro's longing for a kiss.

LINES 91-108

> *Ah, happy chance! the aged creature came,*
> *Shuffling along with ivory-headed wand,*
> *To where he stood, hid from the torch's flame,*
> *Behind a broad half-pillar, far beyond*

The sound of merriment and chorus bland:
He startled her; but soon she knew his face,
And grasp'd his fingers in her palsied hand,
Saying, "Mercy, Porphyro! hie thee from this place;
They are all here to-night, the whole blood-thirsty race!
"Get hence! get hence! there's dwarfish Hildebrand;
He had a fever late, and in the fit
He cursed thee and thine, both house and land:
Then there's that old Lord Maurice, not a whit
More tame for his gray hairs—Alas me! flit!
Flit like a ghost away."—"Ah, Gossip dear,
We're safe enough; here in this arm-chair sit,
And tell me how"—"Good Saints! not here, not here;
Follow me, child, or else these stones will be thy bier."

While Porphyro hides in the castle's shadowy halls, old Angela, Madeline's maidservant—apparently no more invited to the lively party than the Beadsman was—comes shuffling past. With her walking stick like an "ivory-headed wand," Angela seems a little witchy when she first arrives. But when she speaks, she comes across not as an enchanter, but as a feeble and silly old lady, with a "palsied" (or shaking) hand and a reputation as a chatty "Gossip." Sympathetic to Porphyro's love for Madeline, she's terrified to find the young lover in the castle, and warns him:

> [...] "Mercy, Porphyro! hie thee from this place;
> They are all here to-night, the whole blood-thirsty race!

Having told him in no uncertain terms to get out of here, she clutches his hand and detains him for a little longer to tell him exactly which of the party guests might want to murder him most. This scene sets a colorful-but-sinister mood with the mention of "dwarfish Hildebrand" and the grizzled, violent old "Lord Maurice." But it also makes Angela seem a little ridiculous. Her insistent repetitions ("'Get hence! get hence!'", "'flit! Flit like a ghost away,'" "'not here, not here'") don't make much of an impression on Porphyro, who gently invites her to sit down, chill out, and tell him where he can find Madeline. But Angela hurries him away to a safer place.

There's the sense here that Angela has gone a bit goofy in her old age—but also that she has a real sense of death and danger, an understanding of mortality that the ardent young Porphyro can't quite grasp. Again, there's a juxtaposition between the swooning fantasies of the young and the grim, chilly, sickly realities of the old.

LINES 109-126

He follow'd through a lowly arched way,
Brushing the cobwebs with his lofty plume,
And as she mutter'd "Well-a—well-a-day!"
He found him in a little moonlight room,
Pale, lattic'd, chill, and silent as a tomb.
"Now tell me where is Madeline," said he,
"O tell me, Angela, by the holy loom
Which none but secret sisterhood may see,
When they St. Agnes' wool are weaving piously."
"St. Agnes! Ah! it is St. Agnes' Eve—
Yet men will murder upon holy days:
Thou must hold water in a witch's sieve,
And be liege-lord of all the Elves and Fays,
To venture so: it fills me with amaze
To see thee, Porphyro!—St. Agnes' Eve!
God's help! my lady fair the conjuror plays
This very night: good angels her deceive!
But let me laugh awhile, I've mickle time to grieve."

Angela leads Porphyro to a quiet, out-of-the-way room, draped with "cobwebs" and "silent as a tomb"—in other words, a place that has more in common with the Beadsman's icy chapel than the warmth of the party below. Here, Porphyro finally gets to ask his urgent question: "'Now tell me where is Madeline.'" He begs Angela to lead him to his beloved in the name of the "holy loom" upon which the "secret sisterhood" of nuns who worship St. Agnes weave sacred wool.

This allusion to secretive rituals in St. Agnes's name feels like another way of seeing the ritual Madeline is performing this very night. Weaving is an ancient metaphor for storytelling and for dreaming, which "weave" bits and pieces of real-world experience together into something fantastical and new. The dream Madeline wishes for, and this very poem, are both "weavings" of this kind. And again, the poem insists that storytelling and sexy dreaming are "pious[]," pure and holy activities rather than degraded ones.

But Angela sees things in an earthier light. Reminded by Porphyro's mention of St. Agnes that this very evening is "'St. Agnes' Eve,'" she merely remarks, "'Yet men will murder upon holy days.'" Fantasy and spirituality never yet saved anyone from death, she suggests. And Porphyro's insane bravery in turning up at the castle seems to her like something out of a fantasy:

> Thou must hold water in a witch's sieve,
> And be liege-lord of all the Elves and Fays,
> To venture so [...]

Here, the chant-like alliteration in "'water in a witch's sieve'" and "'liege-lord of all the Elves and Fays'" itself casts a dreamy spell.

When Angela thinks of Madeline's own dreamy spell, however, she's not enchanted, but tickled:

> [...] my lady fair the conjuror plays
> This very night: good angels her deceive!
> But let me laugh awhile, I've mickle time to grieve."

The thought of Madeline solemnly performing her ritual makes Angela burst out cackling, and affectionately pray for the "angels" to "deceive" Madeline in the way she hopes for. To Angela, all this enchantment, passion, and love is nothing more than an illusion and a joke—an amusing relief when one has "mickle" (or plenty) of time to "grieve," but still deeply ridiculous. The contrast between the worlds of the mournful old and the dreamy young, these lines suggest, runs pretty deep.

LINES 127-135

Feebly she laugheth in the languid moon,
While Porphyro upon her face doth look,
Like puzzled urchin on an aged crone
Who keepeth clos'd a wond'rous riddle-book,
As spectacled she sits in chimney nook.
But soon his eyes grew brilliant, when she told
His lady's purpose; and he scarce could brook
Tears, at the thought of those enchantments cold,
And Madeline asleep in lap of legends old.

The poem now dedicates half a stanza to the contrast between Angela and Porphyro as Angela cackles away over Madeline's St. Agnes dreams. Here, the speaker uses a richly funny and vivid simile:

> [...] Porphyro upon her face doth look,
> Like puzzled urchin on an aged crone
> Who keepeth clos'd a wond'rous riddle-book,

In other words, Porphyro's response to Angela's affectionately derisive laughter isn't to get angry or defensive. Instead, he's simply uncomprehending. He's already the younger person in the room, but this simile makes him younger still: as he listens in confusion to Angela's laughter, he becomes nothing more than a snotty-nosed "urchin," a scruffy little kid who doesn't get the joke. And Angela, who is indeed an "aged crone," becomes a *wiser* aged crone, one who's chuckling over a grown-up book of jokes as she sits at her ease by the fire.

Porphyro's incomprehension is in part because he doesn't know about Madeline's ritual yet. But it's also because he's young and earnest, and Angela is old and cynical.

This moment thus provides some surprising comic relief. After all, this poem has already made it clear that it takes dreams, visions, stories, and romance very seriously indeed. But here, through Angela, it also admits that these things can be a little silly when they take themselves *too* seriously.

Strangely, the poem's gentle moment of humor at its own expense softens readers up for one of its most deeply-felt moments. When Angela finally stops chuckling and tells Porphyro what she's laughing about, *he* doesn't laugh: he's almost moved to tears. He knows that Madeline is hoping to conjure up a vision of him.

Take a look at the way the poem uses enjambment to evoke Porphyro's feelings in this moment:

> [...] he scarce could brook
> Tears, at the thought of those enchantments cold,

As the enjambed line jumps from the word "brook" to "Tears," the reader feels thrown off balance. Read aloud in everyday speech, this sentence wouldn't stress the word "brook"—it would sound more like "he scarce could brook tears." But the iambic meter here (that is, a meter built of feet that go da-DUM) *demands* a stress on "brook," like this: "[...] he scarce | could brook." Then that stress collides with an unexpected trochee (a poetic foot that follows a stressed-unstressed pattern, DUM-da), so the lines sound like this:

> [...] he scarce | could brook
> Tears, at | the thought | of those | enchant- | ments
> cold,

Put it all together, and these two unexpected stresses collide to make the lines sound a little stumbly and choked—just like Porphyro, choking up as he thinks of Madeline's love for him. And this tender moment is about to give him a big idea.

LINES 136-144

Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose,
Flushing his brow, and in his pained heart
Made purple riot: then doth he propose
A stratagem, that makes the beldame start:
"A cruel man and impious thou art:
Sweet lady, let her pray, and sleep, and dream
Alone with her good angels, far apart
From wicked men like thee. Go, go!—I deem
Thou canst not surely be the same that thou didst seem."

At this critical turning point in the poem, Porphyro gets a sudden idea—one that the speaker doesn't reveal to the reader right away. This "stratagem," or plan, blooms in Porphyro's mind "like a full-blown rose," a simile that suggests it's not just a sudden idea, but a beautiful, enticing, fragrant one. Judging by Porphyro's physical reaction, whatever this lovely idea is, it's also powerful.

Take a look at the way alliteration and consonance evoke the intensity of Porphyro's feelings here:

> Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose,
> Flushing his brow, and in his pained heart
> Made purple riot: [...]

Here, the /f/, /b/, /l/, and /r/ sounds of "full-blown rose" slide into those same sounds in "Flushing his brow." It's as if this rosy thought moves as quickly and fluently as the blood that rushes

to Porphyro's face. A similar sound transition happens between Porphyro's "pained heart" and the "purple riot" inside it. (That image might make more sense when one considers that blood was once thought of as purple. See the "purple fountains" of spilled blood at the beginning of—that's right—*Romeo and Juliet* for just one example.) All those hard /p/ and /t/ sounds are like the pounding of Porphyro's heart.

Whatever Porphyro's "stratagem" is, it's gripped his whole body: as he tells Angela his idea, his heart is beating hard, he's blushing.

And Angela doesn't like it one bit! Listen to how enjambment evokes her appalled scolding here:

> Sweet lady, let her pray, and sleep, and dream
> Alone with her good angels, far apart
> From wicked men like thee. Go, go!—I deem
> Thou canst not surely be the same that thou didst
> seem."

The quick slide from one line to another suggests that Angela is whispering furiously and at top speed. Whatever Porphyro has in mind, it involves Madeline and her plans for the evening—and Angela seems to think it's a seriously impertinent and even "wicked" intrusion, one that makes her reconsider Porphyro's whole character.

But the speaker holds Porphyro's idea back. Readers are left in a state of anticipation, wondering: what could he possibly have proposed to make Angela so angry?

This important moment in the poem is also a good spot to take a look at something the speaker has been subtly doing all along: switching willy-nilly between the past and present tense. If the reader glances back at the first few stanzas, they'll find this happening there, too: it "was" St. Agnes' Eve, but the Beadsman "saith" (or says) his prayers.

Here, Porphyro's idea is in the past tense ("a thought came"), while Angela's startled reaction is in the present ("then doth he propose / A stratagem, that makes the beldame start"). There's a sense here that what's happening is both long-ago and immediate, distant and urgent. And that contrast will only grow stronger in the next section of the poem, as Porphyro unveils his plan.

LINES 145-162

"I will not harm her, by all saints I swear,"
Quoth Porphyro: "O may I ne'er find grace
When my weak voice shall whisper its last prayer,
If one of her soft ringlets I displace,
Or look with ruffian passion in her face:
Good Angela, believe me by these tears;
Or I will, even in a moment's space,
Awake, with horrid shout, my foemen's ears,
And beard them, though they be more fang'd than wolves and bears."
"Ah! why wilt thou affright a feeble soul?
A poor, weak, palsy-stricken, churchyard thing,
Whose passing-bell may ere the midnight toll;
Whose prayers for thee, each morn and evening,
Were never miss'd."—Thus plaining, doth she bring
A gentler speech from burning Porphyro;
So woful, and of such deep sorrowing,
That Angela gives promise she will do
Whatever he shall wish, betide her weal or woe.

Having drawn the reader's interest with Porphyro's intense but unspoken "stratagem" (and Angela's scandalized reaction), the speaker refuses to let readers know exactly what's going on for two whole stanzas!

Instead, there's a little drama between Porphyro and Angela. Porphyro swears that he won't harm Madeline, won't even touch a hair on her head—but rather undercuts this promise of gentleness by threatening that, if Angela doesn't help him to carry his plan out, he'll shout so loud that every murderous knight in the castle will come running to fight him. Angela responds by wailing in elaborate self-pity, essentially saying, *"Why would you say something like that to little old me, a 'feeble soul' on the verge of death who's never been anything but nice to you?"*

This passage is important for a few reasons:

1. It underlines the intensity of Porphyro's passion. The reader has already gotten a pretty good sense that the plan he's cooked up must have something to do with visiting Madeline this evening, and that that idea gets him hot and bothered, "Flushing his brow" and making his heart pound. Here, he becomes "burning Porphyro," so impassioned that he feels ready to fight every knight in the castle (and to be cruel to poor old Angela). Passion, all this fiery symbolism suggests, can be overpowering, as dangerous as it is delicious. Think about the difference between the delightful warmth of a fire in the fireplace versus the horrors of a wildfire that takes out whole towns.
2. This passage also brings back the juxtaposition between youth and age, life and death. In Angela's woe-is-me lament, she calls herself a "poor, weak, palsy-stricken, churchyard thing" whose "passing-bell" might "toll" any minute—reminding readers of the old Beadsman, whose "deathbell" rings at the beginning of the poem. Porphyro's fiery, passionate youth, this moment reminds readers, isn't something that lasts forever; another essential quality of a fire is that it burns out!

The frail old Angela's pitiful "plaining" (or whining) forces Porphyro to *temper* his passion a little, to soften it before it

destroys them both. And it's this "gentler" temperance that makes Angela agree to help him carry his plan out.

It's now been a whole three stanzas since the speaker first teased readers with that unrevealed plan. And that's another part of a developing idea here: the deliciousness of *anticipation*. The poem has already reminded readers that part of the pleasure of listening to a story is the feeling that one is watching from afar, like those "eager-eyed" stone angels back in lines 34-36. Here, that idea gets richer. Maybe one of the delights of getting imaginatively involved in a story, this long delay suggests, is that there's always a little distance between a reader and the story: the feeling of *almost* touching something, but not *quite*.

Not being told Porphyro's plan, in other words, only makes readers hungrier to know what it is—and that hunger is itself a kind of satisfaction. And funnily enough, anticipation will be one of the central features of Porphyro's plan—which will at last be revealed in the next stanza.

LINES 163-171

Which was, to lead him, in close secrecy,
Even to Madeline's chamber, and there hide
Him in a closet, of such privacy
That he might see her beauty unespy'd,
And win perhaps that night a peerless bride,
While legion'd faeries pac'd the coverlet,
And pale enchantment held her sleepy-ey'd.
Never on such a night have lovers met,
Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt.

At last, the poem unveils Porphyro's secret "stratagem." It's pretty simple: he wants Angela to lead him to Madeline's bedroom, where he'll hide in a closet until Madeline is asleep. Then, he'll creep out and make her St. Agnes's Eve dream come true: he, the literal man of her dreams, will be there to greet her when she awakes. (Part of the fun for him, of course, will be that he gets to stare at Madeline's beauty "unespy'd" as she gets ready for bed: he can feast his eyes without being seen.)

One can immediately see why Angela might have a few objections to this plan. It sounds an awful lot like a way for an unscrupulous man to take advantage of a young lady. But one can also see the plan from Porphyro's point of view: it's an opportunity to make a dream into a reality, to bring magic to life.

And this stanza is sympathetic to that view—while also refusing to ignore the dangers of dreams. Take a look at the way this passage uses figurative language and allusion:

While legion'd faeries pac'd the coverlet,
And pale enchantment held her sleepy-ey'd.
Never on such a night have lovers met,
Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt.

Here, the speaker makes yet another allusion to *Romeo and Juliet* when he imagines that herds of fairies will walk over Madeline's bedclothes as she sleeps. That image is straight out of the famous Queen Mab speech, in which the flamboyant Mercutio imagines the Queen of the Fairies riding her chariot over the covers to bring sleepers powerful and fearful dreams.

There's also an allusion here to the episode of Arthurian legend in which Merlin falls in love with the sorceress Vivien—only for her to steal his powers and imprison him in a cave. Here, the poem calls Vivien a "Demon," and Merlin's vanquishing a "monstrous debt," or a terrible price he pays for his love.

These are allusions to moments of deep enchantment, certainly, but also to moments of real danger. Even the personification of "pale enchantment" here is ambiguous: as enchantment "h[olds]" Madeline tight in sleep, it might equally be protecting or trapping her.

In other words, Angela's sense of the dangers of this plan only get at one corner of what might be dangerous here. Dreams and love, in these images, are enchantments that can both delight and imprison. Porphyro seems to be in as much peril as Madeline is, if not more: her beauty might put *him* under a spell, forcing him to pay the "monstrous debt" of helpless love.

These are risks that Porphyro seems willing to take for the chance to "win" his "peerless bride." But love and dreams, this passage warns, are not for the faint of heart: they have the power to imprison and destroy as much as to delight and fulfill.

LINES 172-189

"It shall be as thou wishest," said the Dame:
"All cates and dainties shall be stored there
Quickly on this feast-night: by the tambour frame
Her own lute thou wilt see: no time to spare,
For I am slow and feeble, and scarce dare
On such a catering trust my dizzy head.
Wait here, my child, with patience; kneel in prayer
The while: Ah! thou must needs the lady wed,
Or may I never leave my grave among the dead."
So saying, she hobbled off with busy fear.
The lover's endless minutes slowly pass'd;
The dame return'd, and whisper'd in his ear
To follow her; with aged eyes aghast
From fright of dim espial. Safe at last,
Through many a dusky gallery, they gain
The maiden's chamber, silken, hush'd, and chaste;
Where Porphyro took covert, pleas'd amain.
His poor guide hurried back with agues in her brain.

