

1817
SLEEP AND POETRY
John Keats

Keats, John (1795-1821) - Widely regarded as the most talented of the English romantic poets, Keats, whose work was poorly received during his lifetime, could not have foreseen his later recognition. Ironically, he wrote for his own epitaph: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water." Sleep and Poetry (1817) Contains an attack on traditional eighteenth century poetry and a program for Keats' following ten years as a poet. Opening line: What is more gentle than a wind in summer? ...

SLEEP AND POETRY

As I lay in my bed slepe full unmete
Was unto me, but why that I ne might
Rest I ne wist, for there n'as erthly wight
[As I suppose] had more of hertis ese
Than I, for I n'ad sicknesse nor dise.
CHAUCER

What is more gentle than a wind in summer?
What is more soothing than the pretty hummer
That stays one moment in an open flower,
And buzzes cheerily from bower to bower?
What is more tranquil than a musk-rose blowing
In a green island, far from all men's knowing?
More healthful than the leafiness of dales?
More secret than a nest of nightingales?
More serene than Cordelia's countenance?
More full of visions than a high romance?
What, but thee Sleep? Soft closer of our eyes!
Low murmurer of tender lullabies!

Light hoverer around our happy pillows!
Wreather of poppy buds, and weeping willows!
Silent entangler of a beauty's tresses!
Most happy listener! when the morning blesses
Thee for enlivening all the cheerful eyes
That glance so brightly at the new sun-rise.

But what is higher beyond thought than thee?
Fresher than berries of a mountain tree?
More strange, more beautiful, more smooth, more regal,
Than wings of swans, than doves, than dim-seen eagle?
What is it? And to what shall I compare it?
It has a glory, and naught else can share it:
The thought thereof is awful, sweet, and holy,
Chasing away all worldliness and folly;
Coming sometimes like fearful claps of thunder,
Or the low rumblings earth's regions under;
And sometimes like a gentle whispering
Of all the secrets of some wond'rous thing
That breathes about us in the vacant air;
So that we look around with prying stare,
Perhaps to see shapes of light, aerial limning,

And catch soft floatings from a faint-heard hymning;
 To see the laurel wreath, on high suspended,
 That is to crown our name when life is ended.
 Sometimes it gives a glory to the voice,
 And from the heart up-springs, rejoice! rejoice!
 Sounds which will reach the Frammer of all things,
 And die away in ardent mutterings.

No one who once the glorious sun has seen,
 And all the clouds, and felt his bosom clean
 For his great Maker's presence, but must know
 What 'tis I mean, and feel his being glow:
 Therefore no insult will I give his spirit,
 By telling what he sees from native merit.
 O Poesy! for thee I hold my pen
 That am not yet a glorious denizen
 Of thy wide heaven- Should I rather kneel
 Upon some mountain-top until I feel
 A glowing splendour round about me hung,
 And echo back the voice of thine own tongue?
 O Poesy! for thee I grasp my pen
 That am not yet a glorious denizen

Of thy wide heaven; yet, to my ardent prayer,
Yield from thy sanctuary some clear air,
Smooth'd for intoxication by the breath
Of flowering bays, that I may die a death
Of luxury, and my young spirit follow
The morning sun-beams to the great Apollo
Like a fresh sacrifice; or, if I can bear
The o'erwhelming sweets, 'twill bring to me the fair
Visions of all places: a bowery nook
Will be elysium- an eternal book
Whence I may copy many a lovely saying
About the leaves, and flowers- about the playing
Of nymphs in woods, and fountains; and the shade
Keeping a silence round a sleeping maid;
And many a verse from so strange influence
That we must ever wonder how, and whence
It came. Also imaginings will hover
Round my fire-side, and haply there discover
Vistas of solemn beauty, where I'd wander
In happy silence, like the clear Meander
Through its lone vales; and where I found a spot
Of awfuller shade, or an enchanted grot,

Or a green hill o'erspread with chequer'd dress
Of flowers, and fearful from its loveliness,
Write on my tablets all that was permitted,
All that was for our human senses fitted.
Then the events of this wide world I'd seize
Like a strong giant, and my spirit teaze
Till at its shoulders it should proudly see
Wings to find out an immortality.
Stop and consider! life is but a day;
A fragile dew-drop on its perilous way
From a tree's summit; a poor Indian's sleep
While his boat hastens to the monstrous steep
Of Montmorenci. Why so sad a moan?

