

Annotated *Ode*¹ on *Melancholy*², by John Keats

1

No, no, go not³ to Lethe⁴, neither twist
Wolf's-bane⁵, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd
By nightshade⁶, ruby grape of Proserpine⁷;

¹ Ode: elaborate and stately lyric poem of some length. The ode dates back to the Greek choral songs that were sung and danced at public events and celebrations. The Greek odes of Pindar, which were modeled on the choral odes of Greek drama, were poems of praise or glorification. They were arranged in stanzas patterned in sets of three—a strophe and an antistrophe, which had an identical metrical scheme, and an epode, which had a structure of its own. The ode of the Roman poets Horace and Catullus employed the simpler and more personal lyric form of Sappho, Anacreon, and Alcaeus (see lyric). The ode in later European literature was conditioned by both the Pindaric and the Horatian forms. During the Renaissance the ode was revived in Italy by Gabriello Chiabrera and in France most successfully by Ronsard. Ronsard imitated Pindar in odes on public events and Horace in more personal odes. Horatian odes also influenced the 17th-century English poets, especially Ben Jonson, Robert Herrick, and Andrew Marvell. Milton's ode "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" (1629) shows the influence of Pindar, as do the poems written for public occasions by his contemporary Abraham Cowley. However, the Cowleyan (or irregular) ode, originated by Cowley, disregarded the complicated metrical and stanzaic structure of the Pindaric form and employed freely altering stanzas and varying lines. In general the odes of the 19th-century romantic poets—Keats, Shelley, Coleridge—and of such later poets as Swinburne and Hopkins tend to be much freer in form and subject matter than the classical ode. Notable examples of the three kinds of ode are: Pindaric ode, e.g., Thomas Gray's "The Progress of Poesy" ; Horatian ode, e.g., Keats's "To Autumn" ; Cowleyan ode, e.g., Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality." Although the ode has been seldom used in the 20th cent., Allen Tate in "Ode on the Confederate Dead" and Wallace Stevens in "The Idea of Order at Key West" made successful, and highly personal, use of the form.

² The "Ode on Melancholy" matches the "Nightingale" and the "Grecian Urn" in restrained intensity of language and versification. An important difference, however, is that it lacks a dominant symbol. Keats is therefore forced to storm the main gate of the subject directly. This was not a decisive handicap. He was used to it. Partly because of his lack of formal education and his early freedom from the self-consciousness it often creates, he had begun writing poetry in this way, reassured by the large directness of earlier poetry, and without thought of the "winding stair" which is often necessary, said Bacon, for rising. And alone among the major modern poets, Keats was able to get away with it. *The "Ode on Melancholy"* by Walter Jackson Bate in BLOOM, Harold, Editor. Chelsea House. New York. 1987. pgs. 75-81.

³ The poet addresses an imaginary person with protest or exhortation. [...]The mode was so alien to Keats's habitual thinking that no other poem he wrote uses the device in this direct way. [...]The temptation was to introduce himself as if in debate with someone else: and in contrast with the opening of the other odes, the first stanza starts with abrupt protest: *No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine.* *The "Ode on Melancholy"* . Walter Jackson Bate . In BLOOM, Harold, Editor. *The Odes of Keats*. Chelsea House. New York. 1987. pgs. 75-81.

⁴ In Greek mythology, river of forgetfulness in Hades. The dead drank from Lethe upon their arrival in the underworld. *The Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th ed.*. © The Columbia University Press. Used with the permission of Columbia University Press. All Rights Reserved. The Columbia University Press. Place of publication: Not available. 2017.

⁵ wolf's-bane: poison. Source:

http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/melancholy_voc.html#I

⁶ nightshade: poison. Source:

http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/melancholy_voc.html#I

⁷ Persephone (pərsəf'ənē) or Proserpine (prösür'pənē), in Greek and Roman religion and mythology, goddess of fertility and queen of the underworld. She was the daughter of Zeus and Demeter. When she was still a beautiful maiden, Pluto seized her and held her captive in his underworld. Though Demeter eventually persuaded the gods to let her daughter return to her, Persephone was required to remain in the

Make not your rosary of yew-berries⁸,
Nor let the beetle⁹, nor the death-moth¹⁰ be
Your mournful Psyche¹¹, nor the downy owl
A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,
And drown wakeful anguish of the soul.