Both Angela and Porphyro overcome their fears and get ready to put Porphyro's plan into motion. Angela works out all the details: she'll help Porphyro to fill the closet with "cates and dainties," sweet delicacies that he can bring out to provide Madeline with a midnight feast. Angela also points out Madeline's lute, on which Porphyro can play music to wake

Madeline up.

But Angela still isn't at ease. She tells Porphyro to wait patiently for her to return, and then warns him:

> "[...] Ah! thou must needs the lady wed,
> Or may I never leave my grave among the dead."

In other words, she's still skeptical, worried that Porphyro is just going to sleep with Madeline and then abandon her. She calls down damnation on her *own* head if she helps Porphyro go through with this plan and he then abuses Madeline's trust.

She's not just concerned about Porphyro's behavior, either. With "aged eyes aghast / From fright of dim espial," she's terrified that Madeline's bloodthirsty family will discover their plot ("espial" here means *to be seen*). It's enough to give anyone "agues in her brain" (that is, to make one feverish with worry).

Here again, the poem emphasizes Angela's pitiful old age: she "hobble[s]," she's "slow and feeble," she has "aged eyes." And she's caught up in very real, material fears: a lot closer to death than Porphyro, she's also a lot more alert to its reality and finality.

By now, the poem has repeatedly juxtaposed the cynicism and weariness of old age with the warm, dreamy passion of youth. Here, though, it suggests that even the frail and elderly can be motivated by the power of love and dreams. Earlier in the poem, Angela marvels that Porphyro has the bravery to "venture" into this castle—but she herself shows tremendous courage here, helping the young lovers in spite of her terror and uncertainty. Even those whose youthful joys are long since "said and sung," the poem suggests, can be moved by the intense power of passion. Just as the Beadsman was moved to tears by "Music's golden tongue" earlier in the poem, Angela is moved to brave action by Porphyro's obvious passion, even if she doesn't altogether trust it.

Finally, "Safe at last," Porphyro finds himself hidden in Madeline's bedroom. In fact, he takes "covert" there, like a hunted fox hiding in the underbrush. Listen to the way the echoing sounds here mark the poem's transition into a whole new mood:

> Safe at last,
> Through many a dusky gallery, they gain
> The maiden's chamber, silken, hush'd, and chaste;

This passage is rich with soft /s/ sibilance, musical assonance on the long /ay/ sound, and subtle alliteration on /g/ and /ch/ sounds. These sounds work together to make Madeline's bedroom sound like a sensuous, whispery haven. What happens here will be both enchanting and *quiet*.

LINES 190-198

> *Her falt'ring hand upon the balustrade,*
> *Old Angela was feeling for the stair,*
> *When Madeline, St. Agnes' charmed maid,*
> *Rose, like a mission'd spirit, unaware:*
> *With silver taper's light, and pious care,*
> *She turn'd, and down the aged gossip led*
> *To a safe level matting. Now prepare,*
> *Young Porphyro, for gazing on that bed;*
> *She comes, she comes again, like ring-dove fray'd and fled.*

Angela leaves Porphyro hidden in Madeline's closet and emerges into the hall. She then gropes around in the darkness for a moment before help arrives in the form of Madeline herself, who tenderly helps Angela to get down the stairs.

Here, Angela's descent (and Madeline's ascent) symbolically present the poem's contrast between old age and youth. Angela goes *down* toward the earth, where she'll find her "safe" and final resting place all too soon. Madeline, meanwhile, climbs the stairs "like a mission'd spirit," rising up into the air, to an encounter with the sacred and ethereal world of dreams.

Here, the poem makes one of its sudden leaps from the past tense to the present, in an apostrophe to Porphyro as he crouches out of sight in Madeline's closet:

> [...] Now prepare,
> Young Porphyro, for gazing on that bed;
> She comes, she comes again, like ring-dove fray'd and fled.

The present tense makes this moment feel intense and immediate—and puts the reader in Porphyro's shoes, "prepar[ing]" to "gaz[e] on that bed" right along with him. The long-anticipated moment is *just* about to arrive: both Porphyro and the reader have been getting ready for this encounter for ages. And here, it feels that the reader even sees Madeline through Porphyro's eyes (and his similes). Sacred as a "spirit" and pure as a startled "dove," Madeline isn't just a pretty girl, but a figure of holy beauty.

LINES 199-207

> *Out went the taper as she hurried in;*
> *Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died:*
> *She clos'd the door, she panted, all akin*
> *To spirits of the air, and visions wide:*
> *No uttered syllable, or, woe betide!*
> *But to her heart, her heart was voluble,*
> *Paining with eloquence her balmy side;*
> *As though a tongueless nightingale should swell*
> *Her throat in vain, and die, heart-stifled, in her dell.*

As Madeline enters her bedroom, her candle blows out, and she's left in moonlit darkness. Here, the reader enjoys a special

privilege that even Porphyro can't share: the ability to see Madeline from both the outside and the inside.

From the outside, Madeline, caught up in the enchantment of her St. Agnes' Eve spell, looks like she might be one of the "spirits of the air," or even a "vision" herself. She's silent, panting, and wild-eyed; she knows that, if she speaks, she'll break the spell and deny herself the dream she so desperately longs for. The poem has already suggested that dreams might be powerful enough to entrap or "hoodwink." But dreams are also *fragile*. One word out of place, Madeline seems to feel, and all the magic of this evening will disappear.

"But to her heart, her heart was voluble," the poem goes on. This moment of anadiplosis gives readers an intensely intimate look at Madeline's experience. Her heart is "voluble," talkative, speaking to itself—if only in the form of a pounding heartbeat that "Pain[s] with eloquence her balmy side." (That "balmy" side also suggests that the intensity of the moment might be making her sweat a little—see John Donne's "The Ecstasy" for a related moment of romantic sweaty "balm.") But the heart's conversation with itself also feels frustrated or stifled somehow: in another vivid simile, Madeline's heart is like a "nightingale" unable to sing, dying of its unexpressed feelings deep in the woods.

There's something tricky going on here. As we've already noted in this guide, the poem seems interested in ideas of watchfulness. Part of the pleasure of listening to a romantic story, the poem suggests, is the fun of seeing everything from a god's-eye view. And the poem is also interested in anticipation, in the pleasure of almost-but-not-quite being able to enjoy something. Both of those pleasures come together in this moment. The poem has aligned the reader with Porphyro, making it clear that he and his readers are sharing the same voyeuristic delight.

This passage gives readers something that Porphyro *can't* have: a view of Madeline's inner experience. But in being reminded that they have a special privilege, perhaps readers are also reminded that they can never have what *Porphyro* has in this moment: not being characters in the poem, they can't really be in the room with Madeline.

All these questions of watching and anticipating, in other words, are questions about the *imagination*. All these mentions of Madeline as a "vision" or a "spirit" might remind readers that that's exactly what she is: a dream, invented by a poet and then imagined into life by readers. While readers help to create the dream, they can't really reach out and touch it. And there's both pleasure and pain in longing for something one can't touch.

LINES 208-216

A casement high and triple-arch'd there was,
All garlanded with carven imag'ries
Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,
And diamonded with panes of quaint device,
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;
And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,
And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,
A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings.

In this stanza, the speaker turns away from his central characters for a moment to vividly depict a stained-glass window in Madeline's bedroom. With this turn, a new phase of the poem begins.

At first, it might seem strange that the speaker pauses for a whole stanza to look at a window here. After all, the poem has just come to a moment of high tension: Porphyro is in the closet, Madeline is in bed, and anything might happen. But readers have already learned that this speaker loves tension and anticipation!

Listen to the way the speaker uses woven sounds in lines 208-213 to bring the window to life:

A casement high and triple-arch'd there was,
All garlanded with carven imag'ries
Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,
And diamonded with panes of quaint device,
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;

There's a whole lot going on here: /ar/ sounds weave through lines 208-209; alliterative /f/ sounds connect "fruits" and "flowers"; consonant /d/ and /n/ sounds and assonant /ay/ and /i/ sounds echo throughout. The sound patterns here are as rich, vivid, and interconnected as the elaborate stonework and gorgeous glass they describe.

There's also a complex simile in these lines. The windows are as brilliantly colorful as "the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings." That's a simile with a metaphor built into it: if those wings are "deep-damask'd," they look like they've been embroidered. This layered imagery is just like the complexity of a dream: think how common it is to hear someone describe their dream by saying something like, "I was at my grandpa's house, but it was more like a school, but there was an ocean in the cafeteria."

Bringing the window, moths, and embroidery together, the speaker connects their symbolic meanings:

- There's the window, the thing through which one sees;
- The moth, the creature obsessively drawn to light (and sometimes thus to its doom);
- And embroidery, a common symbol for storytelling.

All of that sounds a lot like what this poem is doing! This is a poem about seeing, about dangerously obsessive passion, and about dream-weaving.

Pull in the rest of the images the window depicts—medieval images of "heraldries" (family crests), "twilight saints" (like Agnes, perhaps?) and the "blood of kings and queens" (that is, noble blood and family lines)—and the window's symbolic meaning really falls into place. Everything that's going on in this window is also going on in the poem itself. The window becomes a symbol for the very poem that contains it.

To unpack that a little further:

- Like the window, the poem is a beautiful, richly-colored, romantic image.
- Like the window, this poem is at once a thing one can *see* and a thing one can see *through* (by being dazzled by the images it creates, and using one's own imagination: everyone's imagined Madeline and Porphyro will look a little different).
- Like the window, the poem captures fragile living things (like fruits, and flowers, and humans) in a medium that won't fade and die (like stone, or glass, or language).

Perhaps it makes sense, then, that this is the only stanza in the poem that doesn't have a *character* in it: the speaker doesn't mention Madeline or Porphyro, Angela or the Beadsman, fair ladies or violent knights. It's just the speaker and the reader together, gazing at this gorgeous sight. We're in the imaginative work of this poem together, the speaker seems to say to the reader, and we're about to go even deeper. Get ready.

LINES 217-225

Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,
And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast,
As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,
And on her silver cross soft amethyst,
And on her hair a glory, like a saint:
She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest,
Save wings, for heaven:—Porphyro grew faint:
She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint.

Having described his richly symbolic window, the speaker turns back to the drama at hand, and watches as Madeline kneels to pray in the colored light of the stained-glass. The moonlight coming through the window transforms as it passes through the panes, and seems to paint Madeline: she's all different colors, from "warm gules" (or vibrant red, in heraldic color-language) to "soft amethyst." Remember, that window represents the poem itself—and in its imaginative light, Madeline becomes even more brilliant and beautiful than she was before.

As the poem picks out spots of glowing light, it also guides the reader's eyes to different parts of Madeline's body:

- First, the poem looks at her "fair breast."
- Then, its eyes move to her praying "hands," her "silver cross," and her hair, upon which a "glory, like a saint" falls, making her seem to have a halo.
- In other words, the poem's gaze moves steadily from the sexual to the spiritual, as if it's climbing a ladder. Rather than being lowly or dirty (as many, many times and cultures have imagined), sexuality becomes the first rung on the climb to heaven.

Hushed sibilance helps to evoke this moment's sacred silence:

Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,
And on her silver cross soft amethyst,
And on her hair a glory, like a saint:
She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest,
Save wings, for heaven: [...]

The intense, luminous "purity" of this moment makes Porphyro "faint," weak at the knees. Oh yeah, Porphyro—remember him? This stanza only returns to him at the end. The speaker and the reader have been so immersed in what Porphyro is looking at that he hasn't even seemed to be a separate character for a moment. Everyone involved looks through his eyes, sharing the intensity of his love-struck vision. Love, like poetry, paints in brilliant colors.

LINES 226-234

Anon his heart revives: her vespers done,
Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;
Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;
Loosens her fragrant boddice; by degrees
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:
Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,
Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,
In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed,
But dares not look behind, or all the charm is fled.

Porphyro's moment of religious faintness at the sight of Madeline's holy beauty doesn't last for long. He "revives" as Madeline finishes her "vespers," or evening prayers, and begins a new phase of her bedtime preparations: undressing.

As Porphyro watches Madeline slowly undress, the poem switches back into the immediacy of the present tense, and the imagery sweeps the reader up into his transporting, full-body passion:

Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;
Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;
Loosens her fragrant boddice; by degrees
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:

Porphyro doesn't just *see* this beautiful sight. He also *feels* those "warmed jewels," *smells* Madeline's "fragrant boddice," and *hears* her "rustling" dress. The only sense he doesn't use is

taste—perhaps precisely the sense he most longs to indulge in a triumphant kiss. But he, like the reader, can only enjoy from afar, even as he sensuously inhabits those "warmed jewels."

Midway through her undressing, Madeline just stands in her fallen dress, "Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed." This simile is rather different from the image of Madeline as a saint that fills up the previous stanza. A mermaid is certainly beautiful, but she's also dangerous: mermaids were said to lure sailors to watery graves. And "sea-weed" sounds pretty clammy after all that perfumed warmth. (Read more on this important image in a wonderful passage from Christopher Ricks's *Keats and Embarrassment*, linked in the Resources section.)

There's both an intense beauty and a serious danger here. Porphyro, transported to the gates of heaven by his passion, might also be on the verge of dying from it.

And Madeline, too, is in a precarious position. As she stands "pensive[ly]" in her half-fallen clothes, she imagines that "fair St. Agnes" is in her bed behind her, but doesn't dare to sneak a peek: her own intense imaginative experience will shatter if she breaks any of the ritual's rules (one of which, remember, is to never look behind you). Passion and dreams seem to have this much in common: they're made even realer and intenser by a little bit of restraint.

(And with that restraint in mind, modern readers should remember that Madeline isn't actually standing there half-naked. She'd be wearing a chemise under her dress, a sort of long loose shirt that also served as a nightgown.)

LINES 235-243

Soon, trembling in her soft and chilly nest,
In sort of wakeful swoon, perplex'd she lay,
Until the poppied warmth of sleep oppress'd
Her soothed limbs, and soul fatigued away;
Flown, like a thought, until the morrow-day;
Blissfully haven'd both from joy and pain;
Clasp'd like a missal where swart Paynims pray;
Blinded alike from sunshine and from rain,
As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again.

Undressed at last, Madeline gets into bed, and Porphryo, the readers, and the speaker all watch her as she descends into a deep, enchanted sleep.

Listen to the way the speaker uses end-stopped lines in this lyrical passage:

Her soothed limbs, and soul fatigued **away;**
Flown, like a thought, until the **morrow-day;**
Blissfully haven'd both from joy and **pain;**
Clasp'd like a missal where swart Paynims **pray;**
Blinded alike from sunshine and from **rain,**
As though a rose should shut, and be a bud **again.**

That long, steady series of end-stops suggests Madeline's even breathing as she lies in a charmed sleep, as deep and "poppied" as if she'd taken opium.

Each of those lines encloses a vivid image—often a simile. Madeline has "Flown, like a thought," becoming immaterial and vanishing "until the morrow-day" (that is, until tomorrow). She's "Clasp'd like a missal where swart Paynims pray"—in other words, shut as tight as a Catholic prayerbook in a Muslim country. And she's like a "rose" that has magically managed to "shut, and be a bud again."

All of these images are, in one way or another, both strange and mysterious. Madeline is emphatically *shut* in all of these images, even magically shut: of course, a rose *can't* "shut, and be a bud again," but that kind of renewal seems like a possibility in Madeline's sleep.

She's not just restored to a "bud," but made illegible by her sleep: no watcher can "read" what's going on inside her. And there's something sacred about that illegibility. The speaker's image of Madeline as a "missal" in a "Paynim" country speaks (unfortunately, but appropriately for the time period Keats represents here) to an old Christian prejudice against Muslims, making the sleeping Madeline into a creature of holy purity incomprehensible to the "infidels" around her.

In other words: Porphyro, the speaker, and the readers might be able to feast their eyes on Madeline as she undresses, but her dream life is completely private. There's something both magical and holy about that kind of privacy, the speaker suggests. Porphyro couldn't intrude on Madeline's dream life even if he wanted to.

LINES 244-252

Stol'n to this paradise, and so entranced,
Porphyro gaz'd upon her empty dress,
And listen'd to her breathing, if it chanced
To wake into a slumberous tenderness;
Which when he heard, that minute did he bless,
And breath'd himself: then from the closet crept,
Noiseless as fear in a wide wilderness,
And over the hush'd carpet, silent, stept,
And 'tween the curtains peep'd, where, lo!—how fast she slept.

Over the past four stanzas, Porphyro, the speaker, and the readers have all shared a single "entranced" experience: watching Madeline as she gets ready for bed. Now the poem's "camera" pulls back, and speaker and reader watch Porphyro again.

He seems stunned in the aftermath of what he's seen. As he waits for Madeline's breathing to signal that she's asleep, he merely stares at her empty dress, as if it's a holy relic.

The language is strange here: Porphyro is listening for Madeline's breath to "wake into a slumberous tenderness." This

paradox—in which sleep becomes a kind of awakening—suggests that perhaps the kind of intense and private dreaming that Madeline fell into in the previous stanza is itself a way to "wake up" into a different world. Dreams and reality are treading awfully close to each other this evening.

After Madeline's breathing suggests that she's fallen asleep, Porphyro—who must have been holding his breath—"breath[es] himself," and tiptoes out of the closet. Listen to the way hushed sibilance creates a mood of tense quiet as Porphyro emerges:

> Noiseless as fear in a wide wilderness,
> And over the hush'd carpet, silent, stept,

Porphyro is trying so hard to be quiet that Madeline's comfortable bedroom suddenly feels like a "wild wilderness" to him—and he himself becomes, not just a frightened person, but a personification of fear itself. (Perhaps the reader can relate to this moment if they remember creeping out of bed late at night as a kid: think how big and menacing a normal room feels in the dark when you're trying to be quiet.)

But all is well: Madeline is "fast" asleep, and Porphyro can begin the next stage of his plan. At this point, of course, the reader doesn't know what that plan is—and might feel a little nervous on Madeline's behalf.

