Ode on Indolence

POEM TEXT

"They toil not, neither do they spin."

One morn before me were three figures seen,
With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced;
And one behind the other stepp'd serene,
In placid sandals, and in white robes graced:
They pass'd, like figures on a marble Urn,
When shifted round to see the other side;
They came again; as when the Urn once more
Is shifted round, the first seen Shades return;
And they were strange to me, as may betide
With Vases, to one deep in Phidian lore.

How is it, Shadows, that I knew ye not?
How came ye muffled in so hush a Masque?
Was it a silent deep-disguised plot
To steal away, and leave without a task
My idle days? Ripe was the drowsy hour;
The blissful cloud of summer-indolence
Benumb'd my eyes; my pulse grew less and less;
Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower.
O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense
Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness?

A third time pass'd they by, and, passing, turn'd
Each one the face a moment whiles to me;
Then faded, and to follow them I burn'd
And ached for wings, because I knew the three:
The first was a fair Maid, and Love her name;
The second was Ambition, pale of cheek,
And ever watchful with fatigued eye;
The last, whom I love more, the more of blame
Is heap'd upon her, Maiden most unmeek,—
I knew to be my demon Poesy.

They faded, and, forsooth! I wanted wings:
O folly! What is love? and where is it?
And for that poor Ambition—it springs
From a man's little heart's short fever-fit;
For Poesy!—no,—she has not a joy,—
At least for me,—so sweet as drowsy noons,
And evenings steep'd in honied indolence;
O, for an age so shelter'd from annoy,
That I may never know how change the moons,
Or hear the voice of busy common-sense!

And once more came they by;—alas! wherefore?
My sleep had been embroider'd with dim dreams;
My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o'er
With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams:
The morn was clouded, but no shower fell,
Though in her lids hung the sweet tears of May;
The open casement press'd a new-leaved vine,
Let in the budding warmth and throstle's lay;
O Shadows! 'twas a time to bid farewell!
Upon your skirts had fallen no tears of mine.

So, ye three Ghosts, adieu! Ye cannot raise
My head cool-bedded in the flowery grass;
For I would not be dieted with praise,
A pet-lamb in a sentimental Farce!
Fade softly from my eyes, and be once more
In masque-like figures on the dreamy Urn;
Farewell! I yet have visions for the night,
And for the day faint visions there is store;
Vanish, ye Phantoms, from my idle spright,
Into the clouds, and never more return!

SUMMARY

I awoke one morning to see three figures hovering before my eyes. Their heads were bent; they held hands and all looked to one side. They walked calmly in a line, dressed in elegant sandals and white robes. They went past me, moving like images on an ancient marble vase do when you turn it around to see the other side; then they came back, just as the images come back when you turn the vase around again. They seemed unfamiliar to me—which can happen, if you know more about ancient Greek statuary than you do about urns.

How could I have thought I didn't recognize you, you strange specters? Why did you turn up disguised, like actors in a silent, secretive play? Were you scheming to creep away and leave me with nothing to do? The sleepy morning was delicious as a plump fruit; my eyes were delectably clouded with summery laziness; my heart beat slower and slower; I wasn't troubled by

either pains or pleasures. Oh, why didn't you go away, you ghosts, and leave me haunted by nothing but—well, nothing?

The figures came by again. This time, they turned to look at me. Then, at last, they faded away; I longed to fly after them because I *did* know who they were. The first one was the beautiful girl named Love. The second was Ambition, with his thin cheeks and tired, watchful eyes. The last one (whom I love all the more when people say bad things about her), a bold and demanding girl, I recognized as Poetry, my presiding spirit.

They vanished, and, good lord, I wished I had wings to follow them. What foolishness! What's the use of love, after all, and where can you find it even if you wanted it? As for paltry Ambition, it's just a tremor that shakes a guy's heart during his short and insignificant life. And as for Poetry—no... no, she doesn't offer any pleasures (at least in my opinion) as delicious as sleepy afternoons and evenings drenched in sweet laziness. Oh, if only I could live a life so untroubled that I'd never know that time was passing or be pestered by the little concerns of everyday life!

The figures came by *again*. But why? My sleep had been richly decorated with mysterious, half-seen dreams. My soul had been a green meadow full of flowers, moving shadows, and dappled sunlight. The morning was cloudy, but the rain wasn't falling, though you could see that a May shower was on its way. The open window pressed against a vine with fresh new leaves and let in the warmth of spring and the song of a thrush. Oh, ghosts! I wanted to say goodbye to you then. I wouldn't have mourned your disappearance.

So goodbye, you ghosts! You can't get me to lift my head up from its cool and pleasant bed in the grass. I don't want to live for acclaim, like some cosseted lamb in a treacly, embarrassing play. Fade away, ghosts, and return to your place on that imagined marble vase. Goodbye! I still have dreams to dream in the night, daydreams to dream in the day. Go away, you ghosts; leave my imagination, disappear into the clouds, and don't come back!

THEMES

THE VIRTUES OF LAZINESS

This poem's speaker—a voice for John Keats himself—is pestered one morning by a persistent vision. Just as he awakes, he sees three personified figures representing his motivations: Love, Ambition, and most alluring of all, Poesy (or poetry). This trio walks past him over and over, making pointed eye contact, silently pressuring him to get out of bed and make something of himself. At first, the speaker feels eager to do just that. Ultimately, though, he rejects action in favor of "honied indolence": sweet, delicious, daydreamy laziness. Dreamy inaction, for this speaker, offers deeper rewards than worldly success can.

When Love, Ambition, and Poesy first show their faces, the speaker doesn't want anything to do with them. He wishes that they would "melt" and leave him "unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness." In other words, he's been having a perfectly lovely time in the world of sleep, where neither "pain" nor "pleasure" has any power over him. Sleepy oblivion seems preferable to waking life, during which he's always being goaded by "the voice of busy common-sense"—the little voice that tells him he really must get up and do something useful with himself.

Still, the speaker feels a spike of anxiety at the three figures' appearance, wishing he could rush after them as they slowly fade from his sight. Quickly, though, he brushes that longing aside. Pursuing Love, Ambition, and Poesy, he says, is a fool's errand. Love is always tricksy and evasive, Ambition is just the egotistical longing of a puny mortal's "little heart," and Poesy... well, Poesy is delightful, but not so delightful as "honied indolence": sweet, sweet laziness.

None of these motivations, in other words, can offer the speaker the same pleasures that lounging can. Lying in bed doing nothing, he can enjoy the quiet of his inner life, in which his soul becomes a grassy lawn "besprinkled" with flowers and dappled sunlight. He's also free to appreciate the world outside his window, paying dreamy attention to the "new-leaved vine" that pushes its nose over the sill, the warm clouds of a grey spring morning, and the sound of birdsong.

Choosing this quiet, receptive, observant attitude over the noisy rewards of "praise" and success, the speaker makes a case for passivity over activity, the private world over the public world, and *being* over *doing*. Perhaps simply *being alive* is enough of a reason to live.

Of course, the very fact that this poem is, well, a *poem* suggests that the speaker doesn't reject Poesy for good, no matter what he claims!

