

# The Eve of St. Agnes



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## Summary

### I–III

The **narrator** sets the scene: it is a cold night on St. Agnes' Eve. St. Agnes is the patron saint of chastity. Legend had it that on the Eve of St. Agnes (which occurs in January), various kinds of spells and magic could be successfully practised by virgins in order to bring their future husbands to them, or at least a picture of their future husbands.

This is a cold and deathly opening. A beadsman (a man who is paid to pray for the souls of others) with numb hands is saying prayers. His frosted breath ascends to heaven in the same manner as one's soul was thought to have done after death. The implication is that it is so cold things are dying. The chill is rendered through the crisp, evocative words "*bitter*" (line 1), "*frozen*" (line 3) and "*frosted*" (line 6).

The Beadsman rises after saying his prayers to leave the chapel. The **narrator** mentions the works of sculpture within the chapel as seeming frozen and "*emprisoned*" (line 15). As he shuffles past them (and note how this shuffling will contrast with Porphyro's strides later on in the story) the Beadsman thinks of how they must be aching against the cold, unable to escape from the chapel.

He goes through a door and hears sweet, golden music which **contrasts** with the coldness we have heard described thus far. However, his life as a Beadsman means that he may not enjoy the festivities which are occurring in another part of the house. Instead, he returns to his chamber so that he may pray for other people's sins.

### IV–VI

The Beadsman hears the introduction to the music and a rush of activity. Then trumpets (described as "*snarling*" [line 31] viciously, like the masters of the house) begin to play and many guests arrive into the chambers. These are described as glowing, another contrast to the chapel. However, the mention of the vicious snarling of the trumpets stops the reader from feeling entirely comfortable in the festival chamber.

The revellers burst in dressed in fine apparel and rich clothes. They are a young, joyous crowd, another contrast to the old, shuffling Beadsman. In an aside (lines 41–2), the **narrator** informs us that he wishes to concentrate on "*one Lady*" (line 42), who has so far been preoccupied with thoughts of love. This is an example of the **narrator** talking directly to the reader and guiding the narrative movement of the poem, which gives the **narrator** a personality as a character who we can identify with as being detached from the action – an omniscient **narrator**.

Reflecting on what older women have told her about the significance of St. Agnes' Eve, the lady considers how young virgins – such as herself – can have "*visions of delight*" (line 47 – i.e. male romance figures coming to them) and receive gifts from their loves in the "*honeyed*" night (line 49). Honey evokes warm and sensual taste **connotations**. It is also very often used in Keats to indicate sexuality, probably because of its soft, lush texture. The lady was told that if she looks to Heaven, and pays homage to St. Agnes in her thoughts and prayers, her dream man will appear that night.

### VII–X

Madeline is preoccupied by these thoughts in a sort of daydream, and so does not focus very much on the celebrations. Some suitors look on her daydreaming with scorn as she seems to be ignoring them in favour of thoughts of "*St. Agnes and her lambs unshorn*" (line 71 – after St. Agnes' death, so the tale goes,

her parents saw her in a vision with a baby lamb by her side). Due to the way the **narrator** has focused on her person, the reader is more inclined to be sympathetic to Madeline's thoughts of honey than the suitors' scorn.

Young Madeline lingers at the ball for a little longer. The **narrator** – who suddenly changes location by using the word "*Meantime*" (line 74) in mid sentence – shifts the action to young Porphyro who comes racing across the freezing moors with his heart on fire for the young maid. Note how the fire of his heart **contrasts** with the coldness around the Beadsman earlier in the poem. Also, note how he seems to have crossed the moors regardless of the bitter cold. From the very first description, then, we get the impression there is something 'earthy' about Porphyro: the "*moors*" (line 74) raise **connotations** of a rough, ready, common, strong man. These are (arguably) all typical images of sexuality and power which women conjure up when trying to envisage attractive men.

Standing in the shadow cast by the buttress of the castle, Porphyro prays to the saints to let him see Madeline just once, that he may "*speak, kneel, touch, kiss*" (line 81) her. Note how the list of verbs builds in strength and intensity of action. In another aside, the **narrator** informs us that these things shall occur, which again shows us that the **narrator** is shaping the **plot**, indicating to the reader that the story has a clear sense of structure and tight ordering which the **narrator** shall adhere to.

