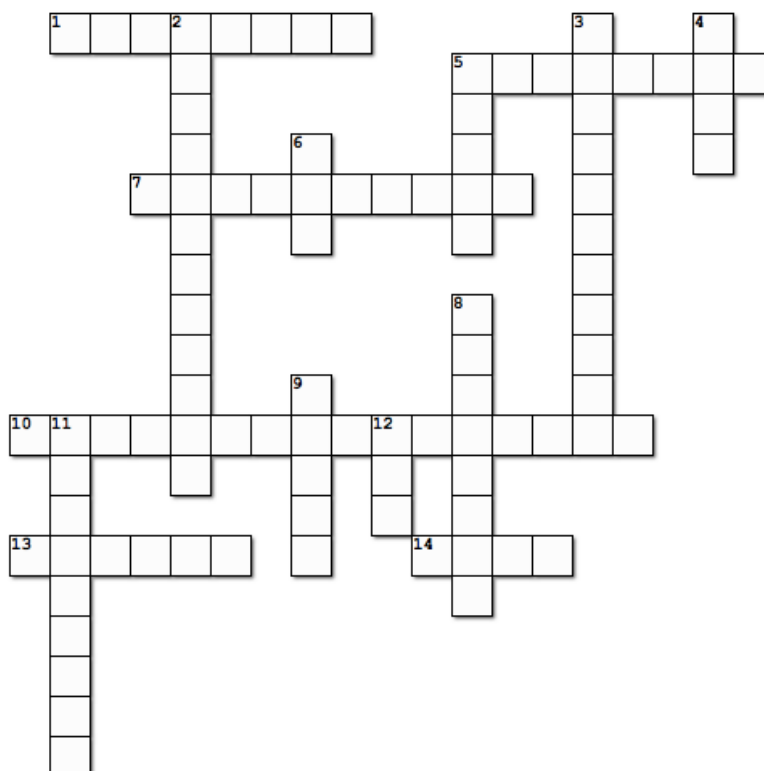


John Keats: Ode on Melancholy

Ode on Melancholy, written in 1819, is a poem advising us how to deal with deep sadness. Don't turn to intoxicants, the speaker repeatedly warns, for they only speed the passage to death. Instead, learn to embrace sadness. Because all things in life are doomed to end, so Keats argues, every object and experience, no matter how good or bad, attains a poignant sadness.

How well do you know this poem?



Across

1. For if thy _____ some rich anger shows.
5. For shade to shade will come too _____.
7. A goddess of the Underworld.
10. In what rhythm or meter is this poem written?
13. An archaic word for 'sovereign' or 'supreme.'
14. Mr Keats, who wrote this poem.

Down

2. Which disease was the scourge of Keats' family, killing his younger brother just before this poem was written?
3. How old was Keats when he died?
4. This word means 'to feast' greedily.
5. This word, describing an owl in the poem, means 'feathery.'
6. Do not make a rosary out of these berries.
8. The juxtaposition of unlike words is known as which technique?
9. No, no, go not to _____.
11. The repetition of similar vowel sounds is called what?
12. How many lines are there in each stanza of the poem?

Understanding and Interpretation

1. What is Keats' argument to the reader in the first stanza? What alternative is offered in stanza 2?
2. Look closely at lines 6 to 10 in the first stanza, where Keats' warns against associating with the 'beetle', the 'death-moth' and the 'downy owl.' What are some of the **connotations** of these creatures?
3. What is the importance of 'beauty' to the second stanza? In which lines is beauty a prominent theme?
4. Most of Keats' odes are written in **iambic meter** – but *Ode on Melancholy* features several **rhythmic interruptions**. Can you find and comment on one or two of these?
5. Why does the last stanza feature so much **personification**?

Poetic Device: *Consonance and Assonance*

Some lines of poetry are written in such a way as to repeat particular vowel sounds; this technique is called **assonance**. For example, in the opening line of *Ode to Melancholy*, Keats arranges five O sounds in a row: *No, no, go not to Lethe*. In English there are five vowels A, E, I O and U, plus Y. These vowels can be read quickly (in words such as win, bat, or fun) or slowly (in words like wine, sate, and vacuum). Vowels can be combined to enhance or lengthen particular sounds: consider words such as ‘creation’, ‘utopia’, or ‘cumulous’. Assonance is almost always classed as a soft sound.

Consonance is created by the deliberate arrangement of consonant sounds within words. It differs from **alliteration** only in that the letters can be repeated anywhere in a word, phrase, or line, not only as the first letter of words. Typically, you can find letters arranged in one of eight patterns. Some of these are classed as hard and others as soft:

Aspirant: <i>made by exhaling breath from the throat</i>	H	Soft
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Common associations include expressing effort, pleasure, the sound of the wind or sea, speed.