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-60

ARTISTIC ACTION VS. CONTEMPLATION

When this poem's speaker is visited by three beckoning spirits—Love, Ambition, and Poesy, his great motivations—he can't decide whether he wants to rush after them or to banish them forever. Though he settles on telling them to clear off, his ambivalence about his spectral visitors suggests that he *can't* banish them for good. Yet he can't just get out of bed and chase them, either. Making art, this poem suggests, means balancing the desire to act and achieve something with the passive, quiet reflection and contemplation that give artistic visions room to take shape.

When the three figures of Love, Ambition, and Poesy first appear to the speaker, he can't decide what makes him more uncomfortable: the idea that they're there to lure him out of his 'honied indolence" in bed, or the idea that they're conspiring in a "deep-disguised plot" to "steal away" from him and leave him "without a task" to occupy his time—in other words, to creep away and leave him without anything to do. As uncomfortable as these figures make him, they're also *important* to him. Part of him wants them to go away and leave him alone; part of him "burn[s]" to follow them.

A big part of the speaker's difficulty with these figures is that he's afraid they'll lead him astray. If he gets up and runs after fame, fortune, and love, he worries, he'll put himself in danger of becoming a "pet-lamb in a sentimental Farce"—a ludicrous figure who strives only for cheap external rewards, "dieted" (or fed) with hollow "praise" for his second-rate art. If your art comes *only* from actively rushing after your "Ambition," these words suggest, it won't have been worth making.

Instead, the speaker turns toward "indolence," a passive, lazy, dreamy receptivity. He rejects an urge to go out and *do* things in favor of gazing idly out his window at a "new-leaved vine" poking its nose over the sill and a sky on the verge of releasing a gentle spring shower. These images of fresh springy potential—of things that are *about* to happen—symbolically suggest that the speaker will indeed follow his "three Ghosts," but that doing so will be more like patiently watching a plant growing than like springing out of bed to do his chores.

Poetry, this Ode suggests, doesn't get built like a wall; instead, it sprouts like a new leaf. Poets need something more than willpower and ego. They need a quality that Keats once called "negative capability," the ability "to be in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts," patiently watching and waiting without rushing to a conclusion, letting an artwork take shape in its own sweet time. Ambitious activity on its own won't cut it; indolent contemplation is just as important a part of the work.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 12-15
- Lines 23-58

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-10

One morn before me were three figures seen,
With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced;
And one behind the other stepp'd serene,
In placid sandals, and in white robes graced:
They pass'd, like figures on a marble Urn,
When shifted round to see the other side;
They came again; as when the Urn once more
Is shifted round, the first seen Shades return;
And they were strange to me, as may betide
With Vases, to one deep in Phidian lore.

The "Ode on Indolence"—a hymn to laziness and passivity—begins, fittingly enough, with a dreamy scene. The speaker wakes up one morning to see "three figures" walking past him. Appearing in profile, holding hands, dressed in "placid sandals" and "white robes," they seem to have stepped right off a "marble Urn," an ancient Greek vase.

They move like they're on an urn, too—or, more precisely, as if they're on an urn that's being slowly rotated, so the figures on it move past, disappear, then reappear as their side of the urn comes round again. Take a look at the way the speaker describes their motion:

> They pass'd, like figures on a marble Urn,
> When shifted round to see the other side;
> They came again; as when the Urn once more
> Is shifted round, the first seen Shades return;

The repetitive language here evokes the dreamy, steady circling of the imagined urn as the figures pass before the speaker's eyes once and again. The figures' inexorable return—and the fact that the speaker refers to the figures as "Shades," ghosts—make this vision feel haunting. These shades, no matter how "serene" and peaceful they look, seem to have ghost-like *business* with the speaker.

Still barely awake, the speaker doesn't even do anything so active as *see* the figures: rather, he says that "one morn before me were three figures seen," as if someone else might almost have been doing the seeing. And as the figures pass him by once and again, they seem "strange to [him]," unfamiliar—an unfamiliarity he justifies by saying he's well-versed in "Phidian lore," not in vases. The "Phidian lore" the speaker alludes to is a knowledge of ancient Greek sculpture: Phidias was the legendary sculptor to whom the Parthenon Marbles were attributed.

The speaker thus seems to say: *What do you want from me, urn-figures? I can't identify you, I'm no expert, I know more about Greek statuary than I do about vase-people like you.*

Next to the speaker's precise image of a Greek urn being spun around for examination—*and* the substantial knowledge of Greek art implied by the very words "Phidian lore"—this sounds like a weak excuse, a kind of 19th-century "new phone, who dis?" The speaker *does* sort of recognize these figures. He just doesn't want to. These shades want something from him, and he'd rather stay in bed.

The fact that these shades appear "like figures on a marble Urn" gives some hint at what exactly they might want. Keats, fascinated by ancient Greece, often used its enduring artworks as a way to explore the powers, mysteries, and limits of art

itself. If three Grecian urn-figures are haunting this very Keatsian speaker, they probably have something to do with his artistic destiny.

The poem's epigraph ("They toil not, neither do they spin") thus feels like the speaker's preemptive argument against the shades' creative demands. Those words come from no lesser authority than Christ: they're a quotation from the parable of the lilies, a story Jesus tells in the biblical Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In this story, Jesus tells his followers not to worry or strive, but to learn from the "lilies of the field," which don't do a lick of work but are still dressed more beautifully than King Solomon himself. Such lily-like indolence, this poem will argue, is both delicious and mysteriously creative.

LINES 11-15

How is it, Shadows, that I knew ye not?
How came ye muffled in so hush a Masque?
Was it a silent deep-disguised plot
To steal away, and leave without a task
My idle days?

The speaker now addresses the haunting "Shadows" in a direct apostrophe:

> How is it, Shadows, that I knew ye not?
> How came ye muffled in so hush a Masque?

The speaker here admits he should have recognized the figures all along. He knows them well; he's just never before seen them "muffled in so hush a Masque" (that is, disguised, as if performing in a quiet, secretive play). This is the first time, in other words, that these figures have shown themselves to him in personified form.

In fact, as his next question reveals, he might even have *relied* on these figures:

> Was it a silent deep-disguised plot
> To steal away, and leave without a task
> My idle days? [...]

The speaker's tone changes pretty quickly here:

- So far, the poem has sounded dreamy, drowsy, hypnotized. As the speaker passively watched the figures processing round and round in the first stanza, even his meter (iambic pentameter—lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "And one | behind | the oth- | er stepped | serene") rocked along steady as a boat.
- Now, however, the speaker starts a paranoid question—*Were you plotting to sneak away and leave me with nothing to do?*—with an urgent trochee (the opposite of an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm—"Was it").

The thought that these figures might abandon him makes the speaker uneasy. The figures clearly have something to do with how the speaker spends his time: they bring him a "task" to fill his "idle days" with. In other words, these artful "Shadows" are connected to the speaker's vocation—and he worries that they've appeared to him only in order to "plot" their disappearance. Will the first time he sees them in this form also be the last time they come to him? Have they only taken on human shapes the better to tiptoe out of his life and leave him taskless? In this moment, the speaker seems to see this apparition as a threat, or at least a warning.

LINES 15-20

Ripe was the drowsy hour;
The blissful cloud of summer-indolence
Benumb'd my eyes; my pulse grew less and less;
Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower.
O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense
Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness?

For a moment, the speaker sounded worried that his three spectral visitors might have appeared only in order to desert him. In the rest of the stanza, though, he seems more than fine with that: in fact, he wishes the figures away, preferring the pleasures of indolence to the demands of an artistic vocation.