Porphyro enters the castle. The **narrator** rhetorically pleads that no-one hear or see him as – due to his poor background – he will likely be killed if the castle's residents were to find him. The situation between Porphyro and Madeline's family has strong similarities to the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets in *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare. Furthermore, there is only one person in Madeline's castle who will help Porphyro – the old beldame (a 16<sup>th</sup> century term which means a maid or a nurse) – just as there is only one in Juliet's castle who will help Romeo – the old nurse.

### **XI–XIII**

The beldame comes shuffling along and Porphyro startles her by coming out of the shadows. She soon recognises him, "*grasping his fingers in her palsied hand*" (line 97). Palsy is a disease which results in trapped nerves and involuntary twitching. As such, it is a particularly savage and grim adjective, establishing the sickly nature of the old beldame. Keats may have acquired knowledge of the condition when he worked at Guy's hospital.

Informing him of two particularly angry members of the house who will kill him if they discover him, she warns Porphyro to escape using the **simile** "*like a ghost*" (line 105). This is an odd choice of image as ghosts are usually fear-inducing, supernatural beings. The use of the ghost image enhances the Gothic atmosphere of the poem, and perhaps darkens Porphyro's character in the reader's mind. However, it could also mean that, if Porphyro were to leave without Madeline, he would be dead, to a certain extent. This could make the reader more sympathetic to Porphyro's character. Such ambiguity makes Porphyro's character more dynamic and our reaction to him more complex.

Porphyro tries to calm her, but whilst doing so she interrupts him at line 107, a comic moment which helps establish the reader's impression of her as a buffoon. This is further enhanced by her idiosyncratic "*well – a – well – a – day*" (line 111) which not only sounds ridiculous against the **narrator's** poetic **diction** but looks ridiculous on the page because of the amount of dashes. She leads him to a chilly, moonlit room in the house, which is "*silent as a tomb*" (line 113). This, again, is a Gothic image which further strengthens the atmosphere of death. Porphyro's speech fills this silence. This **dialogue** may be seen as being used to suggest to the reader that he embodies the opposite of silence and death.

### **XIV–XVIII**

The nurse's confusion as to its being St. Agnes' Eve adds to our sense of her slowness and comic role. She uses grand **hyperbole** which compares Porphyro to the king of elves and a mighty magician. These increase our sense of her as a ridiculous, unknowingly comical figure: just saying that Porphyro had

courage would have been adequate. This response is heightened when the nurse manages to convince herself that Madeline has magical powers.

Interestingly, the nurse uses the word "*mickle*" at line 126. This is a Spenserian word meaning 'much.' As we shall see later, Keats uses Spenserian words for a variety of effects across the poem. Here, it acts as a colloquial expression which makes the nurse seem common or old-fashioned.

The nurse then laughs feebly. Her age is sharply contrasted with the brilliance in Porphyro's eyes when she informs him that Madeline has been praying to St. Agnes. Porphyro is moved to tears because of "*those enchantments cold*" (line 134). Some commentators have seen this phrase as significant as it suggests that whatever Madeline conjures through her prayers will not be a living entity. It would seem that Madeline has conjured Porphyro, which would therefore suggest that he is not human or living. This heightens the suspense and the sense of the Gothic which surrounds the poem.

Suddenly – with the energetic **simile** "*like a full-blown rose*" (line 136) – a plan strikes Porphyro, making a "*purple riot*" (line 138) in his heart. Purple is a significant and apt colour as Porphyro is an etymological derivation of the Greek word for 'purple.' He tells the nurse of his plan, which we do not hear. The plan is apparently so shocking that it leads the beldame to call him "*wicked*" (line 143). By refusing to give us any information concerning the plan, Keats builds our interest and temporarily makes us consider that it could be evil or morally dubious.

Porphyro swears to the nurse that he will not harm Madeline, and says that if he does do her any harm or discomfort he will wake the entire castle and confront them (although he accepts he will probably lose). This is an odd promise or oath to make – he is already their enemy, after all. Does this example lead us to see Porphyro as a renegade, rebellious or violent youth? Or does it show that he is so passionate and enamoured of Madeline that he would willingly surrender his life to those who wished him harm if he ever hurt her?

### **XIX-XXI**

Angela asks why Porphyro is trying to scare her (who has prayed for him nightly) so much, referring to herself as a "*poor, weak, palsy-stricken, churchyard thing*" (line 154). All these adjectives emphasise her aged, infirm nature. This complaint makes the "*burning Porphyro*" (line 159) more gentle (again, is this passionate or destructive burning? And note how this verb's **connotations contrast** with the age and slowness of Madeline's nurse). Angela is seemingly convinced and agrees to help him, whether good or ill befalls her.