LINES 253-261

> *Then by the bed-side, where the faded moon*
> *Made a dim, silver twilight, soft he set*
> *A table, and, half anguish'd, threw thereon*
> *A cloth of woven crimson, gold, and jet:—*
> *O for some drowsy Morphean amulet!*
> *The boisterous, midnight, festive clarion,*
> *The kettle-drum, and far-heard clarionet,*
> *Affray his ears, though but in dying tone:—*
> *The hall door shuts again, and all the noise is gone.*

Readers might be holding their breath by now, just as Porphyro was in the closet a moment ago. Madeline's asleep, Porphyro's in the bedroom: what is he about to do?

Prepare a midnight snack, apparently. Porphyro doesn't disturb Madeline, but begins to set up "a table" for her. It'll be an elegant one: he drapes it with a "cloth of woven crimson, gold, and jet," a rich weaving of red and gold and black.

But just as Porphyro spreads his tablecloth, he's interrupted. Take a look at the way the speaker uses dramatic end-stops in lines 256-257 to evoke his tension and fear:

> A cloth of woven crimson, gold, and jet:—
> O for some drowsy Morphean amulet!

Just as Porphyro throws that tablecloth out, he hears a noise—marked here by that strong combination of a colon and a dash. The colon gives the moment a waiting, expectant feeling, while the dash gives it an intensity, as if Porphyro has suddenly sat still to listen. In that moment, before the reader even knows what's going on, he suddenly wishes for a "drowsy Morphean amulet," a talisman that could keep Madeline asleep. (Morpheus was the Roman god of dreams.)

At last, readers learn what has disturbed him: the sound of the "festive clarion, / The kettle-drum, and far-heard clarionet"—that is, the music from the party far below, drifting through an opened "hall door" somewhere. This sound—which in another context might be pretty jolly—"Affray[s]" (or frightens) Porphyro, as well it should: it's the sound of his partying enemies, all drunk and violent.

His real worry isn't that someone might come and discover him here, however, but that the sound of the music might wake Madeline up! By now, Porphyro is as deep into his own dreamy night as Madeline is in her sleep, single-mindedly focused on his mysterious plans.

LINES 262-270

> *And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep,*
> *In blanched linen, smooth, and lavender'd,*
> *While he forth from the closet brought a heap*
> *Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;*
> *With jellies soother than the creamy curd,*
> *And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;*
> *Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd*
> *From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,*
> *From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon.*

The sound of distant music fades, and Porphyro returns to his task: laying out a sumptuous feast for Madeline, who sleeps on undisturbed in the smooth and sweet-smelling linens of her "lavender'd" bed.

Porphyro's feast is a treat for readers as much as for the characters. Take a look at the vivid imagery here:

> [...] a heap
> Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;
> With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
> And lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon;
> Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd
> From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,
> From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon.

In this passage, there's something to appeal to every sense: the luxurious texture of "sooth[]" (or smooth) "jellies" and "creamy curd"; the jewel-pinkness and sweet-spicy smell of those "lucent syrops" (or clear, luminous syrups) "tinct with cinnamon"; the warm flavor of those "spiced dainties." Even the ears get a treat in the voluptuous sibilance and consonance of "silken Samarcand" and "cedar'd Lebanon."

Everything that Porphyro lays out is a "daint[y]," an elegant little treat. There's no hearty bread and soup here: this banquet is all

dessert. And these aren't just desserts, but *exotic* desserts: they've been transported "in argosy," in sailing ships, from far-off Fez (in Morocco), Samarcand (an ancient city in Uzbekistan), and Lebanon.

In laying out these rare delicacies for Madeline, Porphyro is inviting her to join him not in nourishment, but in pure pleasure. That these pleasures often come from distant lands also hints that he's asking her to join him somewhere new and foreign. This banquet is a symbolic invitation to the land of sensual delight.

LINES 271-279

These delicates he heap'd with glowing hand
On golden dishes and in baskets bright
Of wreathed silver: sumptuous they stand
In the retired quiet of the night,
Filling the chilly room with perfume light.—
"And now, my love, my seraph fair, awake!
Thou art my heaven, and I thine eremite:
Open thine eyes, for meek St. Agnes' sake,
Or I shall drowse beside thee, so my soul doth ache."

Porphyro's completed banquet is a gorgeous sight. Laid out in fine dishes of gold and silver, the "dainties" stand gleaming, "sumptuous" in the "quiet of the night." They transform the "chilly room," filling it with "perfume light."

That image appeals both to the nose and, in a subtle moment of synesthesia, the eye: it's as if that "perfume" is not just light in the sense of "delicate" but light in the sense of "luminous." The feast of pleasure seems to glow—and so does Porphyro, whose "glowing hand" shines with passion, excitement, and nervousness.

With everything ready, Porphyro turns to Madeline at last. He addresses her in the grand old style of courtly love: a medieval tradition in which a knight would swear a pure, chaste devotion to a beloved lady. He'd do battle for her, protect her, and worship her—but never touch her. Porphyro's address to Madeline here is cast in just such refined and spiritual terms:

> "And now, my love, my seraph fair, awake!
> Thou art my heaven, and I thine eremite:

In this metaphor, Porphryo is an "eremite," or a hermit, a solitary holy man dedicated fully to worshiping his "seraph" (or angel), Madeline—who is "heaven" itself to him. If she doesn't awake, he whispers, he'll "drowse" beside her. By this he doesn't mean that he'll also fall asleep, but that he'll actually die of love: his heart "ache[s]" so much that it might kill him as he sits at her bedside.

Perhaps that image of a holy, solitary "eremite" on the verge of death might take readers back to the Beadsman—a figure who feels a little incongruous in this passionate bedroom. But religious passion and sexual passion, this image suggests, might have more than a little in common.

LINES 280-288

Thus whispering, his warm, unnerved arm
Sank in her pillow. Shaded was her dream
By the dusk curtains:—'twas a midnight charm
Impossible to melt as iced stream:
The lustrous salvers in the moonlight gleam;
Broad golden fringe upon the carpet lies:
It seem'd he never, never could redeem
From such a stedfast spell his lady's eyes;
So mus'd awhile, entoil'd in woofed phantasies.

Porphyro leans over Madeline's pillow, pleading with her to wake up: but here, he encounters a wrinkle in his plan. Madeline's sleep is so deep and mysterious that she seems to be under a "charm," a spell that's as "impossible to melt as iced stream" (or a frozen river).

Here, the poem, like Porphyro, pauses and looks around, stymied:

> The lustrous salvers in the moonlight gleam;
> Broad golden fringe upon the carpet lies:

From Madeline in the "iced stream" of her sleep, Porphyro looks at other things that are holding perfectly still: the "lustrous" dishes in which he's prepared his feast, and the "broad golden fringe" of the carpet. Like Madeline, these things are rich and beautiful sights; like Madeline, they're motionless. The whole room seems to be caught up in Madeline's enchantment.

It seems that Madeline's St. Agnes ritual has really worked! This stanza insists that her sleep is truly enchanted: it's a "stedfast spell" and a "midnight charm," and it holds not just Madeline but the world around her.

Even Porphyro, so urgent he was "glowing" in the previous stanza, gets lost in this magical spell. At the end of this passage, he's "entoil'd in woofed phantasies"—in other words, entrapped or entangled in woven visions. (This metaphor might remind readers of that "deep-damask'd" tiger moth back in line 213. Madeline's spell, like those wings, is tightly-woven.)

Back in line 234, the poem suggested that dreams and fantasies are fragile and fleeting. Then, Madeline didn't dare to breathe a word or turn around in case "all the charm" of her spell flew away. But this stanza suggests that dreams have a real-world power, too. Porphyro and Madeline are both *spellbound* here, deep in the hold of an enchantment that seems to freeze time.

LINES 289-297

Awakening up, he took her hollow lute,—
Tumultuous,—and, in chords that tenderest be,
He play'd an ancient ditty, long since mute,
In Provence call'd, "La belle dame sans mercy":

Close to her ear touching the melody;—
Wherewith disturb'd, she utter'd a soft moan:
He ceas'd—she panted quick—and suddenly
Her blue affrayed eyes wide open shone:
Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured stone.

At last, something changes in Porphyro. He "awaken[s]" from the "woofed phantasies" he's been tangled up in, gets up, and grabs Madeline's lute (a guitar-like instrument). If Madeline won't wake up at his whisper, maybe she'll wake up to the sound of music. He plays her an old, old song, a French Provencal troubadour ballad called "La belle dame sans mercy"—which translates to "the beautiful lady without pity."

A moment ago, the whole room was frozen: Madeline's sleep was like an "iced stream" and everything from the dishes to the carpet seemed to be holding its breath. Now, as Porphyro plays, movement and sound returns. He becomes "tumultuous," full of energetic motion and feeling.

Music, the thing that brings the room back to life, is an art form that, like poetry, is based on *time*. Both music and poetry *use* time, in the sense of meter and rhythm, to produce their effects—and both music and poetry are *limited* in time in a way that visual art forms like painting and sculpture aren't. In other words, while it's possible to stare at a painting for as much or as little time as one wants, a song only lasts as long as it lasts.

By playing music, Porphryo startles Madeline out of a frozen kind of suspension and back into time. That's a wonderful thing, of course: it's only in time that lovers can do things like, for instance, kiss (as Keats reflects in another poem from this period, "Ode on a Grecian Urn"). But time is also tragic. As the poem has already made very clear through Angela and the Beadsman, time's passage ultimately leads to only one place: death. Porphyro's song might be beautiful, but it's also going to end eventually—just like the lovers' beautiful night together, and just like their lives.

The poem asks readers to think about death yet again even as Porphyro plays. The song he chooses, "La belle dame sans mercy," is "an ancient ditty, long since mute": in other words, it's a song that's been lost since Porphyro played it, and no one knows how it goes now. (Readers might be interested to know, though, that Keats wrote a poem of that very name not long after he finished "The Eve of St. Agnes"—and it's also about the allurements and dangers of sexual passion.)

Bringing Madeline back to life, that is, also means bringing her back to a world of mortality: a place where time passes, songs are lost, and people die. And when Madeline at last wakes up, she doesn't seem all too happy about that. Her eyes are "affrayed," frightened. And Porphyro, for his part, goes "pale as smooth-sculptured stone." In other words, he looks a lot like those "sculptur'd dead" in their tombs back at the beginning of the poem.

Embracing life, this moment suggests, means embracing *time*, too. If one wants to enjoy the music, if one wants to kiss, one is going to have to accept that music and kisses both pass. Life itself might be read as a "beautiful lady without pity."

LINES 298-306

Her eyes were open, but she still beheld,
Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep:
There was a painful change, that nigh expell'd
The blisses of her dream so pure and deep
At which fair Madeline began to weep,
And moan forth witless words with many a sigh;
While still her gaze on Porphyro would keep;
Who knelt, with joined hands and piteous eye,
Fearing to move or speak, she look'd so dreamingly.

Madeline awakens to find the literal man of her dreams sitting at her bedside. One might expect this to be a satisfying moment. But for Madeline, this isn't a fulfillment of her dream, but a "painful change"—one that almost "expell[s]" the glory of her recent dream. She doesn't embrace Porphyro, but babbles "witless words" and cries, staring at him.

Take a look at the way the speaker uses assonance to evoke Madeline's emotions here:

Her eyes were open, but she still beheld,
Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep:
There was a painful change, that nigh expell'd
The blisses of her dream so pure and deep

Here, long /i/ and /ay/ sounds are like wailing cries—in sharp contrast with the deep /ee/ sounds of the lost dream.

Madeline has just emerged from a place of profound, private, eternal-feeling beauty into the real world—and she reenters with a bump. As she cries and babbles, she stares at Porphyro, who kneels at her bedside as if he's praying, with "joined hands and piteous eye." One has to feel for the guy: this is likely not the reaction he was expecting. And while Madeline is awake now, she also still looks "dreamingly," as if she's caught up in a whole new kind of vision.

LINES 307-315

"Ah, Porphyro!" said she, "but even now
Thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear,
Made tuneable with every sweetest vow;
And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear:
How chang'd thou art! how pallid, chill, and drear!
Give me that voice again, my Porphyro,
Those looks immortal, those complainings dear!
Oh leave me not in this eternal woe,
For if thou diest, my Love, I know not where to go."

Weeping and shaking, Madeline explains herself. While she was asleep, she says, Porphyro appeared to her as the very vision of love: with "looks immortal" and "spiritual" eyes, the dream-

Porphyro might have been a deathless god. But as she looks on him now, he's terribly "chang'd": he's "pallid, chill, and drear," or pale, cold, and dismal-looking. The corpse-like looks of the living Porphyro reminds Madeline that her beloved will inevitably die—and if he dies, she'll "know not where to go," feeling eternally lost.

This stanza doubles down on the difference between the dream-Porphyro and real-life-Porphyro. Take a look at the way Madeline's speech uses repetition for emphasis here:

> "Ah, Porphyro!" said she, "but even now
> Thy voice was at **sweet** tremble in mine ear,
> Made tuneable with every **sweetest** vow;

Filtered through Madeline's dream, Porphyro's voice wasn't just "sweet," but the "sweetest," an absolute taste of heaven. And part of that heaven was the feeling that it would last forever: the dream-Porphyro's "looks immortal" promised an eternity of bliss.

Awake, Madeline feels that she'll be lost in "eternal woe" instead. And Porphyro doesn't seem to feel all that much better: his "sad eyes" speak of his own sense of loss at Madeline's waking world.

This is a poignant and serious moment, but also a gently funny one. The difference between an idealized lover and the real person is an old and familiar source of pain. Madeline's agony here isn't just over the fact that her beloved will one day die, but over the fact that he's not a god, but a man.

The transition between an ideal world of dreams and the disappointing waking world isn't without its consolations, however. And when Madeline calls Porphyro "my Love" in line 315, she opens the door to an embrace of real life and real love, in all their pain and pleasure.

LINES 316-324

> *Beyond a mortal man impassion'd far*
> *At these voluptuous accents, he arose*
> *Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star*
> *Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose;*
> *Into her dream he melted, as the rose*
> *Blendeth its odour with the violet,—*
> *Solution sweet: meantime the frost-wind blows*
> *Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet*
> *Against the window-panes; St. Agnes' moon hath set.*

As Madeline laments over the real, live Porphyro's mortality, Porphyro isn't crestfallen. Instead, he's "flush'd" with love to the point that, paradoxically, he becomes "beyond a mortal man impassion'd far." Strangely, Madeline's horror over the thought of his eventual death brings the two of them to a moment that's as close to heavenly immortality as humans can get on earth.

Intense similes invite the reader to immerse themselves in this moment of passion, too:

> [...] he arose
> Ethereal, flush'd, and **like a throbbing star**
> Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose;

Porphyro becomes "like a throbbing star," a concentrated pinpoint of intense and pulsating light. That "throbbing" (aside from suggesting the pulse of Porphyro's impassioned blood) might also remind readers of the music he played to wake Madeline: the two of them are sharing the steady, musical beat of time again.

And at last, he transforms from a star into something even more "ethereal." In a vivid blend of metaphor and simile, he *melts* and becomes not a substance, but a *smell*:

> Into her dream **he melted, as the rose**
> **Blendeth its odour with the violet,**—
> Solution sweet:

In this intense moment, Porphyro and Madeline embrace, and they're lifted above cold, mortal reality. Porphyro's body, which only a few lines ago was chilly and deathly as "smooth-sculptur'd stone," *melts*, becoming as smooth and fragrant as the banquet foods he laid out for Madeline. The two seem to dissolve into each other. United *in* Madeline's "dream," they become a new "solution" together, like the mingled smell of violets and roses. They're transcendently at one in bliss, just for a moment, in spite of all the sorrow and tragedy of the real world around them.

The speaker's use of flowers here points readers back to the poem's poignant fascination with transience. Flowers are traditional symbols both of sexual beauty and of its brevity: as Shakespeare's Count Orsino once put it, young women are "as roses, whose fair flower / Being once displayed, doth fall that very hour." The lovers' embrace is just as delicious and just as temporary as spring flowers.

But this blissful, poignant embrace is a "solution sweet," not just in the sense of a sweet combination, but in the sense of a sweet *answer*. Life might be disappointing, pleasure and romance and youth might be brief—but for a second, in the transcendent fusion of love, Porphyro and Madeline touch an immortal bliss. Those moments make life worth living in spite of all its pains.

It's only a moment, though. "Meantime," as the speaker reminds readers, "the frost-wind blows," and "St. Agnes' moon hath set." Winter is all around the flowery summer of Porphyro and Madeline's love, and time is moving along.

LINES 325-333

> *'Tis dark: quick pattereth the flaw-blown sleet:*
> *"This is no dream, my bride, my Madeline!"*
> *'Tis dark: the iced gusts still rave and beat:*

"No dream, alas! alas! and woe is mine!
Porphyro will leave me here to fade and pine.—
Cruel! what traitor could thee hither bring?
I curse not, for my heart is lost in thine,
Though thou forsakest a deceived thing;—
A dove forlorn and lost with sick unpruned wing."

The "solution sweet" of Madeline and Porphyro's embrace is over almost as soon as it begins. Outside, a winter storm is raging, and Madeline is already lamenting the loss of her love.

Listen to how the poem uses anaphora and parallelism here to evoke the dark tension of this moment:

'Tis dark: quick pattereth the flaw-blown sleet:
"This is no dream, my bride, my Madeline!"
'Tis dark: the iced gusts still rave and beat:
"No dream, alas! alas! and woe is mine!

As Porphyro and Madeline talk, the darkness and the storm-blown ice and snow, "rav[ing]" like a madman, rattle the windows over and over. It's as if cold reality is trying its best to get in.

Porphyro, for his part, is still feeling pretty pleased with how things have gone, rejoicing, "This is no dream." But Madeline is starting to see things another way.