Life is the rose's hope while yet unblown;
The reading of an ever-changing tale;
The light uplifting of a maiden's veil;
A pigeon tumbling in clear summer air;
A laughing school-boy, without grief or care,
Riding the springy branches of an elm.
O for ten years, that I may overwhelm
Myself in poesy; so I may do the deed

That my own soul has to itself decreed.
Then will I pass the countries that I see
In long perspective, and continually
Taste their pure fountains. First the realm I'll pass
Of Flora, and old Pan: sleep in the grass,
Feed upon apples red, and strawberries,
And choose each pleasure that my fancy sees;
Catch the white-handed nymphs in shady places,
To woo sweet kisses from averted faces,
Play with their fingers, touch their shoulders white
Into a pretty shrinking with a bite
As hard as lips can make it: till agreed,
A lovely tale of human life we'll read.
And one will teach a tame dove how it best
May fan the cool air gently o'er my rest;
Another, bending o'er her nimble tread,
Will set a green robe floating round her head,
And still will dance with ever varied ease,
Smiling upon the flowers and the trees:
Another will entice me on, and on
Through almond blossoms and rich cinnamon;
Till in the bosom of a leafy world

We rest in silence, like two gems upcurl'd
In the recesses of a pearly shell.

And can I ever bid these joys farewell?
Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,
Where I may find the agonies, the strife
Of human hearts: for lo! I see afar,
O'ersailing the blue cragginess, a car
And steeds with streamy manes- the charioteer
Looks out upon the winds with glorious fear:
And now the numerous tramplings quiver lightly
Along a huge cloud's ridge; and now with sprightly
Wheel downward come they into fresher skies,
Tipt round with silver from the sun's bright eyes.
Still downward with capacious whirl they glide;
And now I see them on the green-hill's side
In breezy rest among the nodding stalks.
The charioteer with wond'rous gesture talks
To the trees and mountains; and there soon appear
Shapes of delight, of mystery, and fear,
Passing along before a dusky space
Made by some mighty oaks: as they would chase

Some ever- fleeting music on they sweep.
Lo! how they murmur, laugh, and smile, and weep:
Some with upholden hand and mouth severe;
Some with their faces muffled to the ear
Between their arms; some, clear in youthful bloom,
Go glad and smilingly athwart the gloom;
Some looking back, and some with upward gaze;
Yes, thousands in a thousand different ways
Flit onward- now a lovely wreath of girls
Dancing their sleek hair into tangled curls;
And now broad wings. Most awfully intent
The driver of those steeds is forward bent,
And seems to listen: O that I might know
All that he writes with such a hurrying glow.
The visions all are fled- the car is fled
Into the light of heaven, and in their stead
A sense of real things comes doubly strong,
And, like a muddy stream, would bear along
My soul to nothingness: but I will strive
Against all doubtings, and will keep alive
The thought of that same chariot, and the strange
Journey it went.

Is there so small a range
In the present strength of manhood, that the high
Imagination cannot freely fly
As she was wont of old? prepare her steeds,
Paw up against the light, and do strange deeds
Upon the clouds? Has she not shown us all?
From the clear space of ether, to the small
Breath of new buds unfolding? From the meaning
Of Jove's large eye-brow, to the tender greening
Of April meadows? Here her altar shone,
E'en in this isle; and who could paragon
The fervid choir that lifted up a noise
Of harmony, to where it aye will poise
Its mighty self of convoluting sound,
Huge as a planet, and like that roll round,
Eternally around a dizzy void?
Ay, in those days the Muses were nigh cloy'd
With honors; nor had any other care
Than to sing out and sooth their wavy hair.
Could all this be forgotten? Yes, a schism
Nurtured by foppery and barbarism,
Made great Apollo blush for this his land.