She agrees to lead Porphyro into Madeline's bedroom and hide him in a closet so he may watch her prepare for bed and sleep. Clearly, there is something darkly voyeuristic about this plan. Acts of voyeurism are regular features of Gothic tales, and the reader's suspense and intrigue may be heightened at this point upon recognition of this Gothic element. The **narrator** mentions the "*pale enchantment*" under which Madeline sleeps, which **contrasts** with the possibility of the real, physical presence of Porphyro.

The final line of this **stanza** discusses Merlin's dream, a reference which has puzzled commentators as it has no bearing on Arthurian legends. The monstrous debt could be seen as a reference to Merlin's death. If this is so, the reference provides an ominous backdrop to this night in which the lovers are to meet, as there were violent storms and supernatural presences on the night of Merlin's death.

Angela agrees to hide him in a place where she says that he will be able to see Madeline's "*lute*" (line 175). There is every possibility that this was intended to be a sexual reference: indeed, the original manuscript copies of the poem were deliberately edited by Keats' publishers as they were considered too sexually explicit in other places. Angela tells Porphyro to pray while she goes to prepare the

chamber, adding as an afterthought that the two of them must be wed or else she may never rise from her grave after death, an incredibly dark and Gothic thought for the nurse to have.

## XXII

Angela hobbles away and Porphyro waits for her to return. When she does she whispers for him to follow her. She is reported to be scared of "*dim espial*" (line 185), which is another archaic word. Here, the effect once again emphasises Angela's age, but now also serves to heighten the sense of the Gothic and the danger – in the form of Madeline's relatives – that could be lurking in the shadows waiting to attack Porphyro. When the pair reach Madeline's room it is described as "*silken, hushed, and chaste*" (line 187), which **contrasts** with our view of Porphyro as headstrong, passionate and potentially violent. Porphyro hides away and Angela leaves with the grim image of their being "*agues*" (meaning painful periods of chill or fits) in her brain" (line 189).

## XXIII–XXIV

Angela goes to walk down the staircase just as Madeline ascends it "*like a missioned spirit*" (line 192). The imagery of ascension implies that Madeline is rising upwards, almost as if she were a saint or spirit rising to Heaven, while the use of the word 'missioned' implies that she is innocent and pure. When she enters the room she is compared to a "*ring-dove*" who is "*frayed*" (another Spenserian word which means frightened). In this case, the effect of this archaic adjective is to draw on the beauty of Spenserian language (which many poets at the time – including Keats – perceived to be the most beautiful expression of the English language – a sort of 'golden age' of literature). This, in turn, emphasises Madeline's delicate nature.

In **stanza** XXIII Madeline's candle goes out, another stock Gothic device used to raise tension by plunging the scene into near darkness. The moonlight is the only source of light, and readers will recognise that it casts a hazy, ghostly and often discomfiting light. Here, it is described as "*pallid*" (line 200) which means sickly or deathly, which emphasises this eeriness. The **caesura** in this **stanza** enacts Madeline's panting in the reader's delivery. It can also be said that the density of pauses raises the tension of the **stanza**. The end of the **stanza** mentions a dying nightingale, which again imports a sense of death into the poem.

## XXV–XXVII

Madeline prepares for bed in the moonlight. The **narrative** description makes us 'see' or 'watch' the moonlight fall on Madeline's "*fair breast*" (line 218), which places the reader very much in Porphyro's position. This can be said to increase our level of identification with him. Madeline is compared to an angel or saint, and seems so free from sin or dreams of sex that Porphyro grows faint. We might question why he seems so worried that she is seemingly so virginal: is he only worried that she will not love him as a result, or simply that she will not sleep with him as a result? However, his heart revives as he sees her let down her hair (with the word "*frees*" (line 227) implying a youthfulness and rebellion similar to Porphyro's) and removes her "*warmed jewels*" (line 228), which is another sexual image. After she removes her clothes she is described as "*like a mermaid*" (line 231), a temptress of the sea. She is having thoughts of St. Agnes, still trying to focus on the Saint so that her dream lover may come to her by some "*charm*" (line 234).