Here, the poem shows a sympathy with Madeline's position that perhaps the reader has been waiting for. After all, no matter how much Madeline might have wanted to dream of Porphyro, it's another matter to wake up and find he's been hiding in her room this whole time. During both the time period when this poem is set *and* the time period when Keats was writing, women were absolutely not supposed to have *any* sexual contact with men before they were married—and faced poverty, shame, and exile if they did. Here, Madeline fears that Porphyro has used her, and will certainly abandon her like a "traitor."

But her love for him is so powerful that she can't stay mad: "I curse not," she tells him, "for my heart is lost in thine." That metaphor hearkens back to the "solution sweet" in the previous stanza: the couple's love for each other makes them feel blended, unified. Yet here, Madeline's heart is also "lost," wandering and confused. In a telling moment of diacope, she even repeats the word a few lines later:

I curse not, for my heart is lost in thine,
Though thou forsakest a deceived thing;—
A dove forlorn and lost with sick unpruned wing."

Lost in Porphyro's heart, she predicts feeling even more lost when he leaves her: she'll be like a dove with a broken wing. But Porphyro is about to try his best to put all these extremely reasonable fears to rest.

LINES 334-342

"My Madeline! sweet dreamer! lovely bride!
Say, may I be for aye thy vassal blest?
Thy beauty's shield, heart-shap'd and vermeil dyed?
Ah, silver shrine, here will I take my rest
After so many hours of toil and quest,
A famish'd pilgrim,—saved by miracle.
Though I have found, I will not rob thy nest
Saving of thy sweet self; if thou think'st well
To trust, fair Madeline, to no rude infidel.

Hearing Madeline's fears of abandonment and shame, Porphyro plunges straight ahead, offering not just to marry her, but to be a perfect chivalrous knight to her. Again, he draws on the tradition of courtly love in this passage, using a series of metaphors that present him as a holy warrior, dedicated to protecting Madeline's sacred beauty:

Thy beauty's shield, heart-shap'd and vermeil dyed?
Ah, silver shrine, here will I take my rest
After so many hours of toil and quest,
A famish'd pilgrim,—saved by miracle.

Porphyro imagines himself here as a "shield" in the shape of a big red heart. This moment hearkens back to the vision of the stained-glass window, with its "heraldries" and "emblazonings." Porphyro is thinking in poetic and romantic terms, seeing himself as an idealized "shield" straight out of an Arthurian legend (or, indeed, straight out of that window—the "shielded scutcheon blushed with blood" sounds a lot like the "heart-shaped and vermeil-dyed" shield here).

He also sees Madeline as a "silver shrine," a holy place where he, "a famish'd pilgrim" or religious traveler, can rest and be restored. This is also a highly idealized vision of Madeline's beauty—but it's one that suggests their love is reciprocal. Porphyro will protect Madeline, and Madeline will restore Porphyro.

If all of this seems a little elevated, well, perhaps Madeline thinks so too—for at the end of this stanza, Porphyro tries to reassure her in more direct terms:

Though I have found, I will not rob thy nest
Saving of thy sweet self; if thou think'st well
To trust, fair Madeline, to no rude infidel.

The metaphor here speaks directly to Madeline's earlier fear of being abandoned like "a dove forlorn and lost." If you're a dove, Porphyro seems to say, don't worry, I won't "rob thy nest." He rather undercuts that promise with the words "saving of thy sweet self," though: essentially, he's saying, "I won't steal anything from you—except you yourself!"

But he promises, here, that he won't steal Madeline away

without her consent. He's asking her to trust him, believing that he's no "infidel": in other words, he'll be faithful to her, and to the almost religious passion he feels for her.

LINES 343-351

"Hark! 'tis an elfin-storm from faery land,
Of haggard seeming, but a boon indeed:
Arise—arise! the morning is at hand;—
The bloated wassaillers will never heed:—
Let us away, my love, with happy speed;
There are no ears to hear, or eyes to see,—
Drown'd all in Rhenish and the sleepy mead:
Awake! arise! my love, and fearless be,
For o'er the southern moors I have a home for thee."

Porphyro goes on, asking Madeline to listen to the "elfin-storm from faery land" that blows outside. Throughout this poem, the storm has been a symbol of harsh, chilly reality. Now, Porphyro transforms it from a thing of "haggard seeming" (or dreadful looks) to "a boon indeed," a true blessing. As an "elfin-storm," it becomes something like the world of dreams and spells, a part of the night's fantasies.

It's a "boon" because it will cover the young lovers' tracks. Porphyro proposes that he and Madeline tiptoe out of the castle together "with happy speed," creeping past the drunken partiers. By now, he says, everyone will be asleep, "drown'd" in "Rhenish" (fancy German wine) and "sleepy mead" (soporific honey-beer). Under the cover of the guests' sleep and the noise of the storm, the lovers can creep out "o'er the southern moors" and make a "home" together.

While readers don't get a direct look at Madeline in this moment, they can infer that this plan might sound a little dangerous to her. Porphyro has to repeat his urging a couple of times: "Arise—arise!" he says in line 345, and "Awake! arise!" he says again in line 350. If Madeline doesn't hop right out of bed and get dressed, maybe it's because this is a dangerous plan. Even if the storm is a "boon indeed," the lovers will have to confront its "haggard seeming" in order to escape.

Ever since Madeline woke up, readers might have observed that she and Porphyro are interpreting things differently. Madeline cries and thinks of death; Porphyro speaks in romantic terms of "silver shrine[s]" and "miracle[s]." But the two are also united in a "solution sweet" through their passion for each other, and their hearts are "lost" in each other's. Their love doesn't just unite two people, but two perspectives on the world. As Porphyro coaxes Madeline to leave, he's also arguing for the redemptive power of dreams and love, even in a harsh reality. Perhaps the two really can "escape" through their love.

LINES 352-360

She hurried at his words, beset with fears,
For there were sleeping dragons all around,
At glaring watch, perhaps, with ready spears—
Down the wide stairs a darkling way they found.—
In all the house was heard no human sound.
A chain-droop'd lamp was flickering by each door;
The arras, rich with horseman, hawk, and hound,
Flutter'd in the besieging wind's uproar;
And the long carpets rose along the gusty floor.

At last, Porphyro persuades Madeline to run away with him, and she hurries out of bed in spite of being "beset with fears"—and understandably so. The metaphorical "sleeping dragons" who are her bloodthirsty relatives are "all around," and perhaps they're watching.

But none appear. The poem evokes the tense, trembling darkness and silence of the midnight house through rich imagery and alliteration:

> In all the house was heard no human sound.
> A chain-droop'd lamp was flickering by each door;
> The arras, rich with horseman, hawk, and hound,
> Flutter'd in the besieging wind's uproar;
> And the long carpets rose along the gusty floor.

The /h/ sound that repeats through these lines is like the low gusts of wind that wander through the drafty castle, making the carpets ripple and the "arras" (or tapestry) flutter. And the repeating /fl/ sound in "flickering," "flutter," and "floor" sounds just like the flap of flame and cloth those words relate to. Like Madeline and Porphyro, the reader hears "no human sound": only the quiet, uneasy movements of the wind.

For the last 17 stanzas, the poem has been deeply immersed in the dream-world of Madeline's bedroom. Now, the speaker takes readers back out into the medieval castle where the poem began. Madeline's and Porphyro's bedroom encounter has an enchanted, timeless quality that lifted them out of the normal passage of time: their embrace made them briefly "immortal." Now they're right back in a historical context, a world of flickering oil lamps and tapestries depicting hunting scenes.

All this imagery reminds readers that this poem takes place in a distant and even legendary past—a time and place that are long gone. Even as the lovers escape in search of a blissful "home," mortality creeps back into the picture.

(This might also be a good moment to note that Porphyro and Madeline flee without ever tasting Porphyro's lavish banquet—which, for all readers know, just stands there gleaming forever, an image of the joys, not of sensual fulfillment, but of sensual anticipation.)

LINES 361-369

They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall;
Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide;
Where lay the Porter, in uneasy sprawl,
With a huge empty flaggon by his side:

The wakeful bloodhound rose, and shook his hide,
But his sagacious eye an inmate owns:
By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide:—
The chains lie silent on the footworn stones;—
The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans.

The previous stanza returned Madeline and Porphyro to a distinct setting, a medieval world. Now, the speaker reminds readers that that world is long gone with an insistent simile:

They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall;
Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide;

Of course, Madeline and Porphyro aren't just *like* phantoms. They *are* phantoms: both spirits from a ghostly and distant past, and inventions, mere "shadows," just like the party guests back in line 39. As the poem comes to its close, it leaves its intense sensory immersion in Madeline and Porphyro's experience and starts to see them as what they are: fleeting dreams.

That dreaminess is also *literary*. As Madeline and Porphyro tiptoe out of the castle, they must make their way past a drunken Porter (or doorkeeper) who might remind readers of a similar drunken Porter in *Macbeth*. In *Macbeth*, the Porter in charge of Macbeth's bloody castle jokes about being in charge of the gates of Hell. Here, it seems, the lovers might be trying to *escape* a similarly murderous world of politics and warring bloodlines. This subtle allusion reminds readers that Madeline and Porphyro belong to the same world as the Porter does in another way: that is, they're all people from the world of fiction.

But even as the speaker hints, "this is all a made-up story," readers are immersed in that story anew. The poem comes back into the present tense as it tracks Madeline and Porphyro's escape step by step: the door's "bolts" slide "by one, and one," "the key turns," and the "hinges groan[]." There's even another touch of grounded comedy here as the guard dog, "the wakeful bloodhound," gets to its feet and "[shakes] his hide"; readers can almost hear the *whap-whap-whap* of floppy ears as the dog shakes, and see its "sagacious" (that is, wise or discerning) expression as it recognizes Madeline and lets her pass. All this physical, moment-by-moment action turns up the tension: will Madeline and Porphyro escape?

At once insisting that this is all a fantasy and making that fantasy feel real, lived, and tangible, the speaker paints one last flourish on this tale of dreams. This might be a fantasy, the speaker seems to say, but fantasy can be so real and powerful you can almost taste it.

LINES 370-378

And they are gone: ay, ages long ago
These lovers fled away into the storm.
That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,
And all his warrior-guests, with shade and form
Of witch, and demon, and large coffin-worm,
Were long be-nightmar'd. Angela the old
Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform;
The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,
For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold.

The very last stanza of "The Eve of St. Agnes" brings all the poem's pleasures and pains to a head. Porphyro and Madeline escape into the storm, leaving behind them a castle full of old people crawling toward undignified and nightmarish deaths.

Look what the speaker does with tense here:

And they are gone: ay, ages long ago
These lovers fled away into the storm.

Over the course of one sentence, the poem flips from the present tense to the past again, and Madeline and Porphyro are lost in the storms of time. They truly "are gone": this is the last readers see of them. The poem doesn't end on their love or their triumph, but turns abruptly to visions of horror.

Madeline isn't the only person in this castle who has a powerful dream this evening. The "Baron" (presumably her father) "and all his warrior-guests" have hideous nightmares of "witch, and demon, and large-coffin-worm." (Notice the ugliness of the simple adjective "large" there: the speaker could have called it a slimy or writhing or hungry coffin-worm, but he doesn't. The simplicity of "large" shrewdly leaves a lot of the horror to the reader's imagination.) And Angela and the Beadsman both unceremoniously die.

The speaker lingers on the nastiness of their deaths with grim relish. Poor old Angela doesn't just pass away: she dies "palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform," misshapen and convulsing. The Beadsman, meanwhile, who has spent his life praying a "thousand aves" (or Hail Marys) for the family in the castle, dies utterly alone, "aye unsought for" in the ashes of a dead fire.

Many of Keats's first readers did not like this ending at all, and encouraged him to revise it. But Keats stuck to his guns. The poem returns, at the end, not just to the inevitability of death, but to the pain, suffering, and loneliness of the elderly dead. This is the "bitter chill" of reality that's been pressing in around the young lovers this whole time. Even if Porphyro and Madeline are lucky enough to live as long as the Beadsman and Angela, their passionate metaphorical "fires" will go out, and they'll be left dead in the ashes, too.

But there's still strange passion and strange joy in these lines. The intense horror of these deaths makes Porphyro's and Madeline's transformative "solution sweet" feel even more urgent and beautiful. And if the reader remembers how much this poem resembles *Romeo and Juliet* in its shape, characterization, and plot, they might see even more reason for a curious optimism here. After all, in that play, it's the young lovers who find themselves food for coffin-worms. Madeline and Porphyro escape that fate. And while their love can't defeat

death forever, it can bring them a taste of "immortal" bliss while they live.

Love, poetry, and dreams, this poem suggests, have a great deal in common. All are fleeting; all are delicious; all are deceptive; all speak to a different kind of reality than that of the everyday world. And all have the power to transform time, making the hours not just a grim march to the grave, but a music one can dance to.

SYMBOLS

STATUES AND CARVINGS

The statues and carvings in "The Eve of St. Agnes" symbolize two things at once: the chilly inevitability of death, and the immortalizing power of art.

Statues first appear in the freezing chapel where the Beadsman sits praying. These aren't just any statues, but carved medieval tombs meant to physically represent their dead inhabitants. The Beadsman doesn't think even of them as statues, but as "Knights" and "ladies," silently praying in their "orat'ries" (or side chapels) just like he is. These statues have an obvious connection to death, but they also remind readers that these knights and ladies were once like the living party guests who are about to begin their dance inside the castle. These earlier generations are long gone now, but through the power of art, they're also still present.

Statues don't just have the power to keep the dead around, but also to bring impossible beings to life. The "carved angels" in lines 34-36, for example, keep an eternal watch over the goings-on below, and their perpetual "Star[e]" suggests that art has possibilities beyond the human. These angels—like art itself—are both fantastical and immortal.

Later in the poem, when Porphyro sinks to his knees "pale as smooth-sculptured stone" at the sight of Madeline's opening eyes, both of those earlier stony possibilities come together. When Madeline sees her pale lover, she weeps, imagining him dead as those stony tombs. But if he's a "smooth-sculptured stone," he's also an image of a lover who *won't* fade and die.

Stone here thus suggests both the inevitability of death and the way that art can stand up against that inevitability.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-18:** " The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze, / Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails: / Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat'ries, / He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails / To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails."
- **Lines 34-36:** " The carved angels, ever eager-eyed, / Star'd, where upon their heads the cornice rests, / With hair blown back, and wings put cross-wise on their breasts."
- **Line 297:** "Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured stone."

PORPHYRO'S FEAST

The lavish feast that Porphyro piles up at Madeline's bedside (lines 264-270) is a symbol of sensual pleasure and sexuality.

All of the foods that Porphyro lays out are sweet, rich, scented, and exotic. Everything is "sooth[]" (or smooth) and "creamy," "candied" and "spiced." This banquet appeals to every sense, up to and including hearing: just listen to the relish of sound in the words "From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon." There's nothing on this table but treats, "dainties"; no hearty soup or wholesome bread, just delectable luxuries.In setting this banquet up, Porphyro isn't merely inviting Madeline to have a nice midnight snack, but to revel in pleasure with him, immersing herself in the world of the senses.

Funnily enough, though, the pair never actually taste this sumptuous spread: it just stands there gleaming, an image of anticipated and imagined delights. Perhaps, this image suggests, anticipation is its own kind of delicious pleasure.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 264-270:** " While he forth from the closet brought a heap / Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd; / With jellies soother than the creamy curd, / And lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon; / Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd / From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one, / From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon."

WARMTH AND COLD

The poem's contrasts between delectable warmth and wintry chill symbolize the contrasts between life and death, pleasure and pain, and youth and old age.

All through the poem, the speaker insists on the "bitter chill" that surrounds Madeline and Porphyro's "heart[s] on fire." And that chill is often associated with the elderly and the dead: the "icy hoods and mails" of the people carved on the stone tombs, the "ashes cold" in which the Beadsman dies. In the midst of all this cold death, Porphyro and Madeline are "flush'd"; Madeline wears jewels "warmed" by her skin, and Porphyro's "warm unnerved arm" sinks into her pillow as he leans over to wake her. Their youthful passion is like a fire blazing away in midwinter. The juxtaposition of warm and cold imagery suggests that the fires of passionate youth go out eventually—and that this is all the more reason to enjoy them

while they last.

But there's also some deeper complexity in the symbolism here. Madeline's St. Agnes spell is called "these enchantments cold," and her magical sleep is "Impossible to melt as iced stream." The dream-ritual is as cold as those stony tombs in the chapel. Perhaps, this symbolism suggests, embracing old tradition is one way of reconciling brief warm youth with inevitable chilly death. The poem's love of "old romance" is itself a way of marrying warm life and cold death: after all, romance is all about the beauty of a world that's long gone.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-6:** "St. Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was! / The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold; / The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass, / And silent was the flock in woolly fold: / Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told / His rosary, and while his frosted breath,"
- **Lines 14-18:** " The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze, / Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails: / Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat'ries, / He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails / To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails."
- **Lines 25-27:** "soon among / Rough ashes sat he for his soul's reprieve, / And all night kept awake, for sinners' sake to grieve."
- **Lines 32-33:** " The level chambers, ready with their pride, / Were glowing to receive a thousand guests:"
- **Line 61:** "not cool'd by high disdain;"
- **Lines 74-76:** "Meantime, across the moors, / Had come young Porphyro, with heart on fire / For Madeline."
- **Line 84:** "Love's fev'rous citadel:"
- **Line 86:** "hot-blooded lords,"
- **Lines 112-113:** " He found him in a little moonlight room, / Pale, lattic'd, chill, and silent as a tomb."
- **Line 134:** "those enchantments cold,"
- **Line 137:** " Flushing his brow,"
- **Lines 217-222:** " Full on this casement shone the wintry moon, / And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast, / As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon; / Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest, / And on her silver cross soft amethyst, / And on her hair a glory, like a saint:"
- **Line 228:** " Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;"
- **Lines 237-238:** " Until the poppied warmth of sleep oppress'd / Her soothed limbs, and soul fatigued away;"
- **Line 271:** "glowing hand"
- **Line 275:** " Filling the chilly room with perfume light.—"
- **Line 280:** " Thus whispering, his warm, unnerved arm"
- **Lines 282-283:** "'twas a midnight charm / Impossible to melt as iced stream:"
- **Line 311:** " How chang'd thou art! how pallid, chill, and drear!"
- **Line 318:** " Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star"
- **Lines 322-324:** "meantime the frost-wind blows / Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet / Against the window-panes; St. Agnes' moon hath set."
- **Line 325:** " 'Tis dark: quick pattereth the flaw-blown sleet:"
- **Line 327:** " 'Tis dark: the iced gusts still rave and beat:"
- **Lines 358-360:** " The arras, rich with horseman, hawk, and hound, / Flutter'd in the besieging wind's uproar; / And the long carpets rose along the gusty floor."
- **Lines 377-378:** " The Beadsman, after thousand aves told, / For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold."