Men were thought wise who could not understand
His glories: with a puling infant's force
They sway'd about upon a rocking horse,
And thought it Pegasus. Ah dismal soul'd!
The winds of heaven blew, the ocean roll'd
Its gathering waves- ye felt it not. The blue
Bared its eternal bosom, and the dew
Of summer nights collected still to make
The morning precious: beauty was awake!
Why were ye not awake? But ye were dead
To things ye knew not of, - were closely wed
To musty laws lined out with wretched rule
And compass vile: so that ye taught a school
Of dolts to smooth, inlay, and clip, and fit,
Till, like the certain wands of Jacob's wit,
Their verses tallied. Easy was the task:
A thousand handicraftsmen wore the mask
Of Poesy. Ill-fated, impious race!
That blasphemed the bright Lyrist to his face,
And did not know it, - no, they went about,
Holding a poor, decrepid standard out
Mark'd with most flimsy mottos, and in large

The name of one Boileau!
O ye whose charge
It is to hover round our pleasant hills!
Whose congregated majesty so fills
My boundly reverence, that I cannot trace
Your hallowed names, in this unholy place,
So near those common folk; did not their shames
Affright you? Did our old lamenting Thames
Delight you? Did ye never cluster round
Delicious Avon, with a mournful sound,
And weep? Or did ye wholly bid adieu
To regions where no more the laurel grew?
Or did ye stay to give a welcoming
To some lone spirits who could proudly sing
Their youth away, and die? 'Twas even so:
But let me think away those times of woe:
Now 'tis a fairer season; ye have breathed
Rich benedictions o'er us; ye have wreathed
Fresh garlands: for sweet music has been heard
In many places;- some has been upstirr'd
From out its crystal dwelling in a lake,
By a swan's ebon bill; from a thick brake,

Nested and quiet in a valley mild,
 Bubbles a pipe; fine sounds are floating wild
 About the earth: happy are ye and glad.

These things are doubtless: yet in truth we've had
 Strange thunders from the potency of song;
 Mingled indeed with what is sweet and strong,
 From majesty: but in clear truth the themes
 Are ugly clubs, the Poets' Polyphemes
 Disturbing the grand sea. A drainless shower
 Of light is poesy; 'tis the supreme of power;
 'Tis might half slumb'ring on its own right arm.
 The very archings of her eye-lids charm
 A thousand willing agents to obey,
 And still she governs with the mildest sway:
 But strength alone though of the Muses born
 Is like a fallen angel: trees uptorn,
 Darkness, and worms, and shrouds, and sepulchres
 Delight it; for it feeds upon the burrs,
 And thorns of life; forgetting the great end
 Of poesy, that it should be a friend
 To sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts of man. -

Yet I rejoice: a myrtle fairer than
E'er grew in Paphos, from the bitter weeds
Lifts its sweet head into the air, and feeds
A silent space with ever sprouting green.
All tenderest birds there find a pleasant screen,
Creep through the shade with jaunty fluttering,
Nibble the little cupped flowers and sing.
Then let us clear away the choking thorns
From round its gentle stem; let the young fawns,
Yeaned in after times, when we are flown,
Find a fresh sward beneath it, overgrown
With simple flowers: let there nothing be
More boisterous than a lover's bended knee;
Nought more ungentle than the placid look
Of one who leans upon a closed book;
Nought more untr tranquil than the grassy slopes
Between two hills. All hail delightful hopes!
As she was wont, th' imagination
Into most lovely labyrinths will be gone,
And they shall be accounted poet kings
Who simply tell the most heart-easing things.
O may these joys be ripe before I die. -

Will not some say that I presumptuously
 Have spoken? that from hastening disgrace
 'Twere better far to hide my foolish face?
 That whining boyhood should with reverence bow
 Ere the dread thunderbolt could reach? How!
 If I do hide myself, it sure shall be
 In the very fane, the light of Poesy:
 If I do fall, at least I will be laid
 Beneath the silence of a poplar shade;
 And over me the grass shall be smooth shaven;
 And there shall be a kind memorial graven.
 But off Despondence! miserable bane!
 They should not know thee, who athirst to gain
 A noble end, are thirsty every hour.
 What though I am not wealthy in the dower
 Of spanning wisdom; though I do not know
 The shiftings of the mighty winds that blow
 Hither and thither all the changing thoughts
 Of man: though no great minist'ring reason sorts
 Out the dark mysteries of human souls
 To clear conceiving: yet there ever rolls
 A vast idea before me, and I glean

Therefrom my liberty; thence too I've seen
The end and aim of Poesy. 'Tis clear
As anything most true; as that the year
Is made of the four seasons- manifest
As a large cross, some old cathedral's crest,
Lifted to the white clouds. Therefore should I
Be but the essence of deformity,
A coward, did my very eye-lids wink
At speaking out what I have dared to think.
Ah! rather let me like a madman run
Over some precipice; let the hot sun
Melt my Dedalian wings, and drive me down
Convuls'd and headlong! Stay! an inward frown
Of conscience bids me be more calm awhile.
An ocean dim, sprinkled with many an isle,
Spreads awfully before me. How much toil!
How many days! what desperate turmoil!
Ere I can have explored its widenesses.
Ah, what a task! upon my bended knees,
I could unsay those- no, impossible!
Impossible! -