**Stanza** XXVII describes Madeline as she falls asleep. Her act of sleeping is rendered in calming, relaxing language and imagery, such as the words "*poppied warmth*" (line 237) which **contrasts** to the cruel coldness earlier in the poem. Such **diction** is soothing and places her in a blissful haven where neither joy nor pain is experienced. Although it can be said to contrast with the coldness in a positive way, the reader may still feel some anxiousness at this point: Madeline experiences no joy, and is blind to sunshine. She is compared to a closed rose in line 243. These images of passivity and inertness are both curiously warming but also contrast with Porphyro's active physicality and alertness. As such, they highlight her vulnerability as a sleeper, while he watches her from the closet.

### XXVIII–XXXI

Porphyro gazes at her dress upon the floor – clearly an action which shows that he desires the wearer. He listens to her breathing and blesses her. “*Slumbrous tenderness*” (line 247) is a way of describing her audible breathing whilst she sleeps, not necessarily her snoring. Porphyro hopes that this breathing will “wake” (line 247, meaning turn) into the breathing of an excited lover. He creeps out from the closet to the curtains of her bed and peeps in on her sleeping.

Porphyro begins to set a table by her bedside, throwing a cloth across it. The **narrator** calls for the use of a “*drowsy Morphean amulet*” (line 257). An amulet is both a type of charm against evil or witchcraft and a medicine of occult or magical powers. Morpheus is the god of sleep, so it would seem that Porphyro desires a sleeping potion or charm to shield Madeline from any danger, thereby evoking a sense of danger and magic back into the **plot**. That Porphyro wishes to shield Madeline from danger increases the reader’s empathy with his character and motivation.

At this point, music is heard from the revelries elsewhere in the castle. The list effect and the strong ‘t’ sounds in “*boistrous, midnight, festival*” (line 258) help to aurally render the loud sounds. These sounds contrast with the peaceful words and **diction** we have come to associate with Madeline’s bedroom. A hall door is closed and these sounds die away. This moment acts to remind us of the setting and to create a strong, aural contrast between the festivities and the lovers.

Madeline maintains her soft, delicate sleep, emphasised by beautiful, sensuous adjectives such as “*azure-lidded*” (line 262) and “*lavendered*” (line 263). Porphyro places a heap of rich, opulent food upon the table, all described using rich adjectives and imagery. These images are directly contrasted with “*the chilly room*” (line 275).

Porphyro then asks Madeline to wake and open her eyes or else he will faint beside her though heartache.

### XXXII–XXXIV

He leans onto her pillow, but she does not wake as St. Agnes’ charm seems impossible to cast off. We question whether this is a good thing (as she is peacefully sleeping) or a bad thing (as she is separated from someone who we might recognise as being her ideal lover). Porphyro can only muse and consider “*fantasies*” (line 288) about her. We might consider Madeline’s position as incredibly weak (she is in a deep sleep from which she cannot wake and has a male intruder bending over her) and is therefore synonymous with women’s position in society at the time. I do not think that Keats was looking to emphasise this social context too heavily, but it might be of interest to you how he explores it.

Porphyro stops his fantasising and plays upon her lute, which continues the sexual **metaphor** from earlier in the poem. He plays a song called ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ which, as we shall see, Keats clearly saw as being a strangely dark romantic story of magic, power and eeriness.

This song wakes her, but it is not a comforting awakening. Instead, her eyes are described as “*affrayed*” (line 296), which means startled or frightened. Her breathing speeds up, which raises the tension and underlines for the reader the vulnerable position she is in. Porphyro sinks to his knees in a submissive, less dominating pose and turns “*pale*” (line 297). This movement allays some of our fears that he may be a serious threat or danger to Madeline. However, as Madeline slowly realises that Porphyro – who she has been dreaming about – is real and in front of her, the **narrator** describes her emotions as going through a “*painful change*” (line 300). The realisation causes her to cry, expelling the bliss of her sleep. This may leave us wary of Porphyro and lead us to sympathise with Madeline.

### XXXV–XXXVIII

Madeline states that she heard Porphyro in her dreams singing, but is saddened that in reality he is "*pallid, chill, and drear!*" (line 311). She begs him to be like he was in her dreams; she fears that she will be lost if he were to die. The movement of these **stanzas** sees our tension and fears about the possibility of danger or animosity between the lovers being allayed as the two move closer together.