THE STAINED GLASS WINDOW

In a clever twist, the stained glass window in Madeline's bedroom becomes a symbol for "The Eve of St. Agnes" itself—and for poetry in general. Windows were one of Keats's favorite symbols for the transporting power of art (see the "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode to Psyche" for two more good examples) and this one plays just that role here.

The speaker spends a whole stanza just looking at this window. Its stone frame is decorated with "fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass"; its panes, colored with "splendid dyes," represent "heraldries" (or family crests), "saints," and "a shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings" (or a heraldic shield depicting a noble family's symbols).

In other words, this window represents the very world the poem takes place in. All of these images turn up elsewhere in the poem: the "saints" echo St. Agnes herself, the "heraldries" Madeline's noble and warlike family, and the "fruits" and "flowers" the sensual pleasures of Porphyro's feast (and by symbolic extension, the joys of sexuality). This window thus becomes a symbol of the poem itself: a gorgeous work of art representing romantic medieval themes.

And all of these images are in a *window*: that is, a thing that you can both *see* and *see through*, just like this poem. For instance, when one studies how the poem's sound and shape work, one is looking *at* the "window"; when one envisions, say, Madeline and Porphyro's embrace, one is looking *through* the "window."

Poetry, this symbolic window suggests, has the power both to communicate beautiful images and to *preserve* them. Unlike human flesh, art doesn't die. Glass (and poetry!) don't last forever, but they last a lot longer than mortal bodies can.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 208-216:** " A casement high and triple-arch'd there was, / All garlanded with carven imag'ries /

Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass, /
And diamonded with panes of quaint device, /
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes, / As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings; / And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries, / And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings, / A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings."

- **Lines 217-225:** " Full on this casement shone the wintry moon, / And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast, / As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon; / Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest, / And on her silver cross soft amethyst, / And on her hair a glory, like a saint: / She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest, / Save wings, for heaven:—Porphyro grew faint: / She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"The Eve of St. Agnes" uses subtle alliteration to evoke the characters' passionate emotions and the castle's dangerous, magical atmosphere. One characteristic alliterative passage turns up in lines 136-139:

> Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose,
> Flushing his brow, and in his pained heart
> Made purple riot: then doth he propose
> A stratagem, that makes the beldame start:

In this important moment, Porphyro has the sudden idea to make Madeline's St. Agnes dream come true by hiding in her bedroom. But the reader doesn't learn exactly what this scheme is until the next stanza. The strong alliteration here draws attention to the mystery. It also mirrors the speed of Porphyro's brainwave: the repetition of /f/ and /b/ sounds here makes the "full-blown rose" speed right into the "Flushing" (or blushing) of Porphyro's "brow" as fast as the blood rushes to his face. And the repeated plosive /p/ sounds in "pained," "purple," and "propose" (strengthened even more by all that internal /p/ consonance) sounds just like what they describe: Porphyro's heart pounding as he tells Angela his scheme. (Angela's displeasure at this idea might be reflected in the sharp hiss of /s/ sounds in "stratagem" and "start.")

Later, when Porphyro goes through with his scheme and peeps at Madeline as she prays in front of her stained-glass window, sibilant alliteration (and consonance) reflects the hushed mystery of the scene:

> And on her silver cross soft amethyst,
> And on her hair a glory, like a saint:
> She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest,
> Save wings, for heaven:

Here, quiet /s/ sounds suggest the stillness of the scene—and remind readers how quiet Porphyro has to stay in Madeline's closet to avoid getting caught!

Across the poem, then, alliteration helps to evoke the characters' intense emotions and to create a mysterious, enchanted atmosphere. We've highlighted a few notable selections here—there's much more to find!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "for," "feathers"
- **Line 3:** "frozen"
- **Line 4:** "flock," "fold"
- **Line 5:** "fingers"
- **Line 6:** "frosted"
- **Line 30:** "Soon"
- **Line 31:** "silver," "snarling," "chide"
- **Line 32:** "chambers"
- **Line 33:** "glowing," "guests"
- **Line 36:** "blown," "back," "breasts"
- **Line 85:** "him," "held," "hordes"
- **Line 86:** "Hyena," "hot-blooded"
- **Line 87:** "howl"
- **Line 89:** "mercy," "mansion"
- **Line 90:** "beldame," "body"
- **Line 119:** "men," "murder"
- **Line 120:** "water," "witch's"
- **Line 121:** "liege-lord"
- **Line 126:** "let," "laugh"
- **Line 136:** "full-blown"
- **Line 137:** "Flushing," "brow," "pained"
- **Line 138:** "purple," "propose"
- **Line 139:** "stratagem," "start"
- **Line 221:** "silver," "soft"
- **Line 222:** "saint"
- **Line 223:** "She," "seem'd," "splendid"
- **Line 224:** "Save"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, strengthens and reflects the poem's imagery and emotion. In one memorable passage, the speaker describes the ornate stained-glass window in Madeline's bedroom:

> A casement high and triple-arch'd there was,
> All garlanded with carven imag'ries
> Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,
> And diamonded with panes of quaint device,
> Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
> As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;

Here, three vowel sounds weave in and out of each other. There are the /ah/ sounds of "arch'd," "garlanded" and "carven"; the /eye/ sounds of "diamonded," "device," "dyes," and "tiger-moth"; and the /ay/ of "panes," "quaint," and "stains." These patterned vowel sounds perfectly match the patterned colors of the stained glass they describe.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "bitter," "chill"
- **Line 6:** "while"
- **Line 7:** "pious," "incense," "censer"
- **Line 8:** "flight"
- **Line 10:** "saith," "patient"
- **Line 11:** "takes"
- **Line 14:** "each," "seem," "freeze"
- **Line 16:** "ladies," "praying"
- **Line 208:** "arch'd"
- **Line 209:** "garlanded," "carven"
- **Line 211:** "diamonded," "panes," "quaint," "device"
- **Line 212:** "stains," "dyes"
- **Line 213:** "tiger"

ALLUSION

"The Eve of St. Agnes" is a rich tapestry of allusion. In everything from its shape to its plot to its language, the poem pays tribute to the stories and writers who fired up Keats's imagination.

As we've mentioned elsewhere in this guide, one of the poem's biggest allusions is structural. Keats borrows his stanza form from the Renaissance poet Edmund Spenser. The Spenserian stanza, with its distinctive meter and rhyme scheme, gets readers into the mood for a medieval romance right off the bat. (Check out the Form, Rhyme Scheme, and Meter sections for an in-depth explanation of Spenserian stanzas.) Spenser used this stanza form to write one of Keats's favorite poems, *The Faerie Queene*, an allegorical tale of chivalry and magic. Keats pays tribute to that poem both by borrowing Spenser's structure and writing in the same romantic genre.

The other big allusion here is the poem's whole plot. A tale of two passionate young lovers from warring families, "The Eve of St. Agnes" bears a strong resemblance to *Romeo and Juliet*. Even some of the peripheral characters are the same: poor Angela, Madeline's feeble maidservant, parallels Juliet's Nurse, and the pious old Beadsman might bring Romeo's confidant Friar Lawrence to mind. And the chapel at the beginning of the poem, with its fearful, icy "sculptur'd dead," echoes the end of *Romeo and Juliet*, when the lovers die in Juliet's family tomb.

In a way, Keats uses "The Eve of St. Agnes" to rescue Romeo and Juliet from their terrible fate. Juliet wakes up to find Romeo dead; Madeline merely wakes up to find Porphyro mortal. And while there's plenty of danger and uncertainty around Porphyro and Madeline when they escape into the storm, they do escape. The poem is clear that death gets everyone in the end—but perhaps these two lovers will live to smooch another day, at least.

Keats also alludes to Shakespeare in more granular ways within the poem:

- His image of "faeries pac[ing] the coverlet" echoes the famous Queen Mab speech (also from *Romeo and Juliet*) in which the flamboyant Mercutio imagines the Queen of the Fairies riding over bed covers to deliver sinister dreams.
- The "elfin-storm from faery land" might equally nod to *The Tempest*, in which a magical storm begins a story of reconciliation, and *King Lear*, in which a terrible storm represents all the world's incomprehensible suffering.
- The power of music to wake enchanted sleepers comes from *The Winter's Tale*, in which a statue of a long-dead queen comes to life at the sound of music.
- The drunken Porter is straight out of *Macbeth*—in which a comical Porter delivers a darkly funny monologue right after the play's first murder.
- And, in a little twist of wit, the "cates and dainties" (or fine sweets and treats) that Angela provides for Porphyro's feast refer to *The Taming of the Shrew*, in which the mischievous Petruchio tries to woo the fiery Kate with a pun on her name, calling her "my super-dainty Kate—for dainties are all Kates."

Rounding things out are brief allusions to Arthurian legend (with the shout-out to Merlin's dangerous love for Vivien in line 171) and to Greek mythology (with the reference to Morpheus, god of dreams, in line 257). There's even a funny moment of anticipatory allusion when Keats mentions the French Provencal troubadour song "La belle dame sans mercy" (meaning something like "the beautiful lady without pity") in line 292: Keats would write a poem of the same name not long after he finished "The Eve of St. Agnes"!

And then there's the most obvious allusion of them all, to the Catholic folk tradition of the St. Agnes' Eve ritual—one that young women still sometimes perform.

All these allusions get at something important about the poem's spirit. This is a poem about the seductive beauty of the imagination—and the writers and stories Keats alludes to here are ones that deliciously fed his own dreams. His poem blends their influences together as Porphyro "melt[s]" into Madeline's dream, making a "Solution sweet."

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "St. Agnes' Eve"
- **Lines 5-6:** " Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while

he told / His rosary,"

- **Lines 14-18:** " The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze, / Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails: / Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat'ries, / He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails / To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails."
- **Lines 46-54:** " They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve, / Young virgins might have visions of delight, / And soft adorings from their loves receive / Upon the honey'd middle of the night, / If ceremonies due they did aright; / As, supperless to bed they must retire, / And couch supine their beauties, lily white; / Nor look behind, nor sideways, but require / Of Heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire."
- **Lines 82-88:** " He ventures in: let no buzz'd whisper tell: / All eyes be muffled, or a hundred swords / Will storm his heart, Love's fev'rous citadel: / For him, those chambers held barbarian hordes, / Hyena foemen, and hot-blooded lords, / Whose very dogs would execrations howl / Against his lineage:"
- **Lines 168-171:** " While legion'd faeries pac'd the coverlet, / And pale enchantment held her sleepy-ey'd. / Never on such a night have lovers met, / Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt."
- **Line 173:** "cates and dainties"
- **Line 257:** " O for some drowsy Morphean amulet!"
- **Lines 291-292:** " He play'd an ancient ditty, long since mute, / In Provence call'd, "La belle dame sans mercy":"
- **Lines 343-344:** " "Hark! 'tis an elfin-storm from faery land, / Of haggard seeming, but a boon indeed:"
- **Lines 363-364:** " Where lay the Porter, in uneasy sprawl, / With a huge empty flaggon by his side:"
- **Lines 370-371:** " And they are gone: ay, ages long ago / These lovers fled away into the storm."

CAESURA

Keats uses lavish amounts of caesura all through "The Eve of St. Agnes"—so much so, in fact, that we haven't highlighted it all here. Instead, we'll zoom in on how it works in lines 226-234, where there's a particularly good example of how mid-line pauses help to create rhythm, mood, and atmosphere.

In this passage, Porphyro watches, enchanted, as Madeline undresses. Take a look at the way caesurae shape the pace of lines 226-228:

> Anon his heart revives: || her vespers done,
> Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;
> Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;

Before this stanza, Porphyro has been watching Madeline pray, almost swooning at the sight of her —but the first caesura in this stanza, a dramatic colon, prepares readers for a new stage of his watching. Something big is about to happen, that strong pause suggests. And so it does: Madeline slowly begins to undress, step by step, and Porphyro gets sensuously lost in each moment.

At first, Madeline is just taking off her jewelry. But another big caesura comes after she "loosens her fragrant boddice"—that is, after she starts to take off her dress in line 229:

> Loosens her fragrant boddice; || by degrees
> Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:
> Half-hidden, || like a mermaid in sea-weed,

Porphyro is now looking at his beloved in only her underclothes, and the semicolon there suggests both the emotional punch of this moment for him and Madeline's halfway-through undressing. In line 231, a gentler comma does something similar, introducing a vivid simile of Madeline standing "like a mermaid in sea-weed" and making it seem as if Porphyro is marveling at the sight of her: half-undressed and dreaming, she hypnotizes him like a mythical creature. The caesurae here suggest how luxuriously slow these moments feel.

In general, then, caesura shapes the poem's pace to evoke what the poem describes. Different kinds of mid-line breaks here work a lot like musical notation, asking readers to speed up or slow down to match the action—and to savor what they see, just as Porphyro does.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 226:** "revives: her"
- **Line 229:** "boddice; by"
- **Line 231:** "Half-hidden, like"
- **Line 232:** "awake, and"
- **Line 233:** "fancy, fair"
- **Line 234:** "behind, or"

ENJAMBMENT

"The Eve of St. Agnes" uses enjambment to create momentum and surprise throughout. Since enjambment carries a thought from one line to the next, it can speed up a poem's pace. For instance, take a look at how enjambment gives Angela's indignant speech in lines 140-144 extra energy:

> "A cruel man and impious thou art:
> Sweet lady, let her pray, and sleep, and dream
> Alone with her good angels, far apart
> From wicked men like thee. Go, go!—I deem
> Thou canst not surely be the same that thou didst seem."

Here, enjambment makes it feel as if Angela is furiously scolding Porphyro, so appalled by his plan to creep into Madeline's bedroom that her words come out in a rush.

Enjambment can also trip readers up. Take a look at the enjambment that leads up to Porphyro's big idea in lines 133-134:

> [...] and he scarce could brook
> Tears, at the thought of those enchantments cold,

Here, the transition from "brook" to "Tears" feels off-kilter and unbalancing. The meter here demands a stress on "brook," so it collides with "Tears": "he scarce could brook / Tears." That collision of stresses makes the line feel a little panicky and choked—just like Porphyro, trying not to weep at the beautiful thought of Madeline's St. Agnes spell. (See the Meter section for more on how Keats plays with meter in this poem.)

A different kind of enjambed surprise turns up at the end of the poem in lines 375-376:

> [...] Angela the old
> Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform;

This, the last enjambment in the poem, springs the word "Died" on readers like a booby trap. The swift pace here mirrors Angela's unceremonious, ugly, and sudden death.

By playing with the poem's pacing and rhythm, then, enjambment evokes and reflects emotion and mood.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "told / His"
- **Lines 17-18:** "fails / To"
- **Lines 20-21:** "tongue / Flatter'd"
- **Lines 25-26:** "among / Rough"
- **Lines 39-40:** "faerily / The"
- **Lines 40-41:** "gay / Of"
- **Lines 48-49:** "receive / Upon"
- **Lines 53-54:** "require / Of"
- **Lines 58-59:** "train / Pass"
- **Lines 59-60:** "vain / Came"
- **Lines 66-67:** "sighs / Amid"
- **Lines 67-68:** "resort / Of"
- **Lines 75-76:** "fire / For"
- **Lines 77-78:** "implores / All"
- **Lines 83-84:** "swords / Will"
- **Lines 87-88:** "howl / Against"
- **Lines 88-89:** "affords / Him"
- **Lines 94-95:** "beyond / The"
- **Lines 101-102:** "fit / He"
- **Lines 103-104:** "whit / More"
- **Lines 115-116:** "loom / Which"
- **Lines 122-123:** "amaze / To"
- **Lines 124-125:** "plays / This"
- **Lines 129-130:** "crone / Who"
- **Lines 132-133:** "told / His"
- **Lines 133-134:** "brook / Tears"
- **Lines 137-138:** "heart / Made"
- **Lines 138-139:** "propose / A"
- **Lines 141-142:** "dream / Alone"
- **Lines 142-143:** "apart / From"
- **Lines 143-144:** "deem / Thou"
- **Lines 146-147:** "grace / When"
- **Lines 158-159:** "bring / A"
- **Lines 161-162:** "do / Whatever"
- **Lines 164-165:** "hide / Him"
- **Lines 165-166:** "privacy / That"
- **Lines 173-174:** "there / Quickly"
- **Lines 174-175:** "frame / Her"
- **Lines 176-177:** "dare / On"
- **Lines 178-179:** "prayer / The"
- **Lines 183-184:** "ear / To"
- **Lines 184-185:** "aghast / From"
- **Lines 186-187:** "gain / The"
- **Lines 195-196:** "led / To"
- **Lines 201-202:** "akin / To"
- **Lines 206-207:** "swell / Her"
- **Lines 209-210:** "imag'ries / Of"
- **Lines 229-230:** "degrees / Her"
- **Lines 237-238:** "oppress'd / Her"
- **Lines 246-247:** "chanced / To"
- **Lines 253-254:** "moon / Made"
- **Lines 254-255:** "set / A"
- **Lines 255-256:** "thereon / A"
- **Lines 264-265:** "heap / Of"
- **Lines 268-269:** "transferr'd / From"
- **Lines 271-272:** "hand / On"
- **Lines 272-273:** "bright / Of"
- **Lines 273-274:** "stand / In"
- **Lines 280-281:** "arm / Sank"
- **Lines 281-282:** "dream / By"
- **Lines 282-283:** "charm / Impossible"
- **Lines 286-287:** "redeem / From"
- **Lines 295-296:** "suddenly / Her"
- **Lines 300-301:** "expell'd / The"
- **Lines 301-302:** "deep / At"
- **Lines 307-308:** "now / Thy"
- **Lines 317-318:** "arose / Ethereal"
- **Lines 318-319:** "star / Seen"
- **Lines 320-321:** "rose / Blendeth"
- **Lines 322-323:** "blows / Like"
- **Lines 323-324:** "sleet / Against"
- **Lines 337-338:** "rest / After"
- **Lines 340-341:** "nest / Saving"
- **Lines 341-342:** "well / To"

- **Lines 370-371:** "ago / These"
- **Lines 373-374:** "form / Of"
- **Lines 375-376:** "old / Died"

IMAGERY

Rich, sensuous imagery is one of the hallmarks of Keats's poetry in general—and of "The Eve of St. Agnes" in particular. The imagery here immerses the reader deep in the poem's dreamy world and appeals to every sense. Take a look, for instance, at the passage in which Porphyro prepares a midnight feast for Madeline in lines 262-270:

> And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep,
> In blanched linen, smooth, and lavender'd,
> While he forth from the closet brought a heap
> Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;
> With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
> And lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon;
> Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd
> From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,
> From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon.

