

Keats, “The Eve of St. Agnes”

- I. Written in 1819 and set on St. Agnes Eve, traditionally the coldest night of the year
 - A. St. Agnes was patron saint of virgins
 - B. According to tradition, if a maiden went to bed without any supper and observed certain rituals (described in the poem), she would dream of her future husband.
- II. The poem is a chivalric romance with some Gothic overtones
 - A. A castle setting in the past, probably in the medieval era
 - B. Gothic framing, as the story is framed by the present, and encloses an even more distant past
 - C. Includes references to armor of knights, tapestries, and to mythic figures such as Merlin
 - D. Story is also a tale of warmth encompassed by cold
 - E. The coldest day of the year encloses a layer of revelry, that in turn encloses the young lovers
- III. By being set in a distant past (from which we suddenly pull back in the final stanza), the poem sidesteps the issue of the future happiness of the lovers
- IV. The poem has much sensuous imagery, which some of Keats’s publishers objected to
- V. A very visual, almost cinematic, poem
- VI. Also includes many sound references and moments of synaesthesia
- VII. Written in Spenserian stanzas, after Edmund Spenser, the sixteenth-century poet
 - A. Nine-line stanzas
 - B. Eight iambic pentameter lines closed with a hexameter, or six-foot line (“Alexandrine”)
 - C. The rhyme scheme is *ababbcbcc*
- VIII. The poem provides a dialectic of the real and unreal
 - A. For example, the representation of the woman vs. the real woman (in the moonlight scene in stanza XXV)
 - B. the dream Porphyro vs. the real man
 - C. and the scene of the lovers gliding like phantoms as they escape—real lovers emulating the unreal (phantoms)
- IX. Stanzas 1 and 2 establish cold imagery, refer to “sculptur’d dead” in the chapel, invoking the deeper past
- X. Madeline is introduced, her ritual described
- XI. Young virgins are supposed to go to bed without eating and to go to bed without looking sideways or behind
- XII. Love story is somewhat reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet story
 - A. Porphyro is not welcome in the castle
 - B. He is helped by an old beldame, or an aged nurse, who helps the young lovers
- XIII. She leads him secretly to Madeline’s chamber, so he can gaze upon her
 - A. Stanza 25 depicts the moonlight shining through the stained glass window and falling upon her, making her seem like an angel or a saint
 - B. Here, the real woman is overlaid by the idealized one
 - C. In a very voyeuristic stanza, Porphyro watches while she looses her garments
- XIV. When her breathing reveals she has fallen asleep, he brings out exotic sweets and delicacies for her, described with rich sounds
- XV. “perfume light” (stanza 31) is one of the synesthetic references in the poem
- XVI. He plays the lute and awakens her
 - A. In stanzas 34-35, her dream gives way to reality
 - B. Madeline was dreaming of Porphyro, and awakens to find him there
 - C. She has some confusion as to whether she is dreaming or awake

- D. She also has a note of regret: The ideal Porphyro of her dream is in some ways superior to the real Porphyro
 - E. "How chang'd thou art! how pallid, chill, and drear! / Give me that voice again, my Porphyro."
- XVII. Stanza 36 is the most erotic stanza of the poem, and the one about which Keats really battled with his publishers
- A. As they apparently make love, there is a cinematic moment when the camera seems to pull back from the scene of the two lovers
 - B. from "into her dream he melted" to the pattering of the sleet on the windows ("Like Love's alarum")
- XVIII. He reassures her referring to himself as a pilgrim on a quest who has been saved by a miracle, the miracle of her love
- XIX. They glide into the hall, past the sleeping porter,
- XX. The dog does not bark because he recognizes them
- XXI. Keats suddenly pulls back and pushes the action into the distant past
- XXII. We leave the lovers, at the moment of their escape, and we never find out what happens to them
- XXIII. The guests in the castle all have bad dreams, of witches, and demons, and the worms of the grave
- XXIV. The sudden, final image is of Angela dying palsy-twitching and the Beadsman dead among the ashes