On hearing this, Porphyro rises, flushed and "*like a throbbing star*" (line 318), both sexual symbols. He is then described as curiously melting into her dream. This is as close to an explicit description of the act of sex as a 19<sup>th</sup> century censor would have allowed. Outside, the wind blows, described as "*patterning the sharp sleet*" (line 323) against the windows. Here, the 't' sounds enact in the reader's voice the sound of the sleet hitting the window, providing a powerful contrast to the warmth of the lovers at the point of the consummation of their love.

**Stanza XXXVII** contains several **dialogues** mixed with narration. The **narrator** tells us it is dark and sleety outside; Porphyro reassures Madeline that he is not a dream; the **narrator** again reminds us of the icy conditions outside; Madeline is grieved that it is not a dream as she feels Porphyro will leave her even though she is deeply in love with him. The **narrative** style quickens the pace of the delivery and the action, which makes the reader exhilarated and more eager to read on.

Porphyro assures Madeline that he will not leave her, saying that she is his "*silver shrine*" (line 387) and that he is a "*famished pilgrim – saved by a miracle*" (line 339). The language Porphyro uses reflects that of the Christian religion, which shows that Porphyro is – to a certain extent – deifying Madeline. His use of the language **contrasts** with the figure of the Beadsman earlier in the poem, and suggests a replacing of Christianity with a religion or spirituality of love.

### XXXIX–XLII

Porphyro states that the storm is magical and that, though it seems bleak, it can be of benefit to the two of them. He convinces Madeline to rise out of bed (the revellers will be too drunk to notice) and return with him over the moors where he will make a home for her. It is important to note the contemporary context when analysing the moor. Disease in Keats' time was much more prevalent than it is now. Cures had still not been discovered for fairly simple illnesses, such as the common cold, or more serious complaints, such as tuberculosis. Keats would have seen suffering during his time at Guy's Hospital, and would have been aware that standing on a freezing moor in the middle of a storm would very likely have resulted in illness and potential death. For Porphyro to convince Madeline to travel across the moors can therefore be seen as either an incredibly passionate and committed gesture of love, or a reckless and potentially life-threatening move.

Madeline is hurriedly stirred into action, worried about the inhabitants of the castle. The lovers find "*a darkling way*" (line 355) by which to escape. They are described as gliding "*like phantoms*" (line 361), a curiously dark, Gothic image which reminds us of the strange, eerie atmosphere in other parts of the poem. The image of the drunk porter may be a literary allusion to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. If so, it imports a touch of the macabre at a moment in which the reader has been subject to the romance and passion of the lovers' union. Further to this, as the couple leave, the door is said to "*groan*" (line 369) on its hinges, heightening the Gothic atmosphere.

In the final **stanza**, the **narrator** tells us that they have "*fled away into the storm*" (line 371), another means of emphasising that the ending of this poem is not as positive or light-hearted as we might expect from a love story. The storm implies that the lovers' futures may be difficult or troubling.

The poem's close is very dark: we are told of the Baron's nightmares, of Angela dying "*palsy-twitched*" (line 376) with a deformed face, and the religious Beadsman sleeping once more in cold ashes – a reference to his death. The ending is gruesome and dark: the lovers' happiness, though tinged with the difficulties and ambiguities of the storm, is contrasted, finally, against the bleak, haggard deaths and nightmares of the older and more religious characters. Ending the poem in this way could be a means through which Keats can suggest that love and passion are stronger forces than age and 'cold' religion. However, the ambiguities mean that this is hardly a clear-cut conclusion.

## Key Themes

'The Eve of St. Agnes' is a complex poem which deals with many different subjects and themes. I've outlined some below. Bear in mind that you will need to think for yourself about the ways in which Keats raises these issues within the poem, and what effect that has on you as a reader.

### Religion and Old Age

Questions concerning religion and old age are explored through the characters of the Beadsman and Angela. Keats' description of the Beadsman emphasises the difficulty of his life by drawing connections between him and his environment. The "bitter-chill" (line 1) of St. Agnes' Eve is echoed in the Beadsman's "frosted breath" (line 6) and numb fingers. The Beadsman is described as "meagre, barefoot, wan" (line 12), which are all physically diminished properties which create a rather pathetic, weak figure in our minds. The sculptures in the chapel are described as being "Emprisoned in black" (line 15). If we were to think of the black cloak a man of the church would wear, we might be tempted to see this phrase as a **metaphor** for the way in which the Beadsman is imprisoned within his religious duties. This seems to show an ambivalent (if not negative) view of Christianity being explored by Keats at this point. This argument is furthered when we consider the way in which the cold, weak, entrapped figure of the Beadsman is contrasted with the fire, passion and energy of Porphyro later in the poem. Furthermore, the only other appearance of the Beadsman is at the end of the poem where he dies, alone, in spite of his religious piety.