This banquet is a feast not just for the mouth, but for the nose, the eyes, and the ears. Readers can almost feel those "sooth[]" (or smooth) jellies and "creamy" curds on one's tongue. And there's sight, taste, and smell all at once in the fragrant, jewel-like red-pinkness of "lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon." Even the words the speaker uses to describe this gorgeous feast appeal to the senses: "silken Samarcand" and "cedar'd Lebanon" are vivid sensory descriptions, but also sibilant delights to the ear.

Moments like this sink readers deep into the fantastical, dreamy part of Keats's world, hypnotizing them with pleasure—and thus making them more like the pleasure-drunk Madeline and Porphyro. But Keats doesn't just use imagery for delight. Take a look at the other side of the coin in lines 375-378, the last lines of the poem:

> [...] Angela the old
> Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform;
> The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,
> For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold.

Here, the imagery dwells on physical touch: the awful twitching of Angela's "deform[ed]" old face and the sad chill of the Beadsman's "ashes cold." Beautiful dreams, these lines suggest, aren't the only thing poetry can bring to life: nightmares are available, too! But perhaps there's even some delight to be found here. After all, these lines make old age and death feel immediate and, well, *lively*.

In other words, the imagery in this poem draws attention to the way the poem celebrates *art* as much as to the scenes that art describes. One of the powers of art, Keats suggests, is to create life and sensation out of nothing. Whether dream or nightmare, the images here are equally enchantments.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-9:** " The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold; / The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass, / And silent was the flock in woolly fold: / Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told / His rosary, and while his frosted breath, / Like pious incense from a censer old, / Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death, / Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith."
- **Lines 14-18:** " The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze, / Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails: / Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat'ries, / He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails / To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails."
- **Lines 20-21:** " And scarce three steps, ere Music's golden tongue / Flatter'd to tears this aged man and poor;"
- **Lines 30-36:** "Soon, up aloft, / The silver, snarling trumpets 'gan to chide: / The level chambers, ready with their pride, / Were glowing to receive a thousand guests: / The carved angels, ever eager-eyed, / Star'd, where upon their heads the cornice rests, / With hair blown back, and wings put cross-wise on their breasts."
- **Lines 37-40:** "the argent revelry, / With plume, tiara, and all rich array, / Numerous as shadows haunting faerily / The brain,"
- **Lines 48-49:** " And soft adorings from their loves receive / Upon the honey'd middle of the night,"
- **Line 52:** " And couch supine their beauties, lily white;"
- **Lines 64-65:** " She danc'd along with vague, regardless eyes, / Anxious her lips, her breathing quick and short:"
- **Lines 76-77:** "Beside the portal doors, / Buttress'd from moonlight, stands he,"
- **Lines 91-92:** "the aged creature came, / Shuffling along with ivory-headed wand,"
- **Lines 109-110:** " He follow'd through a lowly arched way, / Brushing the cobwebs with his lofty plume,"
- **Lines 112-113:** "a little moonlight room, / Pale, lattic'd, chill, and silent as a tomb."
- **Lines 127-132:** " Feebly she laugheth in the languid moon, / While Porphyro upon her face doth look, / Like puzzled urchin on an aged crone / Who keepeth clos'd a wond'rous riddle-book, / As spectacled she sits in chimney nook. / But soon his eyes grew brilliant,"
- **Lines 136-138:** " Sudden a thought came like a full-

blown rose, / Flushing his brow, and in his pained heart / Made purple riot:"

- **Lines 168-169:** " While legion'd faeries pac'd the coverlet, / And pale enchantment held her sleepy-ey'd."
- **Lines 194-196:** " With silver taper's light, and pious care, / She turn'd, and down the aged gossip led / To a safe level matting."
- **Lines 199-200:** " Out went the taper as she hurried in; / Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died:"
- **Lines 208-216:** " A casement high and triple-arch'd there was, / All garlanded with carven imag'ries / Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass, / And diamonded with panes of quaint device, / Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes, / As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings; / And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries, / And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings, / A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings."
- **Lines 217-224:** " Full on this casement shone the wintry moon, / And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast, / As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon; / Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest, / And on her silver cross soft amethyst, / And on her hair a glory, like a saint: / She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest, / Save wings, for heaven:"
- **Lines 226-232:** "her vespers done, / Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees; / Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one; / Loosens her fragrant boddice; by degrees / Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees: / Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed, / Pensive awhile she dreams awake,"
- **Line 235:** "trembling in her soft and chilly nest,"
- **Lines 246-247:** " And listen'd to her breathing, if it chanced / To wake into a slumberous tenderness;"
- **Lines 249-251:** "then from the closet crept, / Noiseless as fear in a wide wilderness, / And over the hush'd carpet, silent, stept,"
- **Lines 253-261:** "the faded moon / Made a dim, silver twilight, soft he set / A table, and, half anguish'd, threw thereon / A cloth of woven crimson, gold, and jet:— / O for some drowsy Morphean amulet! / The boisterous, midnight, festive clarion, / The kettle-drum, and far-heard clarionet, / Affray his ears, though but in dying tone:— / The hall door shuts again, and all the noise is gone."
- **Lines 263-270:** " In blanched linen, smooth, and lavender'd, / While he forth from the closet brought a heap / Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd; / With jellies soother than the creamy curd, / And lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon; / Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd / From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one, / From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon."
- **Lines 271-275:** " These delicates he heap'd with glowing hand / On golden dishes and in baskets bright / Of wreathed silver: sumptuous they stand / In the retired quiet of the night, / Filling the chilly room with perfume light.—"
- **Lines 280-283:** "his warm, unnerved arm / Sank in her pillow. Shaded was her dream / By the dusk curtains:—'twas a midnight charm / Impossible to melt as iced stream:"
- **Lines 284-285:** " The lustrous salvers in the moonlight gleam; / Broad golden fringe upon the carpet lies:"
- **Lines 296-297:** "Her blue affrayed eyes wide open shone: / Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured stone."
- **Lines 305-306:** " Who knelt, with joined hands and piteous eye, / Fearing to move or speak, she look'd so dreamingly."
- **Lines 307-311:** ""but even now / Thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear, / Made tuneable with every sweetest vow; / And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear: / How chang'd thou art! how pallid, chill, and drear!"
- **Lines 317-324:** "he arose / Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star / Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose; / Into her dream he melted, as the rose / Blendeth its odour with the violet,— / Solution sweet: meantime the frost-wind blows / Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet / Against the window-panes; St. Agnes' moon hath set."
- **Lines 336-339:** " Thy beauty's shield, heart-shap'd and vermeil dyed? / Ah, silver shrine, here will I take my rest / After so many hours of toil and quest, / A famish'd pilgrim,—saved by miracle."
- **Lines 353-354:** " For there were sleeping dragons all around, / At glaring watch, perhaps, with ready spears—"
- **Lines 357-360:** " A chain-droop'd lamp was flickering by each door; / The arras, rich with horseman, hawk, and hound, / Flutter'd in the besieging wind's uproar; / And the long carpets rose along the gusty floor."
- **Lines 361-369:** " They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall; / Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide; / Where lay the Porter, in uneasy sprawl, / With a huge empty flaggon by his side: / The wakeful bloodhound rose, and shook his hide, / But his sagacious eye an inmate owns: / By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide:— / The chains lie silent on the footworn stones;— / The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans."
- **Lines 375-378:** "Angela the old / Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform; / The Beadsman, after

thousand aves told, / For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold."

JUXTAPOSITION

"The Eve of St. Agnes" builds a lot of its atmosphere and thought through sharp juxtapositions. The living and the dead, dreams and reality, youth and old age: all these contrasting things appear right next to each other throughout the poem, asking the reader to think about both the beauty and the impermanence of youth and dreams.

Right at the beginning, the poem presents a contrast between the chilly world of the old Beadsman and the lively party inside the castle. The Beadsman himself can feel the force of the difference:

> [...] Music's golden tongue
> Flatter'd to tears this aged man and poor;
> But no—already had his deathbell rung;
> The joys of all his life were said and sung:

The rich, warm "golden" music, the Beadsman knows, just isn't for him: his life is essentially already over, and he's closer to the world of the dead than the world of the living.

The old servant Angela has a similar kind of knowledge, though at first she wears it a little more lightly:

> Feebly she laugheth in the languid moon,
> While Porphyro upon her face doth look,
> Like puzzled urchin on an aged crone
> Who keepeth clos'd a wond'rous riddle-book,
> As spectacled she sits in chimney nook.

This passage uses a comical simile to show just how naive and young Porphyro seems to Angela—an old lady who's seen it all in her time. Like the Beadsman, Angela is long past midnight romances now, but she seems to understand them pretty well. This juxtaposition suggests that youthful fantasies about love are as fleeting and brief as dreams.

And dreams are pretty fleeting! Even when Porphyro and Madeline at last embrace in dreamy bliss, the wintry world outside waits to disillusion them:

> Into her dream he melted, as the rose
> Blendeth its odour with the violet,—
> Solution sweet: meantime the frost-wind blows
> Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet
> Against the window-panes; St. Agnes' moon hath set.

Here, Porphyro and Madeline's embrace is full of warmth and sweet springtime smells, "melt[ing]" and the scents of "rose" and "violet." But the world around them is all "sharp sleet" and "frost-wind." And the "moon" that presides over this magical night has already gone down.

All of these juxtapositions touch on the complex, poignant truth at the heart of this poem. Youth, passion, and dreams, "The Eve of St. Agnes" suggests, are beautiful, but brief. But perhaps it's their very fragility that gives them their strange power. The poem's ominous images of chilly death make its portrait of passion even warmer and richer by contrast.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 20-23:** " And scarce three steps, ere Music's golden tongue / Flatter'd to tears this aged man and poor; / But no—already had his deathbell rung; / The joys of all his life were said and sung:"
- **Lines 32-36:** " The level chambers, ready with their pride, / Were glowing to receive a thousand guests: / The carved angels, ever eager-eyed, / Star'd, where upon their heads the cornice rests, / With hair blown back, and wings put cross-wise on their breasts."
- **Lines 55-63:** " Full of this whim was thoughtful Madeline: / The music, yearning like a God in pain, / She scarcely heard: her maiden eyes divine, / Fix'd on the floor, saw many a sweeping train / Pass by—she heeded not at all: in vain / Came many a tiptoe, amorous cavalier, / And back retir'd, not cool'd by high disdain; / But she saw not: her heart was otherwhere: / She sigh'd for Agnes' dreams, the sweetest of the year."
- **Lines 66-72:** " The hallow'd hour was near at hand: she sighs / Amid the timbrels, and the throng'd resort / Of whisperers in anger, or in sport; / 'Mid looks of love, defiance, hate, and scorn, / Hoodwink'd with faery fancy; all amort, / Save to St. Agnes and her lambs unshorn, / And all the bliss to be before to-morrow morn."
- **Lines 105-108:** ""Ah, Gossip dear, / We're safe enough; here in this arm-chair sit, / And tell me how"—"Good Saints! not here, not here; / Follow me, child, or else these stones will be thy bier.""
- **Lines 127-131:** " Feebly she laugheth in the languid moon, / While Porphyro upon her face doth look, / Like puzzled urchin on an aged crone / Who keepeth clos'd a wond'rous riddle-book, / As spectacled she sits in chimney nook."
- **Lines 176-180:** " For I am slow and feeble, and scarce dare / On such a catering trust my dizzy head. / Wait here, my child, with patience; kneel in prayer / The while: Ah! thou must needs the lady wed, / Or may I never leave my grave among the dead.""
- **Lines 192-196:** " When Madeline, St. Agnes' charmed maid, / Rose, like a mission'd spirit, unaware: / With silver taper's light, and pious care, / She turn'd, and down the aged gossip led / To a safe level matting. "

- **Lines 298-301:** " Her eyes were open, but she still beheld, / Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep: / There was a painful change, that nigh expell'd / The blisses of her dream so pure and deep"
- **Lines 316-324:** " Beyond a mortal man impassion'd far / At these voluptuous accents, he arose / Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star / Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose; / Into her dream he melted, as the rose / Blendeth its odour with the violet,— / Solution sweet: meantime the frost-wind blows / Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet / Against the window-panes; St. Agnes' moon hath set."
- **Lines 370-378:** " And they are gone: ay, ages long ago / These lovers fled away into the storm. / That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe, / And all his warrior-guests, with shade and form / Of witch, and demon, and large coffin-worm, / Were long be-nightmar'd. Angela the old / Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform; / The Beadsman, after thousand aves told, / For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold."

REPETITION

The patterns of repetition in "The Eve of St. Agnes" help to build the poem's atmosphere, its characterization, and its action. (The poem uses one flavor of repetition, parallelism, so distinctively that we've given it its own entry—see Parallelism for more.)

One of the most noticeable flavors of repetition here is anadiplosis, which turns up early on in lines 9-10, when the Beadsman sits at his prayers. His "frosted breath" flies:

> Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while **his prayer he saith.**
> **His prayer he saith**, this patient, holy man;

This repetition continues the Beadsman's prayers across two stanzas, and suggests exactly the kind of "patient, holy" (and thankless) worship he's dedicated his life to, in spite of loneliness and cold.

Anadiplosis also characterizes Madeline when she arrives in her bedroom to finish her ritual and await her romantic dream. She can't speak aloud or she'll break the spell. "But to **her heart, her heart** was voluble," the speaker says. If Madeline's mirrored "heart" speaks "volubl[y]" to itself, she has a rich and passionate inner life. And on an atmospheric level, readers can hear her heart pounding through that iambic repetition: "her **heart**, her **heart**" sounds a lot like a strong heartbeat.

Elsewhere, the poem uses epizeuxis to evoke urgency and energy. For instance, when Angela warns Porphyro to get out of the castle before Madeline's relatives slaughter him, she repeats herself over and over, crying, "**Get hence! get hence!**", "**flit! Flit** like a ghost away," and "**not here, not here.**" These swift repetitions make Angela sound insistent, but also a little silly—an effect that gets even stronger when she repeats "St. Agnes!" no fewer than three times in the space of a single stanza (lines 118-126).

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "his prayer he saith."
- **Line 10:** " His prayer he saith,"
- **Line 100:** "Get hence! get hence!"
- **Lines 104-105:** "flit! / Flit"
- **Line 107:** "not here, not here"
- **Line 111:** "Well-a—well-a-day!"
- **Line 114:** "tell me"
- **Line 115:** "tell me"
- **Line 118:** "St. Agnes," "St. Agnes'"
- **Line 123:** "St. Agnes' Eve"
- **Line 143:** "Go, go"
- **Line 156:** "Whose"
- **Line 157:** "Whose"
- **Line 198:** "She comes, she comes again"
- **Line 204:** "But to her heart, her heart was voluble,"
- **Line 214:** "And"
- **Line 215:** "And"
- **Line 221:** "And on her"
- **Line 222:** " And on her"
- **Line 345:** " Arise—arise!"
- **Lines 361-362:** " They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall; / Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide;"
- **Line 367:** " By one, and one,"

SIMILE

The poem's many similes help to create its enchanted, dreamlike world, layering one image on top of another. (They often work together with the poem's metaphors; see the Metaphor section for even more on the poem's figurative language.)

When, for instance, the speaker imagines the stained glass window in Madeline's bedroom to be as brilliantly colored "as [...] the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings," he's using a triple-layered simile: the windows are as intricately ornamented as a moth's wings, which are metaphorically "deep-damask'd," decorated as if with embroidery. This seamless weaving-together of three vivid images makes the poem's atmosphere feel rich as a dream, full of mysterious meaning: just as in a dream, everything in this simile means more than it seems to on the surface!

The particular similes the speaker chooses often juxtapose the poem's contrasting themes, putting passion and death in uneasy proximity. For instance, take a look at the way the

similes evolve across the course of the two stanzas in which Porphyro watches Madeline get ready for bed (lines 217-234). In both of these stanzas, Porphyro is gazing secretly at Madeline. At first, he sees her in the light of her stained glass window, which throws "on her hair a glory, like a saint": given a halo by the moonlight shining through golden glass, she looks holy as a "splendid angel." But only a few lines later, she becomes "like a mermaid in sea-weed" as she stands half-undressed and lost in thought.