For sweet relief I'll dwell
On humbler thoughts, and let this strange assay
Begun in gentleness die so away.
E'en now all tumult from my bosom fades:
I turn full hearted to the friendly aids
That smooth the path of honour; brotherhood,
And friendliness the nurse of mutual good.
The hearty grasp that sends a pleasant sonnet
Into the brain ere one can think upon it;
The silence when some rhymes are coming out;
And when they're come, the very pleasant rout:
The message certain to be done to-morrow.
'Tis perhaps as well that it should be to borrow
Some precious book from out its snug retreat,
To cluster round it when we next shall meet.
Scarce can I scribble on; for lovely airs
Are fluttering round the room like doves in pairs;
Many delights of that glad day recalling,
When first my senses caught their tender falling.
And with these airs come forms of elegance
Stooping their shoulders o'er a horse's prance,
Careless, and grand-fingers soft and round

Parting luxuriant curls;- and the swift bound
 Of Bacchus from his chariot, when his eye
 Made Ariadne's cheek look blushingly.
 Thus I remember all the pleasant flow
 Of words at opening a portfolio.

Things such as these are ever harbingers
 To trains of peaceful images: the stirs
 Of a swan's neck unseen among the rushes:
 A linnet starting all about the bushes:
 A butterfly, with golden wings broad parted,
 Nestling a rose, convuls'd as though it smarted
 With over pleasure- many, many more,
 Might I indulge at large in all my store
 Of luxuries: yet I must not forget
 Sleep, quiet with his poppy coronet:
 For what there may be worthy in these rhymes
 I partly owe to him: and thus, the chimes
 Of friendly voices had just given place
 To as sweet a silence, when I 'gan retrace
 The pleasant day, upon a couch at ease.
 It was a poet's house who keeps the keys

Of pleasure's temple. Round about were hung
 The glorious features of the bards who sung
 In other ages- cold and sacred busts
 Smiled at each other. Happy he who trusts
 To clear Futurity his darling fame!
 Then there were fauns and satyrs taking aim
 At swelling apples with a frisky leap
 And reaching fingers, 'mid a luscious heap
 Of vine-leaves. Then there rose to view a fane
 Of liny marble, and thereto a train
 Of nymphs approaching fairly o'er the sward:
 One, loveliest, holding her white hand toward
 The dazzling sun-rise: two sisters sweet
 Bending their graceful figures till they meet
 Over the trippings of a little child:
 And some are hearing, eagerly, the wild
 Thrilling liquidity of dewy piping.
 See, in another picture, nymphs are wiping
 Cherishingly Diana's timorous limbs;

A fold of lawny mantle dabbling swims
 At the bath's edge, and keeps a gentle motion

With the subsiding crystal: as when ocean
 Heaves calmly its broad swelling smoothness o'er
 Its rocky marge, and balances once more
 The patient weeds; that now unshent by foam
 Feel all about their undulating home.
 Sappho's meek head was there half smiling down
 At nothing; just as though the earnest frown
 Of over thinking had that moment gone
 From off her brow, and left her all alone.

Great Alfred's too, with anxious, pitying eyes,
 As if he always listened to the sighs
 Of the goaded world; and Kosciusko's worn
 By horrid suffrance- mightily forlorn.
 Petrarch, outstepping from the shady green,
 Starts at the sight of Laura; nor can wean
 His eyes from her sweet face. Most happy they!
 For over them was seen a free display
 Of out-spread wings, and from between them shone
 The face of Poesy: from off her throne
 She overlook'd things that I scarce could tell.
 The very sense of where I was might well

Keep Sleep aloof: but more than that there came
Thought after thought to nourish up the flame
Within my breast; so that the morning light
Surprised me even from a sleepless night;
And up I rose refresh'd, and glad, and gay,
Resolving to begin that very day
These lines; and howsoever they be done,
I leave them as a father does his son.

THE END

in his early poem "Sleep and Poetry" shows, however, Keats was determined to discipline himself: even before February 1820, when he first began to cough blood, he may have known that he had not long to live, and he devoted himself to the expression of his vision with feverish