However, it is Keats' treatment of Angela which is particularly savage. In the poem, she puts her own safety and well-being at risk by helping Porphyro in his scheme to win Madeline's heart. Although we are encouraged to laugh at her old age and comic buffoonery, many readers hold a natural empathy with her simply because she is old and comic. However, Keats removes her from the story after **stanza XXII**, only bringing her in at the end to die "palsy-twitched, with meagre face deform" (line 376). Palsy is an illness which causes paralysis in the nerves of a body part and uncontrollable twitching. Keats suggests that this palsy has affected Angela's face and deformed her, which is a painful and miserable way to grow old. Keats' harsh punishment for Angela may suggest that the poet is condemning age, or at least revealing its harsh and brutal effect on the human frame. As such, he could be further encouraging the view that youthfulness is a blessed charm whereas old age is a curse.

Many commentators have suggested that Keats' harsh treatment of Angela and the Beadsman are included in order to make the poem less trivial, light-hearted and over-sentimental (unlike many romances of the time). In this sense, Keats can be seen to force his **narrative** to deal with heavyweight issues such as age and religion in a satirical and savage way, which affects the way we respond to this romantic **narrative** (in other words, we treat it more seriously).

### The Gothic / Supernatural

The genre of Gothic relies, to a certain extent, on the heightening of suspense or terror in the reader to induce pleasure and interest. These need not be what a modern day reader would understand as 'scary': good examples of the Gothic in Romantic literature include Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (also by Keats) – neither of these would keep you up too late into the night.

The Gothic genre usually involves some 'stock' – or common – elements, including:

- reference to death
- eerie castles, dark hallways, creaking doors
- storms
- magic, sorcery and enchantments
- figures of power or domination (usually male)
- voyeurism
- powerless or vulnerable figures (usually female)
- ambiguous endings
- a love affair

*The Eve of St. Agnes* contains almost all of the above elements and many more examples. By including elements of the Gothic or the supernatural, Keats creates a love story which is darker than we might expect in several places. At specific points, such as when Porphyro watches over the sleeping Madeline, the reader becomes confused as to whether or not we should support Porphyro, who is essentially stalking Madeline. A sudden confusion such as this is disorientating for the reader, and is therefore interesting. At other times, the magic and sorcery of the night is discomfiting. These Gothic moments serve to diversify our response to the love story, thereby heightening our suspense and maintaining our interest.

## Sexuality

When the original manuscript of this poem was sent to his publishers, it was returned to Keats with a note saying that it was 'unfit for ladies' due to its explicit sexual content. Keats complained bitterly that he was being censored, but eventually edited some sections to reduce the references to sex. Despite the cuts, however, one key theme of the poem (as I'm sure you will have picked up on) remains that of sexuality.

One effect of the inclusion of references to lutes, "throbbing star" (line 318) and a man melting into a young lady's dream (XXXVI) is to remind the reader of the heated, passionate physicality of the lovers compared to the coldness of Angela, the Beadsman and the castle.

The references to sexuality are also important in view of the context. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century writers would have been severely penalised for making explicit references to sex in their writing. As a result, the closest many stories involving romance came to exploring sex were simplified, twee and sentimental scenes involving young men holding young ladies' hands in parks in full view of other people. Keats' story is much more suggestive, and therefore more complex and (perhaps) realistic. His **narrative** is much more willing to embrace the (contextually) difficult and contentious issue of sex in literature.

It is important to note that an exploration of sex does not automatically make a story less sentimental. This effect comes in the way that Keats examines the tensions and psychology between the lovers and their sexualities. Madeline is – for all we can tell – a devout virgin: why, then, is she praying so passionately for a man on St. Agnes' Eve? And why does the thought of her being so devout a virgin seem to cause Porphyro to almost faint at one point? Also, if **stanza** XXXVI is an explicit reference to their consummation, is the fact that this occurs out of wedlock significant? Also, to what extent do we feel it is appropriate for Porphyro to watch Madeline undress for bed? Many readers feel uncomfortable at this section. Perhaps this part is intended to underline (and perhaps condemn) the forceful, dominating role of the man in heterosexual relationships? That said, there seem to be no repercussions to these acts of voyeurism.