Here, the speaker sinks back into his imagery as if it were a warm bed. He has awakened, he says, at a "ripe" hour—language that suggests he's slept in late, the time is more than ripe to get up. But if the hour is ripe, it's also delectable as a plump fruit. Lying at his ease, the speaker feels as if he's resting beneath a "blissful cloud of summer-indolence": the sweet laziness of a summer morning. This metaphorical cloud is comfortably heavy as a blanket, so soft and thick that it mutes his senses, "benumb[ing]" his eyes.

In fact, everything about this indolent morning feels softened, muted, blurred. Even the speaker's "pulse gr[ows] less and less" as he lies there doing nothing. Suspended between sleep and wakefulness, he's untroubled either by pain's "sting" or "pleasure's wreath": neither suffering nor the urge to win pleasures can disturb him.

All the speaker's imagery suggests a kind of anesthetized contentment. The world and its concerns seem far, far away from his bed; every outline is fuzzy. Nothing has been troubling him, nothing has felt lacking, and nothing has made him want to move an inch from where he lies—nothing, at least, until those three shades appeared.

Everything was going great before you three turned up, the speaker goes on:

> O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense
> Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness?

The speaker's drowsy morning, in other words, was almost as good as total oblivion. His longing for "nothingness" here suggests that what he really wants right now, more than anything, is a state closer to death than life: a soft, gentle, pulseless, painless indifference to whatever might happen.

But those three figures *won't* just "melt" and be gone. They're still there, refusing to leave him "unhaunted." Like Hamlet's ghost, they're summoning him unwillingly to action.

LINES 21-30

A third time pass'd they by, and, passing, turn'd
Each one the face a moment whiles to me;
Then faded, and to follow them I burn'd
And ached for wings, because I knew the three:
The first was a fair Maid, and Love her name;
The second was Ambition, pale of cheek,
And ever watchful with fatigued eye;
The last, whom I love more, the more of blame
Is heap'd upon her, Maiden most unmeek,—
I knew to be my demon Poesy.

The speaker has felt in turn uneasy and relieved at the thought that his three "Shadows" might leave him for good. The shadows seem to have their own plans and opinions about the situation. For a "third time," they walk past the speaker—and this time, they turn to look at him for a moment (perhaps rather accusingly). Then, they vanish.

At this, the speaker abruptly changes his tune. Now, rather than wishing the figures away, he "burn[s]" to follow them, "ach[ing] for wings" to fly after them, wherever they've gone. That's because, at long last, he truly recognizes them: "I knew the three," he admits.

Now, he introduces them to the reader:

- The first is the "fair Maid" known as Love.
- The second is Ambition, a pale, sickly, staring, "ever watchful" figure.
- The third is Poesy, a "Maiden most unmeek"—a bold, demanding, and divisive lady.

In other words, these figures are personifications of the speaker's deepest motivations. Now it makes sense why they've been haunting him as he lies in bed: they're all the things that make him want to get up and *do* something. No wonder he feels a surge of anxiety and regret when they vanish. They've given his life a purpose and a direction.

"Poesy" is the most important and the most ambivalent of these figures. The speaker spends three whole lines introducing her, calling her "my demon." That doesn't mean that she's a devil (though perhaps there is something a little tormenting about her); rather, she's a demon in the Greek sense, a presiding spirit with whom the speaker feels a special connection.

She's far from an idealized goddess in his eyes, though. He "love[s her] more, the more of blame / Is heap'd upon her": in other words, the more other people speak ill of Poesy, the more the speaker loves her. That "blame" might suggest all sorts of things; judgments of bad verse and complaints that poetry is a waste of time spring to mind. But if Poesy is the speaker's demon, they're made for each other, and the speaker's awareness of the dangers of loving her can't change that.

For that matter, Poesy seems connected to his other motivations: Love, Ambition, and Poesy walk with "joined hands." This trio is a *team*, and marching last in the procession, Poesy seems to be the team's fundamental force. It's in poetry that the speaker's love and ambition converge.

That makes sense! Love, as centuries of verse attest, is poetry-fuel; the speaker also self-professedly loves Poesy herself. And these ancient Greek figures, marching along like images on an urn, all have plenty of Ambition in them: symbolically, they suggest an ambition to make art that will outlive its artist.

LINES 31-40

They faded, and, forsooth! I wanted wings:
O folly! What is love? and where is it?
And for that poor Ambition—it springs
From a man's little heart's short fever-fit;
For Poesy!—no,—she has not a joy,—
At least for me,—so sweet as drowsy noons,
And evenings steep'd in honied indolence;
O, for an age so shelter'd from annoy,
That I may never know how change the moons,
Or hear the voice of busy common-sense!

Having named the three shadows who haunted him that morning, the speaker returns to the moment they disappeared. The repeated language here—the spirits again "fade[]," the speaker again longs for "wings" to follow them—suggests that this moment made a big impression on him. Jolted out of the "blissful cloud of summer-indolence" he'd been enjoying so, he's left for a moment in a state of less-than-blissful anxiety.

Quickly, though, he talks himself out of it. It's "folly" to run after those elusive spirits, he spits (in a long alliterative string of rough /f/ sounds that makes him sound well and truly fed up: "faded," "forsooth," "folly," "fever-fit"). One by one, he ticks off the reasons that he shouldn't bother pursuing the spirits:

- Love he dismisses briskly: "What is love? and where is it?" In other words, what good is love, and where could you be sure of finding it even if you wanted it? The question "What is love?" might also suggest a general unease about the very *nature* of love, an uncertainty the speaker doesn't want to probe too deeply.
- Ambition, meanwhile, is just the quaking of a sad little mortal man's heart—a "fever-fit" of anxiety that

your short life won't have amounted to anything.
- And as for Poesy... well, the speaker can't think of anything especially bad to say about Poesy. The best he can do is to say that her joys simply aren't as great as the pleasures of days "steep'd in honied indolence" (that is, soaked in sweet sweet laziness, like baklava is soaked in honey syrup).

These lines push away the very idea of being *motivated*, made to move either intellectually or physically. None of these shades, the speaker says, has a persuasive enough argument to tempt him. Love is unreliable, Ambition is petty, and Poesy is sweet—but not as sweet as drowsing in bed. In other words, the speaker is staking a claim for the value of simply *being* over *doing*.

He's clearly ambivalent about this. Part of him sees his three shades disappearing and feels pure panic, a desperation not to let them get away. Another part longs for nothing more than:

> [...] an age so shelter'd from annoy,
> That I may never know how change the moons,
> Or hear the voice of busy common-sense!

In other words, the speaker longs to live a life so indolent that he doesn't even know what *month* it is. Such a life would silence the "voice of busy common-sense," a voice that seems connected to the three shades. It might, for instance, say something along the lines of *You won't ever write an immortal poem if you don't get out of bed and hop to it*. (Or, for that matter, *There's no money in poetry—go be a doctor!*)

As readers will see, though, the speaker's desire to evade this voice and stay indolent isn't purely a matter of evading responsibility. In fact, his love of indolence and his love of Poesy aren't at odds.