There's a shift here between two kinds of otherworldliness. At first, Madeline is a vision of sacred purity. Then, she's a beautiful but dangerous enchantress: remember, mermaids were traditionally supposed to lure sailors to watery graves. Either way, she's utterly spellbinding. But the movement between those two similes suggests that the speaker is a little bit uncomfortable with just *how* spellbinding female beauty and sexual passion can be: he sees them as both sacred and potentially deadly.

But the similes in this poem can also lighten its mood. For instance, take a look at the moment when old Angela chuckles as she imagines Madeline solemnly trying to conjure up a sexy dream of her future husband (lines 127-131):

> Feebly she laugheth in the languid moon,
> While Porphyro upon her face doth look,
> Like puzzled urchin on an aged crone
> Who keepeth clos'd a wond'rous riddle-book,
> As spectacled she sits in chimney nook.

Here, the romantic lover Porphyro becomes nothing more than a puzzled child who fails to understand a grown-up joke. Angela may be old and frail, no longer a participant in the poem's world of swooning love—but she's also lived long enough to know a thing or two about how young people get caught up in their romances. This moment of comic relief plays against the poem's tone of deep enchantment.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "his frosted breath, / Like pious incense from a censer old,"
- **Lines 39-41:** "Numerous as shadows haunting faerily / The brain, new stuff'd, in youth, with triumphs gay / Of old romance."
- **Line 56:** " The music, yearning like a God in pain,"
- **Lines 104-105:** "Alas me! flit! / Flit like a ghost away.""
- **Line 113:** "silent as a tomb."
- **Lines 128-131:** " While Porphyro upon her face doth look, / Like puzzled urchin on an aged crone / Who keepeth clos'd a wond'rous riddle-book, / As spectacled she sits in chimney nook."
- **Lines 136-137:** " Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose, / Flushing his brow,"
- **Lines 192-193:** "Madeline, St. Agnes' charmed maid, / Rose, like a mission'd spirit, unaware:"
- **Line 198:** "She comes, she comes again, like ring-dove fray'd and fled."
- **Lines 206-207:** " As though a tongueless nightingale should swell / Her throat in vain, and die, heart-stifled, in her dell."
- **Lines 212-213:** " Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes, / As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;"
- **Line 222:** "And on her hair a glory, like a saint:"
- **Lines 223-224:** " She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest, / Save wings, for heaven:"
- **Line 231:** "Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,"
- **Line 239:** " Flown, like a thought"
- **Line 241:** "Clasp'd like a missal where swart Paynims pray;"
- **Line 243:** "As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again."
- **Line 250:** "Noiseless as fear in a wide wilderness,"
- **Lines 282-283:** " a midnight charm / Impossible to melt as iced stream"
- **Line 297:** "Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured stone."
- **Lines 318-320:** " like a throbbing star / Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose; / Into her dream he melted,"
- **Lines 320-322:** "as the rose / Blendeth its odour with the violet,— / Solution sweet:"
- **Lines 322-323:** "the frost-wind blows / Like Love's alarum"
- **Lines 361-362:** " They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall; / Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide;"

METAPHOR

"The Eve of St. Agnes" uses metaphor to evoke the pains and pleasures of love and dreams. One of the most prominent metaphors here is an old one: passion as a fire. Poor Porphyro seems crispy-fried with love for Madeline: he has a "heart on fire," he's "burning," and his hand is "glowing" as he prepares a midnight feast. His heart has even become a "fev'rous citadel" (or a feverish city), suggesting that he's both burning up and sick from passion. All that heat at last finds an outlet when it lets him "melt[]" into Madeline's dream.

Porphyro tends to think of Madeline using another old-fashioned metaphor: the beloved as a holy figure. He makes her a "saint," a "seraph" (or angel), and a "silver shrine," and himself a "pilgrim" or an "eremite" (that is, a religious traveler or a solitary monk). These metaphors fit in with the ancient idea of courtly love, the medieval tradition in which a knight would swear to be the chaste protector of a beloved lady. This kind of love isn't about sexual passion so much as it is about worship and service,

being "beauty's shield," as Porphyro puts it, rather than beauty's boyfriend. (Of course, all that burning and melting we mentioned earlier suggests the picture here is more complicated and sexual.)

Another of the classic metaphors Keats uses here is a more ominous one: sleep as death. Porphyro imagines dying of love for the sleeping Madeline as "drows[ing] beside [her]." And at the very end of the poem, the unfortunate Beadsman "sle[eps] among his ashes cold" for eternity. This linkage of sweet, restful, dream-producing sleep with the chilly finality of death reflects the poem's complex and sometimes conflicted relationship with reality and fantasy.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 75-76:** "young Porphyro, with heart on fire / For Madeline."
- **Lines 83-84:** "a hundred swords / Will storm his heart, Love's fev'rous citadel:"
- **Line 135:** "Madeline asleep in lap of legends old"
- **Line 159:** "burning Porphyro"
- **Line 189:** "His poor guide hurried back with agues in her brain"
- **Line 235:** "her soft and chilly nest,"
- **Line 271:** "with glowing hand"
- **Line 276:** "my seraph fair"
- **Line 277:** "Thou art my heaven, and I thine eremite"
- **Line 279:** "Or I shall drowse beside thee, so my soul doth ache."
- **Line 320:** " Into her dream he melted"
- **Line 331:** "my heart is lost in thine,"
- **Lines 332-333:** " Though thou forsakest a deceived thing;— / A dove forlorn and lost with sick unpruned wing.""
- **Line 335:** "may I be for aye thy vassal blest?"
- **Line 336:** " Thy beauty's shield, heart-shap'd and vermeil dyed?"
- **Lines 337-339:** " Ah, silver shrine, here will I take my rest / After so many hours of toil and quest, / A famish'd pilgrim,—saved by miracle."
- **Lines 340-341:** "I will not rob thy nest / Saving of thy sweet self"
- **Line 349:** " Drown'd all in Rhenish and the sleepy mead:"
- **Line 353:** "there were sleeping dragons all around,"
- **Lines 377-378:** "The Beadsman, after thousand aves told, / For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold."

PERSONIFICATION

Moments of personification make this poem's world seem as alive, watchful, and powerful as the "eager-eyed" stone angels on the castle walls.

One early example turns up in line 20, when the Beadsman is about to leave his chapel when he's moved to tears by "Music's golden tongue." Here, "Music" becomes a sort of god, a shining figure whose sounds speak of the "joys of [...] life"—joys the elderly Beadsman has to turn sadly away from. That same personification appears again in line 56, where the music is "yearning like a God in pain" (also a simile—see the Simile section for more on that important device). Personified, Music seems to share some qualities with the young lovers, who are also "yearning" for each other with a sacred passion. Perhaps this music-god is even the spirit of the poem itself: remember, poetry is often considered a kind of "music," and this poem's music has a lot to do with yearning!

In line 323, Love turns up in a similarly god-like form: it's "Love's alarum" that "patter[s] the sharp sleet / Against the window-panes." Here, Love seems to be protecting Porphyro and Madeline just as Music reflected their feelings, warning them that it's time to get out of the castle under the cover of the storm.

These moments of personification make it feel as if the young lovers in this story are motivated not just by their own little feelings, but by big, ancient spirits. Music and Love, personification suggests, have been around for a lot longer than Porphyro and Madeline, and they'll be around long after them.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 20:** "Music's golden tongue"
- **Line 56:** " The music, yearning like a God in pain,"
- **Line 135:** "Madeline asleep in lap of legends old."
- **Line 169:** "And pale enchantment held her sleepy-ey'd"
- **Line 200:** "Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died"
- **Line 258:** " The boisterous, midnight, festive clarion"
- **Lines 323-324:** "Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet / Against the window-panes"
- **Line 327:** "the iced gusts still rave and beat"

END-STOPPED LINE

The majority of the lines in "The Eve of St. Agnes" are end-stopped; Keats uses enjambment relatively rarely here. (See the Enjambment section for more on that.) The measured, stately pace of end-stopped lines often helps to create a dreamy, meditative mood. But end-stops also sometimes give the poem a jolt of energy.

Because there are so many end-stops in this poem, we haven't highlighted them all here. Instead, take a closer look at a particularly evocative series of end-stops in lines 237-243:

> Until the poppied warmth of sleep oppress'd
> Her soothed limbs, and soul fatigued away;
> Flown, like a thought, until the morrow-day;
> Blissfully haven'd both from joy and pain;

> Clasp'd like a missal where swart Paynims **pray;**
> Blinded alike from sunshine and from **rain,**
> As though a rose should shut, and be a bud **again.**

Strong end-stops close most of the lines in this passage, in which Madeline falls deeply asleep. The semicolons, in particular, suggest Madeline's "poppied" (or opiated) sleepiness: they create longer pauses than commas, evoking a dreamer's slow, even breathing.

A few stanzas later, as Porphyro nervously lays out a sumptuous midnight feast for the sleeping Madeline, end-stops serve a slightly different purpose:

> [...] soft he set
> A table, and, half anguish'd, threw thereon
> A cloth of woven crimson, gold, and **jet:—**
> O for some drowsy Morphean **amulet!**
> The boisterous, midnight, festive **clarion,**
> The kettle-drum, and far-heard **clarionet,**
> Affray his ears, though but in dying **tone:—**
> The hall door shuts again, and all the noise is **gone.**

Here, a characteristic Keatsian combination of punctuation marks—the colon and the dash—evoke Porphyro's nervousness as distant music drifts up from the party, threatening to wake Madeline. That ":—" suggests that Porphyro has paused to listen intently (just like the speaker pauses to listen at the end of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," with the same punctuation). And the exclamation point that crowns Porphyro's desire for a "drowsy Morphean **amulet!**" breaks the lines up with a suddenness that suggest that Porphyro has frozen in alarm. Quiet and calm return with that final steady period when "all the noise is **gone.**"

Across the poem, then, end-stops help to pace the action and set the mood, like musical notation.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "was!"
- **Line 2:** "a-cold;"
- **Line 3:** "grass,"
- **Line 4:** "fold:"
- **Line 6:** "breath,"
- **Line 7:** "old,"
- **Line 8:** "death,"
- **Line 9:** "saith."
- **Line 10:** "man;"
- **Line 11:** "knees,"
- **Line 13:** "degrees:"
- **Line 18:** "mails."
- **Line 21:** "poor;"
- **Line 22:** "rung;"
- **Line 23:** "sung:"
- **Line 24:** "Eve:"
- **Line 27:** "grieve."
- **Line 235:** "nest,"
- **Line 236:** "lay,"
- **Line 238:** "away;"
- **Line 239:** "morrow-day;"
- **Line 240:** "pain;"
- **Line 241:** "pray;"
- **Line 242:** "rain,"
- **Line 243:** "again."
- **Line 256:** "jet:—"
- **Line 257:** "amulet!"
- **Line 258:** "clarion,"
- **Line 259:** "clarionet,"
- **Line 260:** "tone:—"
- **Line 261:** "gone."

PARALLELISM

Perhaps the most characteristic flavor of repetition in "The Eve of St. Agnes" is parallelism (which often appears in tandem with anaphora). By placing similarly-structured passages one after the other, the poem creates a feeling of sensuous overflow.

For instance, look at the way the poem uses both parallelism and anaphora to describe Madeline kneeling in prayer beside her stained glass window (lines 221-222):

> Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,
> **And on her silver cross soft amethyst,**
> **And on her hair a glory, like a saint:**

These parallel descriptions of what the softly colored light does to Madeline's body slowly build up a rich, complex picture: it's as if these lines are following the movements of Porphyro's eyes as he looks from Madeline's hands to her cross to her hair.

A similar moment of parallelism comes in the next stanza as Madeline undresses (lines 228-229):

> Anon his heart revives: her vespers done,
> Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;
> **Unclasps her warmed jewels** one by one;
> **Loosens her fragrant boddice;** [...]

Here, two lines in a row begin with vivid verbs that describe what Madeline is doing with her clothing: she "Unclasps" her jewelry and "Loosens" her dress. This parallelism draws attention to the way Madeline gets freer and barer as she undresses—and evokes the slow, tantalizing progression of that undressing as Porphyro watches.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** “ The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold; / The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,”
- **Lines 31-32:** “ The silver, snarling trumpets 'gan to chide: / The level chambers, ready with their pride,”
- **Lines 156-157:** “ Whose passing-bell may ere the midnight toll; / Whose prayers for thee, each morn and evening,”
- **Lines 221-222:** “ And on her silver cross soft amethyst, / And on her hair a glory, like a saint:”
- **Lines 228-229:** “ Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one; / Loosens her fragrant boddice; by degrees”
- **Line 325:** “ 'Tis dark: quick pattereth the flaw-blown sleet:”
- **Line 327:** “ 'Tis dark: the iced gusts still rave and beat:”

VOCABULARY

St. Agnes' Eve (Line 1, Line 24, Line 46, Line 118, Line 123) - The poem takes place on the night before the festival of St. Agnes, a Catholic saint. Legend has it that young girls would dream of their future husbands if they performed certain rituals on that night.

The Flock in Woolly Fold (Line 4) - The sheep in their pen.

Beadsman (Line 5, Line 28, Line 377) - A servant hired to pray constantly for the souls of a noble family.

Rosary (Line 6) - Prayer beads, especially those used by Catholics.

Pious (Line 7) - Reverent, religious.

Incense (Line 7) - Fragrant resin burned for its good smell, often used in religious ceremonies.

Censer (Line 7) - A metal container used to carry burning incense.

The Sweet Virgin's Picture (Line 9) - An image of the Virgin Mary.

Saith (Line 9, Line 10) - An old-fashioned word for "says." Keats's archaic language gives this poem its mystical, medieval flavor.

Meagre (Line 12) - Scrawny and scraggly.

Sculptur'd Dead (Line 14) - Carved tombs in the shape of the people whose bodies they contain.

Purgatorial (Line 15) - Having to do with Purgatory, the in-between place for souls who aren't damned, but aren't quite ready to go to Heaven yet. According to Catholic tradition, a soul in Purgatory would have to go through trials and penance to prepare for Paradise.

Dumb Orat'ries (Line 16) - Silent, private side-chapels.

Mails (Line 18) - Chainmail armor.

Flatter'd (Line 21) - Here, "flatter'd" means "moved" or "delighted" rather than "insincerely praised."

Penance (Line 24) - Voluntary suffering taken on to atone for a sin.

Reprieve (Line 26) - The withdrawal of a punishment.

Prelude (Line 28) - The introduction to a piece of music.

Chambers (Line 32) - Rooms.

Cornice (Line 35) - The molding around the edge of a ceiling. The stone angels resting their heads on the cornice suggest that this is an elaborate medieval castle.

The Argent Revelry (Lines 37-38) - These lines describe a lavishly-dressed crowd of partygoers, or revelers. They're "argent," or silvery, decked out in "plume[s]" (feathers), "tiara[s]" (little crowns), and "all rich array" (all kinds of sumptuous clothing) in general.

Faerily (Line 39) - Like fairies.

Triumphs Gay of Old Romance (Lines 40-41) - The bright and vibrant glories of old stories or fairy tales. "Romance," here, doesn't mean love stories, but a kind of medieval legend dealing with knights and chivalry.

Sole-thoughted (Line 42) - With one focus; attentively.

Brooded (Line 43) - Thought deeply and seriously.

Dames (Line 45) - Older women.

Honey'd (Line 49) - Sweet as honey.

Couch Supine (Line 52) - Lie down on their backs.

Whim (Line 55) - A fanciful desire.

Sweeping Train (Line 58) - The trailing skirts of an elegant medieval dress.

In Vain (Line 59, Line 207) - Uselessly; without getting any results.

Amorous Cavalier (Line 60) - Love-struck knight.

Disdain (Line 61) - Scorn or contempt.

Otherwhere (Line 62) - Somewhere else.

Vague, Regardless Eyes (Line 64) - Unfocused, unseeing eyes.

Hallow'd (Line 66) - Holy.

Timbrels (Line 67) - Tambourines.

The Throng'd Resort of Whisperers (Lines 67-68) - This phrase suggests that the crowd, or "throng," whispers spitefully or jokingly about Madeline (though she doesn't notice anything going on around her).

'Mid (Line 69) - An abbreviated version of "amid," meaning "among."

Hoodwink'd with Faery Fancy (Line 70) - Deceived by her own fantastical imaginings.

Amort (Line 70) - Madeline is so caught up in her daydreams

that she's metaphorically "amort," or dead to the world.

Purposing (Line 73) - Intending.

Moors (Line 74, Line 351) - Wild, open land.

Buttress'd (Line 77) - Defended. Here, Porphyro is hiding in the shadows so the moonlight won't reveal that he's there.

Implores (Line 77) - Begs.

Tedious (Line 79) - Long, exhausting, and boring.

Perchance (Line 81) - Maybe.

In Sooth (Line 81) - Truly.

Muffled (Line 83) - Wrapped up, prevented from seeing. Here, Keats chooses a word most often used to describe a hushed sound, applying it to sight to suggest a hushed *vision*.

Fev'rous Citadel (Line 84) - Feverish city. In this metaphor, Porphyro's heart has both been conquered by love for Madeline (as if the heart were a city) and made feverish by love (as if love were a disease).

Hyena Foemen (Line 86) - Enemies as cruel and dangerous as hyenas.

Execrations (Line 87) - Hateful curses.

Lineage (Line 88) - Ancestry. In other words, Madeline's family despises Porphyro's; they've got a *Romeo and Juliet* situation on their hands!

Beldame (Line 90) - A witchy old woman.

Bland (Line 95) - Here, "bland" doesn't mean "tasteless," but mild and smooth.

Palsied (Line 97, Line 155) - Shaking, as with weakness or old age.

Hie Thee From This Place (Line 98) - In other words: "get out of here!"

Dwarfish (Line 100) - Shrunken, like a fairy-tale dwarf.

Gossip (Line 105, Line 195) - A way to describe a chatty old woman.