It would seem that sexuality, therefore, can only be viewed in this poem as a thorny and complex issue.

## Narrative Issues

How is this **narrative** constructed by Keats, and how does this affect the way we respond to it?

Many commentators note the dramatic qualities of this poem. The poem's construction is able to hold our interest throughout, providing intriguing mysteries and contrasts that keep the reader stimulated. What follows are some of the key aspects to Keats' **narrative** construction:

## Poetic Imagery and Language

First and foremost, it is important to note that here (and in his other poems) Keats' **narrative** is told through the use of poetic imagery and language. Keats' work is celebrated for its sensuous, rich descriptions and attention to detail. If we look at **stanza** XXIV we see lush descriptions which help to conjure up the images to our minds:



"A casement high and triple-arched there was,  
All garlanded with carven imag'ries  
Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,  
And diamonded with panes of quaint device..."

Keats' poetry is often noted for its appeal to all our senses: here, the use of the fruits and flowers is an appeal to our sense of smell. He also often turns nouns into verbs: in the case above, the noun diamond has become "diamonded." This increases Keats' vocabulary, and makes his verse seem fresh and his descriptions unique and sensuous. There is assonance in the second line between the words "garlanded" and "carven", which makes the description orally pleasant to hear, making it seem ornate and well-crafted (just like the thing it describes). The **alliteration** in the fourth line between the words "diamonded" and "device" also gives this impression. All of these techniques make it seem as if the language is mimicking or attempting to re-enact the emotions that the **narrator** seems to be experiencing when he is looking at the objects (if not trying to enact the specific qualities of the object itself).

These are just some of the poetic techniques Keats uses to tell his story. You must become acquainted with these techniques and feel comfortable when talking about them as they are the primary way through which we are made to interact with the story.

### The Speaker

*The Eve of St. Agnes* is written in a third person **narrative**. On the whole, the personality of the **narrator** (his opinions on the **plot**, for example) is rarely developed. However, we are made to be aware of his existence at several points.

There are few **plot** spoilers, so to speak. We are held in suspense as to the direction of Porphyro's plan until the close of the poem. We are not aware as to what is happening to the revellers at various points. At the close, we are not offered any comfortable resolution as to what will happen to the lovers in the future. As such, we are not offered the sense of well-being and knowing which we may get with the 'happily-ever-after' ending of other love stories. In this sense, suspense and interest are raised as we do not have the answers to many questions we seek. Keats plays with the reader's intuitive nature by denying these answers.

### The Structure

Keats uses the **Spenserian stanza** throughout the poem. The **stanza** is made of nine lines. The first eight are in **iambic pentameter**. The last one is an **alexandrine**, a longer line in **iambic hexameter**. The **rhyme** scheme is (generally speaking) *ababbcbcc*.

The **Spenserian stanza** was subject to a revival by the Romantic poets. It was made famous by Edmund Spenser, a highly revered 16<sup>th</sup> century poet. Spenser used this **stanza** in his epic poem *The Faerie Queen*, which followed the lives of six knights and examined several virtues (covering large issues such as charity, friendship and chastity). After this, the **stanza** was not used for many centuries until Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (which was published a few years before *The Eve of St. Agnes*). To a certain extent, the use of **stanzas** imports an element of the antique and the exotic into Keats' poem.

However, it is important to note that the **plot** and subject matter of Keats' poem are radically different to that of Spenser's work. Christianity is a positive influence to the characters in *The Faerie Queen*, but as we have seen it is treated with ambivalence (at best) in *The Eve of St. Agnes*.



*The Eve of St. Agnes*, Madeline undressing, by John Everett Millais, 1863

Some commentators suggest that the **rhyme** scheme was used by Keats to create a poem which caused its readers to surrender rational or logical thought processes in favour of instinct and fluidity. This requires quite a leap of critical imagination, but is quite an interesting line of thought. The way the *a rhyme* starts off the **stanza**, but is then dropped in favour of the *b rhyme*, which is then dropped in favour of the *c rhyme*, seems to reflect (so the argument goes) a way of thinking which twists around, looping back on itself in order to develop and move forward to its final thought (which is a delayed **rhyme** due to the **alexandrine**). This **rhyme** scheme's progression is rather erratic, which is more suggestive of a creative or fluid way of thinking rather than rationality or formalism (which might instead go in a straight line, such as *a – a, b – b, c – c*, etc.). In this sense, the **stanza** structure attempts to make the reader's interaction with the **narrative** seem intuitive rather than logical, based on sensation rather than strict rules.