2¹²

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 shroud¹³;
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,

underworld for four months because Pluto had tricked her into eating a pomegranate (food of the dead) there. When Persephone left the earth, the flowers withered and the grain died, but when she returned, life blossomed anew. This story, which symbolizes the annual vegetation cycle, was celebrated in the Eleusinian Mysteries, in which Persephone appeared under the name Kore. *The Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th ed.*. © The Columbia University Press. Used with the permission of Columbia University Press. All Rights Reserved. The Columbia University Press. Place of publication: Not available. 2017.

⁸ *yew-berries*: symbol of mourning. The yew is traditionally associated with mourning. Source: http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/melancholy_voc.html#I

⁹ The Egyptians regarded the beetle as sacred; as a symbol of resurrection, a jewel-beetle or scarab was placed in tombs. Source: http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/melancholy_voc.html#I

¹⁰ the death's head moth, so called because its markings resemble a human skull. Source: http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/melancholy_voc.html#I

¹¹ In Greek mythology, personification of the human soul. She was so lovely that Eros (Cupid), the god of love, fell in love with her. He swept her off to a beautiful, isolated castle but forbade her to look at him since he was a god. When she disobeyed, he abandoned her, but she ceaselessly searched for him, performing difficult and dangerous tasks, until at last she was reunited with him forever and made immortal. *The Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th ed.*. © The Columbia University Press. Used with the permission of Columbia University Press. All Rights Reserved. The Columbia University Press. Place of publication: Not available. 2017.

¹² Anticipating the ode "To Autumn" of four months later, the second stanza then turns directly to the vivid acceptance of process. In the very springing of the flowers and the new green of the hill, transience falls upon them like a "shroud" as they emerge into being. But the same process in which death is implicit is also leading things into existence and fostering them toward fulfillment. This is an "April shroud," promising existence as well as death. . *The "Ode on Melancholy"*. Walter Jackson Bate in BLOOM, Harold. Editor. Chelsea House. New York. 1987. pgs. 75-81.

¹³ Referring to an "April shroud" rather than an April shower, Keats show how easily darkness can make its abode in the "viewless winds" of metaphor as well as climate. A formalist could say simply that the idea of an April shroud or deathlike spring is paradoxical, and that paradox is a form of playfulness the siege of contraries can take. A formalist could say simply that the idea of an April shroud or deathlike spring is paradoxical, and that paradox is a form of playfulness the siege of contraries can take. The readiness with which such observations can be made accounts for the popularity of Keats among the New Critics when having to choose a Romantic: he "teaches best," granted that awareness of irony or the simultaneous presence of conflicting meanings is a primary stage in the appreciation of poetry. *The "Ode on Melancholy"*. Walter Jackson Bate in BLOOM, Harold. Editor. Chelsea House. New York. 1987. pgs. 75-81.

Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,
Or on the wealth of globed peonies;
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

3¹⁴

She dwells with Beauty--Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate¹⁵ fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

¹⁴ Images of pleasure and pain are now coalesced in the final stanza. For the contrast now is not of one with the other but rather of both, in organic combination, with the dimly allegorical background (the "temple," "Veiled Melancholy" and her "sovran shrine," the "cloudy trophies")—allegorical images that Keats had once so warmly incorporated in narrative but that now (as later in the Fall of Hyperion) loom abstract and shadowlike, suggesting the permanence of the nonhuman.[...] . *The "Ode on Melancholy"* . Walter Jackson Bate in BLOOM, Harold. Editor. Chelsea House. New York. 1987. pgs. 75-81.

¹⁵ the roof of the mouth, hence, the sense of taste; sometimes, intellectual or aesthetic taste. Source: <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/melancholy.html#general>