LINES 41-44

> *And once more came they by;—alas! wherefore?*
> *My sleep had been embroider'd with dim dreams;*
> *My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o'er*
> *With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams:*

No sooner have the three figures vanished than they appear again. The speaker, who mere moments ago wanted to rush after them, wishes they'd stayed gone. "Alas! wherefore?" he cries (essentially meaning, "*Why'd you have to come back?*"). When they go, he longs for them, and when they return, he wants nothing to do with them.

Now, he describes what the trio calls him away from, giving readers a glimpse of the peace he'd been enjoying before they showed up: a sleep "embroider'd with dim dreams" like a tapestry is embroidered with flowers. His very "soul," he says, had become:

> [...] a lawn besprinkled o'er
> With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams:

The imagery here suggests a kind of garden paradise: those "stirring shades" and "baffled beams" evoke the movement of light through leaves on an airy summer day. Notice the repetitions in this passage:

> My sleep had been embroider'd with dim dreams;
> My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o'er
> With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams:

A mixture of anaphora ("My sleep had been," "My soul had been") and alliteration (the /d/ of "dim dreams," the /b/ of "baffled beams") creates sounds that sway as gracefully as the dappled light. Being a flowery lawn sounds like a delicious experience—even more luxuriously peaceful than *lying* on such a lawn.

And if the speaker's soul was a flowery lawn as he dazed in bed, there was something *organic* about his experience, something natural.

LINES 45-50

> *The morn was clouded, but no shower fell,*
> *Though in her lids hung the sweet tears of May;*
> *The open casement press'd a new-leaved vine,*
> *Let in the budding warmth and throstle's lay;*
> *O Shadows! 'twas a time to bid farewell!*
> *Upon your skirts had fallen no tears of mine.*

In the first part of this stanza, the speaker gave readers a look at what was going on inside him during his deliciously indolent morning, when his very soul was a sun-dappled lawn. Now, he looks out, describing the view from his bedroom window.

Listen to what he pays attention to here:

> The morn was clouded, but no shower fell,
> Though in her lids hung the sweet tears of May;
> The open casement press'd a new-leaved vine,
> Let in the budding warmth and throstle's lay;

Everything in this scene speaks of new life—or, more to the point, life *about* to spring into being. The low, warm, pleasantly cloudy May morning will *soon* let loose a shower of rain; a fresh "new-leaved vine" pushes against the glass of the "open casement" (the window) as if pressing its little nose to the glass; the warm air feels as if it's "budding," opening up like a new flower.

The speaker might be indolent, in other words, but everything around him hums quietly with potential energy. Perhaps his indolence and that energy aren't so very different. Inside and outside him, indolence has something to do with *nature*.

Readers might even think back to the images the speaker used to describe his indolence in the second stanza, where a metaphorical "blissful cloud" of indolence weighed comfortably on his eyes—a cloud that, on reflection, sounds a lot like the literal one that's getting ready to rain now.

The speaker's indolence puts him in an inspiring, reciprocal relationship to a natural world on the edge of a surge of creativity. Though he longed for "nothingness" back in line 20, that nothingness doesn't sound empty, but fertile, full of possibility.

Indolence, in other words, seems to be a creative state in which things *do* happen—eventually. They just happen in their own time. You can't force a cloud to rain or a vine to bear fruit by running after it, or even by sprouting "wings" to fly at it.

It's these images of patient, gentle, warm, beautiful nature that make the speaker declare, in a sudden apostrophe to the three figures:

> O Shadows! 'twas a time to bid farewell!
> Upon your skirts had fallen no tears of mine.

Something about looking at the summery landscapes both inside and outside him—and making a connection *between* these landscapes—gives the speaker a new firmness. He refuses to be ruled by the kind of time that anxiously ticks away; he knows, instead, that this soft morning is "a time to bid farewell" to the figures who'd drag him away from the indolent creativity he's resting in. And this time he won't cry when they go, either.

LINES 51-56

> *So, ye three Ghosts, adieu! Ye cannot raise*
> *My head cool-bedded in the flowery grass;*
> *For I would not be dieted with praise,*
> *A pet-lamb in a sentimental Farce!*
> *Fade softly from my eyes, and be once more*
> *In masque-like figures on the dreamy Urn;*

As the final stanza begins, the speaker makes some strange leaps in time and space. In another apostrophe, he bids his "three Ghosts" a firm "adieu," telling them they'll never get him to lift his "head cool-bedded in the flowery grass." (And notice again how harmonious assonance evokes the pleasure of that indolent lounging: the repeated /ed/ sound of "head cool-bedded" makes the head and its grassy bed sound made for each other.)

These words suggest two surprising things:

- The speaker, addressing the three figures in the present tense, is somehow still *in* his indolent morning, even though until now he's been narrating the story as though it were in the past.
- He's also still in his dreamworld. That image of his head resting "cool-bedded in the flowery grass" suggests that his soul is both the "lawn" he described earlier on and a person resting on that lawn. He's the landscape itself and its inhabitant.

This confusion of time and place suggests this dilemma is still present to the speaker: something he's dealing with even as he writes, and something he always carries inside him.

His next words suggest that his commitment to indolence has more than a little to do with the kind of artist he wants to be. Scornfully, he tells his three spirits:

> [...] I would not be dieted with praise,
> A pet-lamb in a sentimental Farce!

In other words, running after the spirits would also mean running after a shallow, unsatisfying, and even humiliating kind of creative success, giving hollow-eyed Ambition too much control over his destiny. The speaker doesn't want to write poetry only for the sake of success—to become a literary darling, a tamed "pet-lamb" for the public to coo over. That is, he doesn't want to be industrious just for the sake of earning cheap and empty praise.

Instead, his images of nature's creativity suggest, he wants his art to come (as Keats once wrote) "naturally as the Leaves to a tree." He wants to watch and wait, lying patiently in the visionary grass while the flowers bud in their own time. Such an art, he hints, is a different and worthier kind than the art you get by rushing and striving.

Thus, he tells his spirits to return to their "masque-like" procession "on the dreamy Urn"—words that juxtapose the artful qualities of the figures (they're like actors, they're like a decorated vase) with the organic process he's choosing.

However, these words also remind readers that the figures and their urn are as "dreamy" as the imagined lawn of the speaker's soul. These figures might provoke the speaker to action in the outside world, but they're also his own visions, parts of the same imagination that made a sun-dappled lawn from his soul. They still have a role to play, too.

LINES 57-60

> *Farewell! I yet have visions for the night,*
> *And for the day faint visions there is store;*
> *Vanish, ye Phantoms, from my idle spright,*
> *Into the clouds, and never more return!*

In this closing stanza, the speaker tries four times to banish the phantoms who haunt him: "Ye three Ghosts, adieu!" "Fade softly from my eyes." "Farewell!" "Vanish, ye Phantoms." That's a *Get out of here* every other line—insistent apostrophe that suggests all these banishments aren't especially effective. The phantoms are going to do just as they please, as they have all through this poem. Figments of the speaker's imagination they

might be; under his control they are not.

Just before he tries a final time to send the spirits away, the speaker makes this curious point:

> Farewell! I yet have visions for the night,
> And for the day faint visions there is store;

Here, the speaker says that he has plenty of visions to see and dreams to dream—that is, plenty of indolent imagining to do by day and by night. But who exactly is he trying to convince? Is he telling himself what he'll do when the spirits are out of the way or trying to persuade the spirits that he's doing something even if that something doesn't look like getting out of bed and putting pen to paper? In these closing lines as elsewhere, the speaker sounds ambivalent. Perhaps, though, that's not a problem. A willingness to entertain uncertainties and doubts seems closely connected to his creativity.