Bier (Line 108) - A platform on which a dead body is displayed before it's buried.

Lattic'd (Line 113) - A window with many small, crisscrossed panes.

Water in a Witch's Sieve (Lines 120-122) - In these lines, Angela expresses her amazement that Porphyro has had the nerve to come to Madeline's family home on a night when all her relatives (who hate him) are there. She imagines that Porphyro must be somehow magical, able to carry water in a sieve—or perhaps he's the "liege-lord," or ruler, of Fairyland itself.

Mickle (Line 126) - A lot of something.

Urchin (Line 129) - A small (and often raggedy) child.

Crone (Line 129) - An old woman.

Chimney Nook (Line 131) - A cozy little sitting area built right into the wall of a cottage's fireplace.

Brook (Line 133) - Hold back.

Stratagem (Line 139) - A plot or a plan.

Impious (Line 140) - Disrespectful; lacking in piety (or religious faith).

Quoth (Line 146) - Says.

Ruffian (Line 149) - Rough and cruel—like a scoundrel.

Foemen (Line 152) - Enemies.

Beard Them (Line 153) - Beat them up.

Plaining (Line 158) - Complaining, lamenting.

Betide Her Weal or Woe (Line 162) - Whether good or bad fortune comes to her.

Close (Line 163) - Careful and quiet.

Peerless (Line 167) - Matchless, unrivaled.

While Legion'd Faeries Pac'd the Coverlet (Line 168) - In other words, "while multitudes of fairies walked over the bedcovers." Fairies were traditionally thought to bring dreams; see the "Queen Mab" speech in *Romeo and Juliet* for a famous example of this legend.

Merlin and his Demon (Line 171) - This is an allusion to Arthurian legend. The great wizard Merlin was said in some versions of the Arthur stories to have fallen in love with a sorceress or fairy called Vivien (also sometimes known as Nimue, among many other names), who stole his powers and trapped him in a cave.

Cates and Dainties (Line 173) - Elegant little sweetmeats and treats. This is also an allusion to Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, in which the tricky Petruchio tries to seduce the fiery Kate with a series of puns on her name.

Tambour Frame (Line 174) - An embroidery frame.

Catering (Line 177) - Here, Angela means that she can barely trust herself to "cater to," or provide for, Porphyro's complex plan.

Aghast (Line 184) - Horrified.

Espial (Line 185) - Being seen or caught.

Dusky Gallery (Line 186) - Dimly-lit hallway.

Covert (Line 188) - Cover—with connotations of being hunted. An escaping animal might take refuge in a "covert," a dense thicket.

Amain (Line 188) - Thoroughly or completely.

Agues (Line 189) - Fevers. The idea is that Angela is sick with worry and fear.

Falt'ring (Line 190) - An abbreviation of "faltering," or halting, shaky, and hesitant.

Balustrade (Line 190) - The railing at the top of a staircase.

Silver Taper (Line 194, Line 199) - A candle in a silver candlestick.

Safe Level Matting (Line 196) - In other words, Madeline leads Angela down to the safety of a lower floor, where the "matting," or woven rug, is flat and "level," safe for the shaky old lady to walk over unassisted.

Ring-dove Fray'd and Fled (Line 198) - In other words, like a startled pigeon that flees because it's frightened.

Pallid (Line 200, Line 311) - Pale.

Voluble (Line 204) - Expansively and fluently talkative.

Balmy (Line 205) - Warm—with the implication that Madeline may also be sweating a little, producing dampness like a "balm" or ointment.

Casement (Line 208, Line 217) - A window.

Diamonded with Panes of Quaint Device (Line 211) - The window has diamond-shaped panes with "quaint," or charmingly old-fashioned, "devices," or designs.

Innumerable of Stains and Splendid Dyes (Line 212) - The stained-glass window contains an uncountable number of beautiful dyes and colors.

Deep-Damask'd (Line 213) - Richly woven, like damask fabric.

Heraldries (Line 214) - Symbols representing noble families.

Emblazonings (Line 215) - Another word for heraldic devices (or family crests).

Scutcheon (Line 216) - A shield-shaped crest.

Gules (Line 218) - Red, in the special color-language used for describing heraldry.

Boon (Line 219, Line 344) - Blessing.

Taint (Line 225) - Stain or fault.

Anon (Line 226) - Quickly, soon.

Vespers (Line 226) - Evening prayers.

Boddice (Line 229) - The upper part of a dress (more commonly spelled "bodice").

Pensive (Line 232) - Lost in thought.

Swoon (Line 236) - Faintness (especially the kind that comes with strong emotion).

Poppied (Line 237) - Like the effects of poppies—that is, opium. Here, sleep is like a delicious drug.

Missal (Line 241) - A Catholic prayer book.

Swart Paynims (Line 241) - Dark Muslims. (Keats is using rather racist, exoticizing language here.)

Morphean Amulet (Line 257) - A charm that would inspire magical sleep. Morpheus was the god of dreams.

Clarion (Line 258) - Trumpet or horn.

Affray (Line 260, Line 296) - Frighten.

Blanched Linen, Smooth, and Lavender'd (Line 263) - Bleached sheets that are soft and lavender-scented.

Quince (Line 265) - A kind of pear-like fruit.

Jellies Soother than the Creamy Curd (Line 266) - That is, jellies smoother and sweeter even than the flesh of the candied fruit Porphyro has just laid out.

Lucent Syrups, Tinct with Cinnamon (Line 267) - Clear syrups flavored and colored with cinnamon.

Manna and Dates (Lines 268-269) - A sweet-scented resin ("manna") and date fruits, shipped by "argosy" (a kind of merchant ship) from Morocco.

Silken Samarcand to Cedar'd Lebanon (Line 270) - That is, Porphyro's treats come from across the world: from the elegant, luxurious Asian city of Samarcand to the cedar-forested (and cedar-scented) hills of Lebanon.

Seraph (Line 276) - Angel.

Eremite (Line 277) - A hermit, or secluded holy person.

Unnerved (Line 280) - Either tingling or tense with nervousness.

Lustrous Salvers (Line 284) - Shining dishes.

Entoil'd in Woofed Phantasies (Line 288) - That is, tangled up in the woven tapestry of his daydreams. A "woof" is the set of horizontal threads on a loom through which the vertical threads are woven.

Tumultuous (Line 290) - Stormy, full of passion.

La Belle Dame Sans Mercy (Line 292) - French for "the beautiful lady without mercy." Keats would go on to write a poem called "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" not long after he wrote "The Eve of St. Agnes."

Tuneable (Line 309) - Melodious.

Complainings (Line 313) - Mournful songs.

Voluptuous Accents (Line 317) - Sensuous, delightful tones.

Ethereal (Line 318) - Spiritual, heavenly.

Solution (Line 322) - A mixture or combination—with the implication that this embrace is also a "solution" (or resolution) to Madeline and Porphyro's passion.

Rave (Line 327) - Wail or yell crazily.

Forsakest (Line 332) - Abandon.

Vassal (Line 335) - Sworn servant, especially a loyal knight.

Vermeil (Line 336) - Vermillion—a bright rich red.

Pilgrim (Line 339) - A religious traveler who seeks a holy destination.

Infidel (Line 342) - A faithless person. Porphyro is playing on his religious imagery here, suggesting that he'll be loyal to the "religion" of Madeline and not abuse her like a false believer.

Haggard (Line 344) - Ugly, unpromising.

Wassailers (Line 346) - Partiers.

Rhenish and the Sleepy Mead (Line 349) - "Rhenish" is expensive German wine; "sleepy mead" is honey-beer, which makes one sleepy if one drinks too much of it!

Darkling (Line 355) - Dark, murky.

Arras (Line 358) - A wall-hanging or tapestry.

Besieging (Line 359) - Attacking, assaulting.

Porter (Line 363) - The servant in charge of guarding the door.

Flaggon (Line 364) - A big drinking mug.

Sagacious (Line 366) - Wise, knowing.

Inmate (Line 366) - A resident of the house—Madeline, in other words. The dog recognizes her and doesn't start barking.

Shade (Line 373) - Ghost, vision.

Aves (Line 377) - Hail Marys—traditional Catholic prayers.

For Aye Unsought For (Line 378) - Forever unlooked for. The Beadsman dies a lonely death, and no one thinks to look for him.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Eve of St. Agnes" is modeled on the work of one of Keats's favorite writers: the English Renaissance poet Edmund Spenser. Spenser popularized the stanza form Keats is using here in his epic verse romance, *The Faerie Queene*. In fact, it's known as the Spenserian stanza: a nine-line stanza that uses eight lines of iambic pentameter and one line of iambic hexameter. (See the Meter section for a more in-depth explanation of what exactly those terms mean.) This poem uses 42 of these stanzas to tell its sumptuous, romantic story.

Keats borrows from Spenser in more ways than one here. Like *The Faerie Queene*, "The Eve of St. Agnes" is a romance. That doesn't mean it's a love story (though it's certainly also that), but a tale of a legendary medieval world full of chivalrous knights, beautiful maidens, and heroic quests. The poem even says so itself: as the party guests arrive, the speaker looks back to his own childhood memories of reading the "triumphs gay / of old romance." This poem both fits into the romance genre and pays tribute to it through its relish of old-fashioned language and its images of gorgeous, dangerous old castles in enchanted storms.

METER

"The Eve of St. Agnes" uses Spenserian stanzas—a form popularized by the English Renaissance poet Edmund Spenser in his long verse romance *The Faerie Queene*.

Spenserian stanzas are built of nine lines. The first eight lines use iambic pentameter—that is, lines that contain five iambs, metrical feet that go da-DUM, like this:

> The owl, | for all | his feath- | ers, was | a-cold;

The ninth and final line of every stanza changes to iambic hexameter—lines of *six* iambic da-DUMs (also known as alexandrines). Take line 18:

> To think | how they | may ache | in i- | cy hoods | and mails.

The pulsing rhythm of iambs keeps the poem moving along at a steady, hypnotic pace, like the dreamy night it describes. But those final, longer lines of hexameter, which call attention to each stanza's ending, also makes the stanzas feel like self-contained little scenes, individual episodes in a bigger drama.

While the poem keeps to its Spenserian meter pretty steadily, it also alters it sometimes for effect (and perhaps because, even if you're a genius, it's tricky to maintain perfect iambs all the way through a 42-stanza poem). For instance, take a look at what happens when Porphyro has his big idea in lines 136-137:

> Sudden | a thought | came like | a full- | blown rose,
> Flushing | his brow, [...]

Here, as Porphyro decides he's going to hide in Madeline's bedroom and make her St. Agnes dream come true, the lines start not with an iamb but with a trochee, a front-loaded foot that goes DUM-da. Those strong trochees sound a lot like a heart thumping harder with passion and excitement, as does the spondee (stressed-stressed) that ends line 136 ("blown rose").

RHYME SCHEME

"The Eve of St. Agnes" uses Spenserian stanzas, which lay down both a steady iambic meter (see the Meter section for more on that) and a rhyme scheme that goes like this (with new rhyme sounds introduced in each stanza):

ABABBCBCC

While that general *pattern* holds steady throughout the poem, the rhyme words themselves are often pretty flexible. Even in the very first stanza, for example, there are a couple of slant rhymes: Keats rhymes "was" with "grass" and "breath" with "saith" (pronounced "sayth").

In part, that's just to do with the enormous challenge of writing a long rhymed poem—especially in English. (It's a little easier in a language like Italian, in which a lot of words end with similar sounds—see Dante for just one famous example.) But this poem's frequent use of slant rhyme also creates a diffuse, dreamy atmosphere that suits its mood. Rather than snapping into perfect order every time, the rhymes here are often *close* to each other, but not exactly matched—sort of the same way

that, just for instance, one's perfect dream-boyfriend might look a little less perfect in real life!

SPEAKER

The speaker in this poem is a third-person storyteller, who omnisciently watches all the characters as they go about their secretive business. This makes the storyteller a little like Porphyro: both of them are, in their way, voyeurs.(And, by extension, they make the reader into a voyeur, too!)

The reader gets only one indirect glimpse of the speaker as an actual person, when the speaker reflects on how the guests arriving at the castle are like something out of the stories read in childhood (see lines 37-41), when the speaker's "brain" was "new stuff'd, in youth, with triumphs gay / Of old romance." In other words, this is a speaker who adores tales of medieval knights, ladies, and enchantments. In this clever moment, the speaker seems to be saying that the scene is just like something out of an old romance—when, of course, the scene *is* in a romance, one the speaker is writing even now.

All of this suggests that the storyteller is Keats himself. Keats was definitely a big fan of medieval romance (and would return to the genre in his later poem "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"). What's more, the poem borrows its form from one of Keats's very favorite poets, Edmund Spenser, author of one of the most famous of all verse romances, *The Faerie Queene*. (More on that in the Form, Meter, and Rhyme Scheme sections.)

Whether or not you interpret the speaker as Keats, one thing is for sure: this speaker is deeply romantic (in the emotional sense) and deeply Romantic (in the poetic-movement sense), enraptured by the power of dreams, sensual pleasure, and sexual passion.

SETTING

"The Eve of St. Agnes" takes place in a classic fairy-tale castle, full of dangerous knights, fair ladies, and staring stone angels. It's both chilly (especially in its frigid chapel, which doesn't seem to get many visitors) and gorgeous, hung with rich tapestries and lit by flickering oil lamps.

The poem is set in a distant past—a legendary Middle Ages—but even so, this castle already seems to have been around for centuries. Cobwebs dangle from its hallways, and its stone tombs mark a noble family's long legacy.

This setting's mood of rich, ghostly antiquity fits right in with the poem's romantic view of the past—but also with its grim realism about death. Even the drunken party guests are haunted by death and danger, and the ominous storm blowing outside hints at more trouble to come. In this lush but perilous setting, Porphyro and Madeline's love feels all the more immediate and compelling: it's a present-tense passion in a past-tense world.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Keats (1795-1821) wrote "The Eve of St. Agnes" during a burst of concentrated poetic brilliance in 1819. Over the course of a few months, he wrote not only "Agnes," but also his great odes, a six-poem sequence that included the famous "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and "To Autumn." Only a little more than a year later, Keats would die of tuberculosis at the age of 25, believing he'd left no lasting mark on the literary world; he asked that his gravestone be inscribed only "Here Lies One Whose Name Was Writ in Water."

Keats wrote during the heart of the English Romantic era, a poetic movement that arose in reaction to the witty, formal, measured, and sometimes cynical elegance of Enlightenment poets like Alexander Pope. The Romantic poets turned away from the rational clarity of early 18th-century verse to reach back to earthier poetic forms (like the ballad). They took a special interest in tales of mystery and enchantment; Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is one classic example of Romantic storytelling.

"The Eve of St. Agnes" reflects a very Romantic interest in old tales, and also draws on Keats's special fondness for the work of the Renaissance poet Edmund Spenser, whose legendary medieval settings and distinctive stanza form Keats borrows here. Keats would return to similar territory in his haunting ballad "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" (attentive readers might spot a possible moment of inspiration for that poem in this one, in lines 291-292).

"The Eve of St. Agnes," in its sensual luxury and medieval quaintness, was a huge hit among the Victorians. Writers like Tennyson considered it a great favorite—and even wrote tribute poems in response to it.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Keats was writing, the Industrial Revolution was just kicking into gear. This earthshaking period changed England from a largely rural society to a mostly urban one—and, many Romantic poets thought, robbed the world of magic and of natural beauty. The Romantic longing for mystery and enchantment reflected in "The Eve of St. Agnes" was a rebellion in two directions, rejecting both earlier Enlightenment rationalism and a coming world of smoky mechanization.

While Keats keenly felt this Romantic longing, he was a city boy from the start. A middle-class kid from the down-at-heel East End of London, he didn't have the luxury or the money to expect to devote himself to poetry full-time (as his wealthier contemporaries Byron and Shelley could). As a young man, he

trained as a doctor—a much grimmer and less exalted profession in a time before anesthesia.

He was thus the first to understand that, when he caught tuberculosis (often known at the time as "consumption"), he didn't have long to live. His close friend Charles Brown recorded an 1820 incident in which Keats coughed up blood, examined it by candlelight, and declared:

> I know the colour of that blood;—it is arterial blood;—I cannot be deceived by that colour;—that drop of blood is my death-warrant;—I must die.

Keats was already suffering from the beginnings of tuberculosis when he wrote "The Eve of St. Agnes"—and mourning the death of his younger brother Tom from the same disease. It's no wonder, then, that death haunts the edges of the poem.

Before the discovery of penicillin, tuberculosis was a scourge that felled millions; one calculation holds that, by the beginning of the 19th century, it had killed one in seven of the people who had *ever lived*. Even with good doctors and swift advances in medicine, no one really knew what to do with tuberculosis in Keats's time. Keats was only one of many who desperately left England for a warmer climate, hoping that milder temperatures might preserve them. This worked for Keats as well as it worked for anyone—which is to say, not at all. He died and was buried in Rome, far from the people who loved him.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to the poem read aloud (and introduced by one of Keats's many biographers). (https://youtu.be/A39r1jmh0mw)
- The Keats-Shelley Memorial Association — Visit the website of the Keats-Shelley Memorial Association, where you can learn more about Keats's life and work. (https://keats-shelley.org/)
- The Poem in Keats's Hand — Take a look at a manuscript copy of the poem in Keats's own handwriting—and learn more about how the poem was first written and published. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/manuscript-of-st-agnes-eve-by-john-keats)
- Keats's Imagery — Read a short passage from the great scholar Christopher Ricks's "Keats and Embarrassment, in which Ricks discusses the strange image of Madeline standing "like a mermaid in sea-weed." (http://thedabbler.co.uk/2014/08/christopher-ricks-on-keats-and-embarrassment/)
- A Brief Biography — Read about Keats's short, tragic life, and find links to more of his poetry. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-keats)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN KEATS POEMS

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

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