



## Ode on Melancholy

*The main thought of Ode on Melancholy is that true melancholy does not lie in the sad and ugly things of life, but in everything that is beautiful and joyful.*

John Keats  
*Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, and Other Poems*  
(1820)

No, no, go not to Lethe<sup>1</sup>, neither **twist**  
Wolf's-bane<sup>2</sup>, tight-rooted<sup>3</sup>, for its poisonous wine;  
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd  
By nightshade<sup>4</sup>, ruby grape<sup>5</sup> of Proserpine<sup>6</sup>;  
5 Make not your rosary of yew-berries<sup>7</sup>,  
Nor let the **beetle**, nor the death-moth<sup>8</sup> be  
Your mournful Psyche<sup>9</sup>, nor the downy owl<sup>10</sup>  
A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;  
For shade to shade will come too drowsily<sup>11</sup>,  
10 And **drown** the wakeful anguish<sup>12</sup> of the soul.

But when the melancholy fit<sup>13</sup> shall fall  
Sudden from heaven like a **weeping** cloud,  
That fosters<sup>14</sup> the droop-headed flowers<sup>15</sup> all,  
And hides the green hill in an April **shroud**;  
15 Then glut<sup>16</sup> thy sorrow on a morning rose,  
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,  
Or on the wealth of globed peonies<sup>17</sup>;  
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,  
**Emprison** her soft hand, and let her rave<sup>18</sup>,  
20 And **feed** deep, deep upon her peerless<sup>19</sup> eyes.

She dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die;  
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
**Bidding** adieu; and **aching** Pleasure nigh<sup>20</sup>,  
Turning to Poison while the bee-mouth sips<sup>21</sup>:  
25 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<sup>22</sup> against his palate fine;  
His soul shall taste the sadness of her **might**,  
30 And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

- 1 **Lethe.** Lete; uno dei fiumi infernali della mitologia greca e romana le cui acque davano l'oblio della vita terrena. Dante nella *Divina Commedia* pone questo fiume nel paradiso terrestre.
- 2 **Wolf's-bane.** Aconito; genere di pianta erbacea e velenosa. Anticamente veniva usata come esca per catturare i lupi.
- 3 **tight-rooted.** Dalle radici tenaci.
- 4 **nightshade.** Atropa belladonna (pianta dalle bacche velenose).
- 5 **ruby grape.** Grappolo rosso.
- 6 **Proserpine.** Proserpina; divinità romana delle tenebre, figlia di Giove e Demetra, dea delle messi e sposa di Dite, re degli Inferi. A lei si attribuiva il succedersi delle stagioni in quanto trascorreva il periodo invernale con Dite negli inferi e il resto dell'anno sulla terra con sua madre.
- 7 **yew-berries.** Bacche di tasso (velenose).
- 8 **death-moth.** Falena della morte (la macchia che c'è sul dorso di questo insetto sembra avere la forma di teschio).
- 9 **mournful Psyche.** Lugubre Psiche. Apuleio racconta nelle *Metamorfosi* che Amore si innamorò di Psiche, ma le pose come condizione che non cercasse di vedere il suo volto; Psiche violò il divieto e solo dopo una serie di peripezie venne perdonata e accolta dagli dei.
- 10 **downy owl.** Gufo ricoperto di piume.
- 11 **shade ... drowsily.** Un'ombra si succederà all'altra in modo troppo sonnolento.
- 12 **wakeful anguish.** Angoscia vigilante.
- 13 **melancholy fit.** Scoppio della malinconia.
- 14 **fosters.** Ristora.
- 15 **droop-headed flowers.** Fiori con il capo chino.
- 16 **glut.** Sazia.
- 17 **globed peonies.** Peonie dalla forma di globo, sferica.
- 18 **let her rave.** Lascia che lei si infuri, deliri.
- 19 **peerless.** Senza pari.
- 20 **nigh.** Presso, vicino.
- 21 **while the bee-mouth sips.** Mentre la bocca come un'ape (emblema di chi cerca il piacere) succhia.
- 22 **Can ... grape.** Può schiacciare il grappolo della gioia.