At any rate, when he unfurls his final banishment, telling the ghosts to "vanish [...] Into the clouds, and never more return," readers get the distinct sense that the ghosts won't listen. After all, this poem is, well, a *poem*: the speaker can't have given up on his "demon Poesy."

The speaker might always be haunted by these three spirits, then. But he's also making a claim that art-making (and life!) isn't all about willpower, striving, success. Simply *being*, in this ode, is both a delicious pleasure and a creative act. Like a "new-leaved vine" or a lily of the field, the speaker and his poem grow imperceptibly in a warm stillness, animated by something unknown.

SYMBOLS

THE VIEW FROM THE WINDOW

When the speaker drowsily looks out his open bedroom window, he notices all sorts of things that are just getting started, just coming to life: a "new-leaved vine," fresh and green; a sky that promises a warm "shower," but isn't raining yet; a "budding warmth," opening like the petals of a flower.

All these images of imminent growth or release symbolically suggest that the speaker's art, too, is just on the verge of blossoming—a state that demands he embrace indolence over action. The speaker's view hints that poetry doesn't grow through effort or willpower any more than a vine does; it must come in its own time.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 45-48:** "The morn was clouded, but no shower fell, / Though in her lids hung the sweet tears of May; / The open casement press'd a new-leaved vine, / Let in the budding warmth and throstle's lay;"

THE THREE FIGURES

The three figures who process before the speaker's drowsy eyes aren't just symbolic but also allegorical, explicitly personified representatives of abstract ideas. Each has its own personality: "Love" is a beautiful (if evasive) girl; "Ambition" is a weary, tense, and sickly youth; and "Poesy" is a "maiden most unmeek"—a bold, demanding lady whom the speaker feels particularly connected to (and persecuted by).

Besides personifying these ideas, the figures reflect the speaker's desire for artistic immortality. By presenting this trio as robed figures like those you might see on the side of a "marble Urn"—an ancient Greek vase—Keats connects them to the kind of art that *lasts*. More than once, Keats used classical art to represent the teasing, ambivalent power of art in general, which can reach beyond human limitations to outlive its makers by centuries, but can never quite equal life, no matter how close it comes.

The figures also symbolize the *active* part of creativity, as opposed to the passive, indolent, woolgathering part this poem celebrates. Pacing back and forth before the speaker's eyes, these energetic "shadows" beckon the speaker to follow them—to leap out of bed and *do* something with himself. The speaker's ambivalence about these figures suggests that he knows he'll have to respond to them one time or another. But for now, he resists, knowing that creativity requires receptivity as well as action.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-10:** "One morn before me were three figures seen, / With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced; / And one behind the other stepp'd serene, / In placid sandals, and in white robes graced: / They pass'd, like figures on a marble Urn, / When shifted round to see the other side; / They came again; as when the Urn once more / Is shifted round, the first seen Shades return; / And they were strange to me, as may betide / With Vases, to one deep in Phidian lore."
- **Lines 11-15:** "How is it, Shadows, that I knew ye not? / How came ye muffled in so hush a Masque? / Was it a silent deep-disguised plot / To steal away, and leave without a task / My idle days?"
- **Lines 25-30:** "The first was a fair Maid, and Love her name; / The second was Ambition, pale of cheek, / And ever watchful with fatigued eye; / The last, whom I love more, the more of blame / Is heap'd upon her, Maiden most unmeek,— / I knew to be my demon Poesy."
- **Line 41:** "And once more came they by;—alas!

wherefore?"
- **Lines 49-50:** "O Shadows! 'twas a time to bid farewell! / Upon your skirts had fallen no tears of mine."
- **Line 51:** "So, ye three Ghosts, adieu!"
- **Lines 55-56:** "Fade softly from my eyes, and be once more / In masque-like figures on the dreamy Urn;"
- **Lines 59-60:** "Vanish, ye Phantoms, from my idle spright, / Into the clouds, and never more return!"

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

By personifying his three great motivations—Love, Ambition, and Poesy—the speaker suggests that he has a close relationship with these ideas, as well as certain insights into their nature.

The three figures who appear before the speaker as he awakes one morning look "like figures on a marble Urn"—a simile that suggests they have something to do with timeless themes, ideas that have been around since ancient Greece. When they finally reveal their identities, they're indeed old as the hills:

- There's Love, of course, who turns up in the form of a beautiful girl.
- There's Ambition, who's looking pretty pale and sickly.
- And there's Poesy, a "Maiden most unmeek," bold and demanding.

These depictions reveal something about how the speaker sees his motivations—especially when he gets into his reasons for turning away from these "Shadows":

- Love might be lovely, for instance, but "where is it?" This maiden is as evasive and tricksy as she's beautiful.
- Ambition, worn out from effort and from a hunger for fame, doesn't look too good. And, as the speaker observes, Ambition is a petty thing, born of anxiety about how the "short fever-fit" of a guy's life might not amount to much.
- Poesy, finally, often *fails*. She gets "blame [...] heap'd upon her," attracting criticism—perhaps for bad verse, perhaps for wasted time.

The speaker is pretty quick to wash his hands of Love and Ambition (though, as the poem makes clear, he can't banish them for good). But he's more ambivalent about Poesy: he loves her all the more when people criticize her, and he admits that she *does* offer "joy," even if he claims to prefer the joys of indolence.

By presenting these motivations as figures he can interact with, the speaker suggests that he knows them as you'd know a person: they're his long-time companions. He also suggests that the three have a relationship with *each other*. After all, Love, Ambition, and Poesy walk hand in hand.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-7:** "One morn before me were three figures seen, / With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced; / And one behind the other stepp'd serene, / In placid sandals, and in white robes graced: / They pass'd, like figures on a marble Urn, / When shifted round to see the other side; / They came again;"
- **Lines 11-15:** "How is it, Shadows, that I knew ye not? / How came ye muffled in so hush a Masque? / Was it a silent deep-disguised plot / To steal away, and leave without a task / My idle days?"
- **Lines 21-30:** "A third time pass'd they by, and, passing, turn'd / Each one the face a moment whiles to me; / Then faded, and to follow them I burn'd / And ached for wings, because I knew the three: / The first was a fair Maid, and Love her name; / The second was Ambition, pale of cheek, / And ever watchful with fatigued eye; / The last, whom I love more, the more of blame / Is heap'd upon her, Maiden most unmeek,— / I knew to be my demon Poesy."
- **Lines 35-36:** "For Poesy!—no,—she has not a joy,— / At least for me,—so sweet as drowsy noons,"
- **Line 40:** "the voice of busy common-sense!"
- **Lines 45-46:** "The morn was clouded, but no shower fell, / Though in her lids hung the sweet tears of May;"

APOSTROPHE

The speaker's apostrophes to the three figures who haunt him reveal his ambivalence about his desires and his vocation.

When the three Grecian "Shadows" first appear, the speaker doesn't recognize them—or at least, he pretends not to. As these questions reveal, he actually knows them well:

> How is it, Shadows, that I knew ye not?
> How came ye muffled in so hush a Masque? [...]