The **alexandrine** is one of the most interesting elements to the **stanza** and deserves comment. The first eight lines of **iambic pentameter** build an expectation in the reader's mind that this **rhythm** and line length shall be maintained. Yet the ninth and final line is noticeably longer. Keats often uses this longer line to signal to the reader that a pause in the **narrative** is about to occur and that the current **stanza** is being concluded. As a result of being longer, the **alexandrine** acquires a sort of grandness, and as a result of being the conclusion of the **stanza**, it acquires a sort of majesty or superiority above the other lines. This is not to say that more important information or poetry occurs within the **alexandrine**, just that it is a clever way for Keats to regulate the tempo and movement of his verse.

### Plot Development and Movement

Partly as a result of the **Spenserian stanza** (but also through other **narrative** techniques) we can say that the poem is filled with movement between 'scenes' of action. Keats would later go on to write dramas, and his dramatic potential can clearly be seen in this poem.

He achieves movement and **plot** development in some of the following ways:

Technique	Effect
<b>Stanza Breaks</b>	Often this provides a natural moment in which Keats changes his <b>narrative</b> focus, changing the action occurring or moving the location in which that action occurs.
<b>Contrasts</b>	Keats draws many <b>contrasts</b> in the poem. These include <b>contrasts</b> between groups of characters (the Beadsman / Angela vs. Porphyro / Madeline), locations (the festivities in the hall vs. Madeline's bedroom) or temperatures (the chill outside vs. the warmth of Madeline's bedroom). By creating <b>contrasts</b> Keats encourages us to keep our minds on other sections of the poem to the one we are engaged with at the time, creating unity and depth.
<b>Dialogue</b>	Often, <b>dialogue</b> will increase the speed of a section or slow it down depending on who is speaking. Angela's speech is often slow and comic, tending to remain focused on one subject over many lines. The conversation between the lovers at <b>stanza</b> XXXVII, by contrast, is fast paced.
<b>Caesura</b>	The use of <b>caesura</b> (mid-line pauses) allows Keats to give long lists. This is a way of increasing our sense of the <b>narrator's</b> attention to detail concerning the scene he is contemplating. This point is very much entangled with the use of description. Keats uses a lot of dense imagery at certain points of his <b>narrative</b> . This focuses our attention on often minute details, which inevitably slows the <b>plot</b> .

Technique	Effect
Third Person <b>Narrator</b>	The use of a third person <b>narrator</b> allows for a storyteller who can see into the deep thoughts and feelings of his / her characters and see many different time frames at once. However, Keats' <b>narrator</b> does not take up these opportunities very often. As such, we would call him an objective third person <b>narrator</b> . The action is usually focused on one viewpoint (rather than, say, seeing events inside the hall and bedroom simultaneously) and hardly ever goes into the character's minds. This makes the poem seem more focused on the events of the evening (and specifically Porphyro's seduction of Madeline), which gives it a sense of intensity. It also closes the perceived gap between the <b>narrator</b> and the reader, as we both seem to be seeing the action at the same time for the first time (this is clearly not the case, but it seems that way when we are reading).
<b>Framing</b>	The framing of the story is interesting. We start and end with the Beadsman, although the main interest of the story occurs in between these two points. Generally speaking, the action of the poem takes place on one night in the same place, except in the last <b>stanza</b> where Keats transports the reader forward in time to the older character's nightmares and deaths. This framing makes it seem as if the lovers have fled not only from the story, but also from us, and that it is us, as readers, who have been left behind with the Beadsman and Angela. Having the lovers flee from the reader in this way almost emphasises their energy, free spirit and passion.
<b>Character Development</b>	We've already touched on the way that at some points in the story (particularly the voyeurism section) we are unsure as to how to respond to the character of Porphyro. Arguably, we may also feel frustrated with the piety of Madeline at certain points, depending on which approach you take. These responses demonstrate that character development can also change the movement of the poem. If we are forced to reassess our evaluations at certain points, we tend to feel disorientated and more questioning. This usually forces us to re-evaluate our previously held assumptions and opinions, which inevitably makes us read slower.

The above is not a definitive list. However, it should serve to make you more aware of the ways in which the **narrative** techniques at work here affect our reading experience and how we come to interact with the poem.