Dental: <i>made by touching the tongue to the back of the teeth</i>	D, T	Hard
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Create impact sounds, pain, clashing objects, difficult emotions, or other negative associations.

Fricative: <i>made by forcing air between the teeth and lips</i>	F, V, Th (J)	Soft
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Can suggest the release of emotion, the sound of the wind or flowing water, warmth or ease.

Plosive: <i>made by pressing the lips together</i>	P, B	Hard
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Similar to dental and often used in combination to create negative emotional or physical effects.

Sibilant: <i>made by pushing air around the tongue</i>	S, Sh, Z, soft C	Soft
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Can create a variety of auditory effects such as wind, ocean or rain. Symbolic association with the snake can suggest evil or mysterious ideas.

Liquid: <i>made by lightly touching the tongue to the palate</i>	L, R (W)	Soft
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Easily associated with movement, fluidity, and water. Can be obscure, dreamy, and hard to pin down.

Guttural: <i>made by trapping air at the top of the throat</i>	G, hard C, K	Hard
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One of the most unpleasant sounds, can summon a variety of negative effects.

When a poet mixes assonance with soft consonance, he or she creates an effect called **euphony** which is the pleasing mixture of softer sounds. While generally a pleasant auditory device, euphony can create a subtle variety of effects. Euphony is often harmonic, like a choir singing chords together; it

can be uplifting or triumphant; certain natural sounds (like the magical background sounds of a woodland or the depths of the ocean) can be summoned through euphony, as can the sound of musical instruments. Euphony can ring in the ear like a bell; conversely it can have a lulling or drowsy effect, like a soft mattress or cushion upon which the words lie. Sometimes you might feel this lulling effect is hypnotic, in which case euphony may take on a sinister aspect at odds with its pleasing sound. The effect of euphony will always be tied closely to the poem, the ideas evoked by the words and images, and the poet's themes and concerns.

Activity

Practice recognizing patterns of sound (consonance, assonance, and euphony) using these lines from *Ode on Melancholy*. Annotate your ideas then discuss with others in your class. Practice reading the lines aloud and hearing the sounds create effects. The study of sound is not an exact science, and the possible effects always depend on the relationship between sound and the words and images the poet gives you:

*No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist
Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;*

*Make not your rosary of yew-berries,
Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be
Your mournful Psyche,*

*nor the downy owl
A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,
And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.*

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



Important Theme: *Physical and Spiritual Intoxication*

'Neither twist wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine'

Keats had more than his fair share of ill-luck, suffering and unhappiness in his short life. No wonder his poems are so focused on the impermanence of life and beauty and the exploration of melancholy as an inescapable human condition. Having already lost both parents and his younger brother, Keats himself was beginning to feel the scourge of tuberculosis and would be dead within two years of writing these lines. Not only this, but he was suffering financially and the critical literary scene was reviewing his work scathingly. So bad had things gotten that he was considering quitting writing for good – but fortunately he decided to pour his negativity into these odes instead.

It may be no surprise that the first stanza of *Ode on Melancholy* reads like an early kind of advice column, a self-help guide for those overcome with sadness. Keats understands the temptation of trying to escape suffering through the use of intoxicating liquors, medicines, and drugs. The poem mentions poisonous substances, like the bark of the yew tree, deadly nightshade, and even the grapes used to make wine. But, rather than alleviate suffering, Keats implies that using these substances simply rushes one more quickly to a point of no return, as *'shade to shade will come'* and the *'soul'* will quickly be *'drowned'*.



Furthermore, Keats implies that intoxication can be spiritual as well as physical and he warns against excessive wallowing in images of death (represented by the *'beetle'* and *'death-moth'*, with their classical and ancient allusions). At times, the very sounds of his poem lull the reader into a state of indulgence, so that the reader gets a powerful dose of the tempting intoxicants that Keats is warning against. Many of the sounds in the first stanza are lugubrious, luxurious, and hypnotic.

Instead of self-medicating harmfully, Keats offers an alternative to chemical intoxication; an appreciation of the natural world. The natural imagery in the second stanza is brighter, visual, and more straightforward: *roses, peonies, rainbows*. That's not to say that natural intoxication is going to fully alleviate suffering: the flowers in stanza two are already *'droop headed'* as their time passes and

'April's shroud' contains the essence of sadness – the reminder that all life fades – woven into its very fabric. Ultimately, Keats encourages us to accept that melancholy is an unavoidable part of life. It's the subtle difference between embracing melancholy or allowing it to overwhelm us that we should be taking note of. After all, avoiding the temptation of manmade intoxicants is probably a better and healthier way to approach life's vicissitudes.