These questions suggest that the speaker *would* have recognized the three figures of Love, Ambition, and Poesy if they hadn't turned up in personified form: he knows them well as abstract ideas.

In fact, as the poem goes on and he keeps speaking to the three, it becomes less and less clear that they've ever really left him. He describes them "fad[ing]" away on the morning he first saw them in their Grecian disguises (and suggests that he felt a stab of regret then, wishing he could follow them). But he also speaks to them as if they're still haunting him even as he writes,

telling (or perhaps begging) them to "fade softly from my eyes" and "vanish."

These differing flavors of apostrophe thus get at just how ambivalent the speaker feels toward his ghostly motivations. He wants to follow them, and he wants them to vanish; he fears and longs for their disappearance. No matter what he says to them or what he wants, they hover nearby, serving their own mysterious purposes.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-15:** "How is it, Shadows, that I knew ye not? / How came ye muffled in so hush a Masque? / Was it a silent deep-disguised plot / To steal away, and leave without a task / My idle days?"
- **Lines 19-20:** "O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense / Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness?"
- **Lines 49-50:** "O Shadows! 'twas a time to bid farewell! / Upon your skirts had fallen no tears of mine."
- **Lines 51-52:** "So, ye three Ghosts, adieu! Ye cannot raise / My head cool-bedded in the flowery grass;"
- **Lines 55-57:** "Fade softly from my eyes, and be once more / In masque-like figures on the dreamy Urn; / Farewell!"
- **Lines 59-60:** "Vanish, ye Phantoms, from my idle spright, / Into the clouds, and never more return!"

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors blur the boundaries between the speaker's inner and outer world, suggesting that his indolence makes room for imagination.

Listen, for instance, to the passage in which the speaker describes his lazy morning:

> [...] Ripe was the drowsy hour;
> The blissful cloud of summer-indolence
> Benumb'd my eyes; [...]

Here, the speaker projects his own drowsiness onto the "drowsy hour" (which he also pictures as "ripe," like a plump peach). Similarly, feels his "summer-indolence" as a heavy, cozy, "blissful cloud"—a cloud that sounds a lot like the "clouded morn" he'll describe a few stanzas later. In his indolent condition, he harmonizes with his environment: his metaphors make the world part of his dreams and his dreams part of the world.

His images of his inner world likewise spill out into reality. While he was asleep, he says:

> My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o'er
> With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams:

His soul, in other words, was like a grassy summer garden for him to lie in—a garden that reappears in the final stanza, where he refuses to raise his "head cool-bedded in the flowery grass" of his indolence (though in fact he's still in bed). Here, his garden-soul escapes his dreams and soaks into his surroundings. Perhaps there's even a meaningful pun here: a "lawn" is a grass field, but "lawn" is a kind of fabric often used for making bedclothes! Maybe the speaker's "sleep" and his linens are *both* "embroider'd with dim dreams."

Other metaphors suggest that indolence is absolutely delicious. Alongside that "ripe" hour, the speaker relishes hours "steep'd in honied indolence," soaked in sweet laziness like baklava is soaked in honey.

Relishing his indolence, then, the speaker at last scornfully turns away from the figures who tempt him to get up and make himself useful. If he were to give up his indolent, dreamy, mysteriously creative state, he says, the poetry he'd write would make him nothing more than "a pet-lamb in a sentimental Farce." In other words, he'd be nothing better than a cute little animal to be (humiliatingly) cooed over for his clever little verses. His indolent state, in which dreams and reality merge, offers better creative possibilities than that.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-17:** "Ripe was the drowsy hour; / The blissful cloud of summer-indolence / Benumb'd my eyes;"
- **Line 18:** "Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower."
- **Lines 36-37:** "drowsy noons, / And evenings steep'd in honied indolence;"
- **Lines 42-44:** "My sleep had been embroider'd with dim dreams; / My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o'er / With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams:"
- **Line 54:** "A pet-lamb in a sentimental Farce!"

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery emphasizes the contrast between the speaker's lounging and his three ghosts' quiet pacing. Describing the three "Shades" who appear to him one lazy morning, the speaker calls attention to their artfulness and their activeness. Though they're calm and quiet, walking in a "serene," "hush[ed]" procession, they are always on the move. Dressed in "placid sandals" and "white robes," these Grecian figures look as if they've stepped right off a "marble Urn": they come from the world of immortal art, and their constant movement suggests they want the speaker to get up, follow them, and *make* something already.

One of these figures, in fact, turns out to be a personification of Ambition itself—and *Ambition* certainly isn't lounging around in bed. In contrast with the voluptuously indolent speaker, Ambition is "pale of cheek / And ever watchful with fatigued

eye," always vigilant, worn out by a hunger for success.

The speaker, on the other hand, wants to linger in a world that's more natural and drowsy than artful and active:

- He savors his indolence like a "ripe" fruit; it's a "blissful cloud" that "benumb[s]" his eyes, making everything look fuzzy and distant (and distancing him from Ambition's "ever watchful" gaze).
- His soul itself becomes a lawn for him to lie on, dappled with "stirring shades, and baffled beams"—the play of shadow and sunlight on the grass.

All these metaphorical images of natural growth and movement strike a chord with the actual "budding warmth" of the May morning outside his window—a warmth that seems to grow like a flower.

By juxtaposing nature and art, the poem's imagery suggests that indolence is creative in its own way. While the speaker might be tempted to leap out of bed and rush after those three artful figures in a quest for artistic immortality, he's wise enough to know that art-making also demands receptivity, passivity, patience, and full-blown indolence.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "And one behind the other stepp'd serene, / In placid sandals, and in white robes graced:"
- **Line 12:** "How came ye muffled in so hush a Masque?"
- **Line 13:** "Was it a silent deep-disguised plot"
- **Lines 16-17:** "The blissful cloud of summer-indolence / Benumb'd my eyes"
- **Lines 26-27:** "pale of cheek, / And ever watchful with fatigued eye;"
- **Line 44:** "stirring shades, and baffled beams"
- **Lines 47-48:** "The open casement press'd a new-leaved vine, / Let in the budding warmth and throstle's lay;"

ALLUSION

The speaker's allusions to Greek art and biblical wisdom suggest that he's grappling with his desire for artistic achievement, fighting down an urge to *act* and *achieve* in order to serve deeper purposes.

In the first stanza, the speaker describes himself as "one deep in Phidian lore." That means he's knowledgeable about ancient Greek statuary: Phidias was the legendary sculptor to whom the Parthenon Marbles were attributed.

These statues—controversially spirited out of their native Greece and into the British Museum by the British diplomat Lord Elgin—were all the rage when Keats wrote this poem. Keats himself was so deeply moved by them that he wrote a sonnet on their glory. He found their enduring power both inspiring and defeating: even broken and worn by time, the statues made him feel "like a sick eagle looking at the sky," helplessly longing to soar to such artistic heights.

Keats would return to these statues many times both in life and in poetry, often linking them to "marble Urn[s]" like the dreamy one that appears in this poem. For instance, his "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in which the speaker reflects on the eternal power (and eternal limitations) of figures on an imagined Greek vase, describes a "heifer lowing at the skies" that sounds an awful lot like the one that appears in a Parthenon frieze.

