John Keats: Ode on Melancholy

'For shade to shade will come too drowsily, and drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.'

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. Beauty fades, joy passes, and even the most intense moments of happiness are shadowed by the knowledge that they cannot last forever.

Rather than presenting melancholy as something to be avoided, Keats suggests that it is inseparable from our appreciation of life's pleasures. The more deeply we value beauty, love, or happiness, the more vulnerable we become to feelings of loss when those experiences end. For this reason, melancholy is not simply an unpleasant emotion but evidence of our capacity to feel intensely and engage fully with the world. Through its vivid images of flowers, nature, and human desire, the poem explores the paradox that joy and sorrow are bound together. Ultimately, Keats argues that we should not seek escape from melancholy but accept it as an inevitable and even valuable part of the human experience.

How well do you know this poem?

1. Which river whose waters bring on forgetfulness is mentioned in the first line?
(a) Styx
(b) Lethe
(c) Archeron
(d) Phlegethon

2. Which poisonous plant is NOT named in the first stanza?
(a) Henbane
(b) Nightshade
(c) Wolfs-bane
(d) Yew

3. Which of these death related symbols does NOT appear in the first verse?
(a) Owl
(b) Beetle
(c) Moth
(d) Raven

4. Who is the wife of Pluto and queen of the underworld?
(a) Proserpine
(b) Penelope
(c) Porphyria
(d) Persephone

5. In which month does Keats imagine melancholy covering the hills like fog?
(a) January
(b) April
(c) July
(d) October

6. Which verb does Keats use to mean 'take' your mistress' hand?
(a) Emprison
(b) Clasp
(c) Seize
(d) Immure

7. Which flower blooms in a globed shape?
(a) Rose
(b) Hydrangea
(c) Peonies
(d) Azalea

8. What is Joy doing?
(a) Saying bonjour
(b) Calling ciao
(c) Crying hola
(d) Bidding adieu

9. Who has a shrine in the Temple of Delight?
(a) Veil'd Melancholy
(b) Arm'd Desolation
(c) Suit'd Woe
(d) Mask'd Dejection

10. Which fruit also contains the taste of sadness?
(a) Joy's peach
(b) Joy's apple
(c) Joy's grape
(d) Joy's watermelon

Understanding and Interpretation

1. What advice does Keats give to someone who's filled with Melancholy? Which examples (words and images) present his advice most clearly for you?

2. What contribution do images of flowers, rainbows, clouds, and beauty make to the poem and its message?

3. Keats writes that Melancholy "dwells with beauty that must die." What does this suggest about happiness and sadness?

4. How does the structure of the poem develop Keats' argument? What functions do the different stanzas fulfil?

5. Does this poem present Keats as ultimately optimistic or pessimistic about human life? Can you support your idea?

Poetic Device: *Assonance*

'No, no, go not to Lethe…'

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 on Melancholy*, Keats arranges several long O sounds in quick succession: *"No, no, go not to Lethe."* The repetition of O and long E sounds creates a lingering quality that slows the pace of the line and draws attention to the speaker's command, while also beginning the poem in a deeper auditory register suitable for evoking melancholy.

In English, vowel sounds can be short, as in *win*, *bat*, or *fun*, or long, as in *wine*, *sate*, and *vacuum*. Poets often repeat particular vowel sounds to shape the way a line feels when read aloud. Long vowels may slow the pace and encourage reflection, while shorter vowels can quicken a line's movement and energy.

Assonance is usually considered a soft sound pattern because vowel sounds flow smoothly into one another. This musical quality often contributes to an atmosphere or mood. In a poem such as *Ode on Melancholy*, repeated vowel sounds might:

- slow the reader down and encourage contemplation
- create a dreamlike, hypnotic, or otherworldly atmosphere
- imitate the flow of emotion or thought
- evoke beauty, pleasure, and sensory richness
- suggest transience, fading, or the passing of time
- make the poem sound melancholy
- accompany difficult ideas such as sorrow, loss, or death

When repeated soft sounds (whether vowel or consonant) combine to create particularly pleasing or harmonious effects, we call this euphony. Euphony simply means "pleasant sound". Like music, it can create a sense of beauty, harmony, emotional intensity, or wonder. In Keats' poetry, euphonious passages often accompany vivid natural imagery and moments of heightened feeling. Even when discussing sadness, mingling softer sounds together evokes a pleasant, dreamlike quality that suits the poem's central argument: sadness is not something to be avoided, but an essential part of human experience.

When analysing assonance or euphony, avoid assuming a single effect. Instead, ask how the sound connects to the poem's imagery, mood, and ideas. In *Ode on Melancholy*, you can explore whether the poem's musical language reflects its interest in beauty, intense emotion, mortality, pleasure, or the fleeting nature of human experience. Sound patterns are therefore not just decorative; they can help develop the poem's larger concerns and themes.

Analytical Writing Practice

Practice recognizing patterns of assonance and euphony using lines from *Ode on Melancholy*. Read lines aloud and hear the sound effects created. 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. Choose a moment of assonance or euphony, and use ideas from this explainer, to build an analytical paragraph around.

Important Theme: *Physical and Spiritual Intoxication*

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

Keats knew 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.

Activity

After reading Keats' odes, what philosophy of life emerges? Create a short guide titled *Keats' Guide to Surviving Life*, consisting of 5-10 'rules.' Think of a pattern you can use to structure your guide. For instance, you could decide to start each rule with an imperative verb such as: *'Embrace...' 'Accept...' 'Cherish...' 'Resist...'* and so on. Alternatively, create a pattern like *'When life becomes painful…'*