### LITERARY COMPETENCE

#### VOCABULARY

#### 1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.

- |                   |                               |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 scarabeo .....  | 7 reliquario, santuario ..... |
| 2 velo .....      | 8 imprigiona .....            |
| 3 nutriti .....   | 9 attorcigliare .....         |
| 4 affogherà ..... | 10 in lacrime .....           |
| 5 doloroso .....  | 11 dicendo .....              |
| 6 forza .....     |                               |

**> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT****2 READ the first stanza again carefully and answer the following questions.**

- 1 Who is speaking to whom?
- 2 What general advice does the poet give his addressee?
- 3 Which extreme measures to oppose melancholy have to be avoided and why?
- 4 Why are all those measures courted by men?
- 5 What does Psyche stand for?
- 6 Is the addressee able to appreciate his sorrow?
- 7 What is 'the wakeful anguish of the soul' drowned by?

**3 READ the second stanza again and note down:**

- 1 when 'the melancholy fit' falls;
- 2 what melancholy is compared to;
- 3 where the addressee has to 'glut' his sorrow;
- 4 what the flowers stand for;
- 5 what else Keats offers as food for sorrow;
- 6 whether true melancholy involves a gradual evasion of its claims.

**4 READ the poem again till the end and complete the following sentences.**

- 1 'She' is at first an imagined ..... (lines 18-21).
- 2 Then she becomes the goddess of ..... (line 26).
- 3 Melancholy dwells close to the ..... (line 23) whose keenness turns into ..... (line 23).
- 4 The sweetness of joy turns into ..... (line 24) as soon as it is ..... (line 24).
- 5 This new sort of delight is in part a fusion of ..... and ..... (lines 25-26).
- 6 Only those who can appreciate the finest shades of melancholy can equally appreciate ..... (lines 27-28).
- 7 The soul of man is similar to clouds which are hung as ..... in the shrine of melancholy (lines 29-30).

**> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT****5 WORK out the features of each stanza taking into account**

- 1 the rhyme scheme: .....
- 2 the number of lines: .....
- 3 the number of syllables per line: .....
- 4 the number of stresses per line: .....

**6 EXPLAIN:**

- 1 how Keats's stanza differs from the sonnet;
- 2 what effect is achieved.

**7 FOCUS on the first stanza.**

- 1 Underline words and phrases belonging to the world of nature. Which semantic area do they belong to?
- 2 What does the antithesis 'too drowsily' and 'wakeful anguish' in lines 9-10 point out? Choose from among the following.  
☐ Genuine melancholy is linked to anguish.  
☐ The ambiguity of not abandoning oneself to sorrow, death and oblivion in order to enjoy the sensations of an incipient melancholy.  
☐ Sleep and oblivion lead to melancholy.

**8 CONSIDER** the second stanza. It is characterised by two antithetical semantic areas: joy and melancholy.

- 1 Fill in the table below and try to explain the connotation of each word.

Joy	Meaning	Melancholy	Meaning

- 2 What do these lists suggest?  
 3 What is the anger of a 'mistress' parallel to?

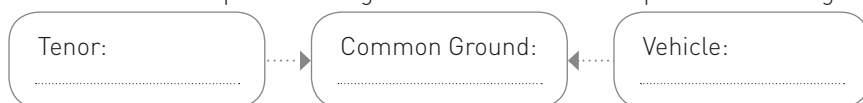
**9 READ** stanza 3 again. Here the emphasis must be put on 'must die'.

- 1 Fill in the diagram below choosing from the list provided.

more intense dies enjoyment must be accompanied with melancholy is linked to beauty	Beauty is transient love and joy fade inseparable from impermanence
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She → ..... → ..... → Also ..... →  
 Therefore ..... = Beauty is ..... because it .....;  
 Joy is .....

- 2 The poet points out the contrasting effect of melancholy in line 24 again. He uses a particular image. Look for it and complete the diagram below in order to explain its meaning.



- 3 Explain why melancholy 'trophies' (line 30) are said to be 'cloudy'.

**10 FOCUS** on Keats's language. Circle examples of

- 1 sensorial language;  
 2 language linked to physical shapes.

Which qualities of an object does the poet particularly insist on?

**11 STATE** the theme of the whole ode.**> COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS WITH THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF THE AGE****12 FIND** similarities between *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (→ T54) and *Ode on Melancholy*.**13 WRITE** not more than 10-12 lines about this topic: 'Melancholy is a fundamental Romantic theme. It may be linked both to physical and psychological loneliness and suffering; it is not to be cancelled with oblivion, but to be enjoyed. Which other Romantic poets belonging both to English and Italian literature have made extensive use of this issue?'