Wherever Greek art appears in Keats, it links to his conflicted, ambivalent desires for artistic fame and immortality—and for plain old artistic *achievement*. In this poem, he turns away from those worldly desires and toward the other side of his poetic character: the "delicious diligent indolence" in which artistic visions can take root. Making art isn't about striving and doing, Keats felt. Rather, art-making requires a peaceful, patient, receptive attitude in which poetry can come "naturally as the Leaves to a tree."

Perhaps that's why he starts this poem with an epigraph taken from the biblical parable of the lilies, a story that appears in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In this story, Christ tells his followers not to toil and worry: after all, lilies don't do either of those things and look how beautifully God dresses *them*. This poem's indolent speaker knows that you can't catch Poesy by leaping out of bed and chasing her: poetry, this allusion suggests, has to be allowed to flower in its own time.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Before Line 1:** ""They toil not, neither do they spin.""
- **Line 5:** "like figures on a marble Urn,"
- **Lines 9-10:** "And they were strange to me, as may betide / With Vases, to one deep in Phidian lore."

ASSONANCE

Lush assonance is a hallmark of Keats's poetry. The vowel sounds he relishes here suggest the delights of indolence and "Poesy" both.

For one fitting example, listen to the lines in which the speaker introduces Poesy herself:

> The last, whom I love more, the more of blame
> Is heap'd upon her, Maiden most unmeek,—
> I knew to be my demon Poesy.

That long, sweet, harmonious /ee/ sound help to make Poesy's delights sound awfully tempting. Poetry, these lines suggest, is the speaker's greatest motivation and greatest temptation—nearly as appealing as "honied indolence" itself.

Indolence is a hard act to follow, though. Listen to how utterly

comfortable the speaker's dreamy, drowsy inner world sounds here:

> So, ye three Ghosts, adieu! Ye cannot raise
> My head cool-bedded in the flowery grass;

The assonant chain of /ed/ sounds here creates an internal rhyme, matching the speaker's head to the cool grassy bed where it rests as if they were made for each other (which, considering the "flowery grass" is a metaphor for the speaker's soul, they were).

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "morn before," "me," "three," "seen"
- **Line 4:** "placid sandals"
- **Line 13:** "deep"
- **Line 14:** "steal," "leave"
- **Line 15:** "drowsy hour"
- **Line 23:** "faded"
- **Line 24:** "ached"
- **Line 25:** "fair Maid," "name"
- **Line 26:** "pale"
- **Line 29:** "heap'd," "unmeek"
- **Line 30:** "be," "demon," "Poesy"
- **Line 36:** "least," "me," "sweet"
- **Line 37:** "evenings," "steep'd," "honied"
- **Line 41:** "more," "wherefore"
- **Line 42:** "sleep," "dreams"
- **Line 45:** "clouded," "shower"
- **Line 46:** "tears"
- **Line 47:** "leaved"
- **Line 52:** "head," "bedded"
- **Line 54:** "pet," "sentimental"
- **Line 59:** "Vanish," "Phantoms," "idle spright"

VOCABULARY

"They toil not, neither do they spin." (Before Line 1) - The poem's epigraph quotes a parable that appears in the biblical Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In this story, Christ tells his followers not to fret and strive, but to learn from the lilies, which don't weave clothes but are nonetheless more beautifully "dressed" than King Solomon himself.

Side-faced (Line 2) - Facing to the side—like figures on a Greek vase.

Placid (Line 4) - Calm and peaceful.

Urn (Line 5, Line 7, Line 56) - A stone vase (like the Grecian Urn Keats would write another famous ode about).

Shades (Line 8) - Ghostly figures.

May betide (Line 9) - Can happen.

Phidian lore (Line 10) - Knowledge of sculpture. Phidias was the legendary ancient Greek sculptor to whom the Parthenon Marbles (famed statues which made a big impression on Keats) were attributed.

Ye (Line 11, Line 12, Line 19, Line 51, Line 59) - You.

Masque (Line 12, Line 56) - A formal, elaborately costumed play or dance.

Deep-disguised (Line 13) - Top secret.

Summer-indolence (Line 16) - That is, the delicious laziness you might feel on a summer day.

Benumb'd (Line 17) - Numbed.

A moment whiles (Line 22) - That is, for a moment.

Unmeek (Line 29) - Not timid, not shy—in other words, bold and demanding!

My demon Poesy (Line 30) - The speaker isn't claiming that Poesy (or Poetry) is a devil (though there are certainly devilish connotations here). Rather, he's saying that Poesy is a personal spirit that haunts him, sort of like a more demanding and capricious guardian angel.

Forsooth (Line 31) - An oath that literally means something like "indeed" or "in truth," though it's used here mostly as an exclamation—with connotations more like "good Lord" or "oh man!"

Folly (Line 32) - Foolishness.

Fever-fit (Line 34) - In other words, the heart's feverish, angsty little convulsions.

Steep'd in honied indolence (Line 37) - Soaked in sweet laziness.

Shelter'd from annoy (Line 38) - Protected from troubles and annoyances.

Wherefore (Line 41) - Why.

O'er (Line 43) - A contraction of "over."

Stirring shades and baffled beams (Line 44) - That is, moving shadows and interrupted sunbeams. These words evoke the dappled, breezy sunlight underneath a tree in summer.

Casement (Line 47) - Window.

Throstle's lay (Line 48) - A "throstle" is a thrush; a "lay" is a song—so a "throstle's lay" is birdsong.

'Twas (Line 49) - A contraction of "it was."

Cool-bedded (Line 52) - That is, resting coolly.

Dieted (Line 53) - Fed.

A sentimental Farce (Line 54) - A false and insincerely emotional play. A "Farce" suggests both a kind of crudely comical show and a mockery more generally; the speaker is saying that he doesn't want to make a fool of himself writing sugary, crowd-pleasing verse.

Spright (Line 59) - Imagination, fancy, daydream.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Ode on Indolence" is likely one of the earliest of Keats's great Odes (though critics bicker about what got written when). This was a series of six poems in which Keats would explore art's relationship to life, death, and time. Like all odes, these were addressed to particular subjects, from a Greek vase to a nightingale to autumn; "Ode on Indolence" and "Ode on Melancholy" were the only two in the sequence addressed to abstract concepts.

Some critics have seen "Indolence" as the greenhouse in which ideas for the other odes sprouted. A lot of the images that appear in this poem—the open window, the bird's song, the figures on a Grecian urn—reappear in the other odes, or even take center stage as those odes' addressees.

"Indolence" uses a form of Keats's own invention and one that he would return and return to. When Keats wrote "Ode on Indolence," he'd been thinking a lot about meter and poetic form and experimenting with new shapes for sonnets. The rhyme scheme he uses here draws on those experiments: he fuses elements of Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnet forms to create a brand-new 10-line stanza shape. "Indolence" is built from six of these 10-line stanzas. This steady, unhurried, you might even say *indolent* stanza form offers plenty of room for meditation.

METER

"Ode on Indolence" uses a quiet and unobtrusive meter: good old iambic pentameter, the rhythm of Keats's heroes Shakespeare and Milton. Every line of iambic pentameter is built from five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in line 11:

> How is | it, Shad- | ows, that | I knew | ye not?

Iambic pentameter is a traditional and popular meter for a reason: spoken English easily falls into a roughly iambic rhythm. Iambic pentameter is flexible, too, allowing for easy and natural-sounding variations. Listen to the difference in line 13, for instance:

> Was it | a si- | lent deep- | disgui- | sed plot

This rather paranoid line begins with an urgent trochee—the opposite foot to an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm—that suggests a needly stab of artistic anxiety. (Note, too, that in this poem Keats gives words ending in "-ed" the full Shakespearean pronunciation: not "dis-GUISED," with two syllables, but "dis-GUY-sed," with three.) Small variations like this appear throughout the poem, adding interest and emphasis.

RHYME SCHEME

"Ode on Indolence" uses the following weaving rhyme scheme:

> ABABCDECDE

Here, Keats is poaching and recombining rhyme patterns from two kinds of sonnets: the Shakespearean or English sonnet, which starts out with alternating rhymes, and the Petrarchan or Italian sonnet, whose closing sestet often uses a CDECDE pattern. At the time Keats wrote this poem, he'd been thinking a lot about the limitations of each of these rhyme schemes on their own; this new 10-line pattern, which he reuses in a number of his other great odes, was the fruit of his meditations.

The movement from the quick back-and-forth rhymes of the first four lines to the slower interweaving of the closing six creates a pulsing, sweeping pace, like waves rushing to shore and then falling back.

SPEAKER

By all indications, this poem's speaker is a voice for John Keats himself. Many of the images here—from the "pet-lamb" the speaker scorns in the last stanza to the vision of three allegorical shades processing past like figures on a Greek urn—first appear in letters Keats wrote in 1819, in and around the months when he was composing his six great Odes.

The speaker's ambivalence about Love, Ambition, and Poesy and his championing of indolence are certainly Keats's own. In a March 1819 letter to his beloved brother George and sister-in-law Georgiana, he described a morning when he lay in bed until 11 a.m., relishing, as he put it, "a delightful sensation about three degrees on this side of faintness" that he felt was "a rare instance of advantage in the body overpowering the Mind."

But this languorous pleasure in simply *being* has a creative value, too. Keats famously wrote that greatness in literature demands a quality he called "Negative Capability"—the ability "to be in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Art-making, in other words, requires a kind of patient receptivity that doesn't rush to a conclusion. A "delicious diligent indolence," as Keats described it in another letter, was *part* of the pursuit of Poesy, not opposed to it.

SETTING

The poem is set at once in the speaker's bedroom and in his imagination—and sometimes in between the two. When the speaker wakes up, he's in his own bed, looking out the open "casement" (or window) to see a low, soft sky and a little vine

poking its nose over the windowsill. But he's also not far from a world in which the "lawn" (or linen fabric) of his bedspread is also a lawn of the grassy variety, a dream-meadow in which his soul can rest at ease, untroubled by worldly suffering or worldly ambition.

In fact, the speaker's soul doesn't just rest in this visionary meadow, it *is* this visionary meadow: he imagines both that his "soul had been a lawn" and that his head is "cool-bedded in the flowery grass" of that lawn. In his indolence, in other words, he can live *inside himself*, in a private paradise.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Keats (1795-1821) is often seen as an archetypal Romantic poet: a dreamy, sensuous soul who died tragically young. But Keats was also a vigorous, funny writer, a working-class kid making inroads into a literary scene dominated by aristocratic figures like Lord Byron. He died obscure and poor, never knowing that he would become one of the world's best-loved poets. But he had a quiet faith in his own genius: in an early letter, he once declared, "I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death."

Keats seems to be working out some of his complex feelings about such artistic ambition in this poem—likely one of the earliest in the immortal six-ode series he wrote between the spring and autumn of 1819. Perhaps this poem was the testing ground for some of the images that would haunt Keats all through 1819: the urns, casements, and dreamy Greek apparitions here would play a prominent role in other odes. Keats might have thought less of this ode than the others (though he did write to a friend about how much he'd enjoyed composing it). At any rate, he never tried to publish it, and it first appeared in print in the posthumous collection *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats* (1848).

Keats met or corresponded with most of his fellow Romantics, but never got too close to any of them. As a young writer, for instance, he was inspired by William Wordsworth, the granddaddy of English Romanticism—but was dismayed to find him pompous and conservative in person. ("Mr. Wordsworth," Wordsworth's wife Mary reprimanded the enthusiastic young Keats, "is never interrupted.") He had just one conversation with Samuel Taylor Coleridge (which seems to have felt more like a whirlwind than a friendly chat). And while Percy Shelley admired Keats's work, Keats never quite fell in with him and his elite clique; Byron, Shelley's close friend, was actively contemptuous of Keats. Keats's real circle was instead built from earthier London artists like Charles Lamb, Leigh Hunt, and Benjamin Haydon.

In spite of being something of an outsider in his time, Keats has indeed landed "among the English Poets" since his death. Ever since later Victorian writers like Tennyson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning resurrected his reputation, he's been one of the most beloved and influential of poets.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Keats wrote the "Ode on Indolence" at a turning point in both his life and his artistic career. The germs of this poem (the image of Love, Ambition, and Poesy as three figures on an urn, for instance) start turning up in his letters around March 1819. By the summer of that year, he had embarked upon a project that would secure his place "among the English poets": a series of six odes that many consider to be some of the world's greatest poems.

The winter before he began writing these odes, Keats nursed his younger brother Tom through the last months of a fatal case of consumption, a deadly disease we now know as tuberculosis. Consumption was horribly familiar to Keats already, not just from his medical training (he studied to become a surgeon) but from his childhood: the disease claimed his mother when he and his siblings were still small. It would claim Keats, too. He was only 24 when he began writing his odes in 1819; he would die little more than a year after he completed them.

Alongside grief, Keats was grappling with complicated feelings about having fallen deeply in love with the literal girl next door: a young woman called Fanny Brawne whose family rented the other half of the house where he lived. Though head over heels for her, Keats also felt more than a little uncomfortable about how completely his love absorbed him, as well as worried that a penniless poet wouldn't make a very appealing prospective husband (at least in Fanny's family's eyes).

This very personal poem's reflections on the persistent noodging of Love, Ambition, and Poetry and the appeal of painless "nothingness" might thus reflect both Keats's grief and his overwhelm in a sea of powerful feelings. The speaker's commitment to an indolence that lets art take shape in its own time reveals Keats's courageous *patience*: his refusal to rush heedlessly after his ambition even in the painful knowledge that life is short.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Keats-Shelley Museum — Learn more about Keats through the museum housed in his final home in Italy. (https://ksh.roma.it/)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a performance of the poem. (https://youtu.be/LMso4Lz9Elw)
- Keats's Legacy — Read five contemporary writers reflecting on what Keats means to them to honor the recent bicentenary of his death.

(https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/feb/23/john-keats-five-poets-on-his-best-poems-200-years-since-his-death)

- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Keats's life and work (and check out some of his manuscripts) at the British Library's website. (https://www.bl.uk/people/john-keats)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN KEATS POEMS

- Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art
- La Belle Dame sans Merci
- Ode on a Grecian Urn
- Ode on Melancholy
- Ode to a Nightingale
- Ode to Psyche
- On First Looking into Chapman's Homer
- On Seeing the Elgin Marbles
- On the Grasshopper and Cricket
- On the Sea
- The Eve of St. Agnes
- This living hand, now warm and capable
- To Autumn
- When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be

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