

Case Study: Keats and Tennyson

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will gain experience in close reading excerpts from two poems using an element of analysis you have learned about in this course. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Reading a Keats Excerpt
2. Analyzing a Keats Excerpt
3. Reading a Tennyson Excerpt
4. Analyzing a Tennyson Excerpt

1. Reading a Keats Excerpt

Read the first two stanzas of the poem. As you read, ask yourself the following questions:

- How would you describe the rhyme scheme?
- Does the rhyme scheme seem appropriate for the subject matter?

From "The Eve of St. Agnes" by John Keats (1820)

St. Agnes Eve — Ah bitter chill it was!
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;
The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:
Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told
His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
Like pious incense from a censer old,
Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,
Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.

His prayer he saith, this patient, holy man;
Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees,
And back returneth, meagre, barefoot, wan,
Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees:
The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze,
Emprison'd in black purgatorial rails:

Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat'ries,
He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails
To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails.

(Owens and Johnson, 1998, p. 380)

2. Analyzing a Keats Excerpt

In comparison to the Rossetti poem you read in the previous lesson, the rhyme sounds here form complex patterns, don't they? While "was"/"grass" in the first stanza and "man"/"wan" in the second do not quite produce a full rhyme (depending on your accent), the first and third lines do rhyme in subsequent stanzas. Using a letter of the alphabet to describe each new rhyme sound, we could describe the pattern like this: *a b a b b c b c c* (imagine sustaining that intricate patterning for 42 stanzas). This kind of formula is useful up to a point for showing how often the same sounds recur, and it does show how complicated the interweaving of echoing sounds is.



DID YOU KNOW

There is a technique called poetic inversion, or changing the usual word order of speech, which is often linked to the need to maintain a rhythm or to find a rhyme. Consider the last two lines of the first stanza: "Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death, / Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith." Because the words "death" and "saith" at the end of the lines rhyme, we are unlikely to notice how awkwardly the end of the second line is phrased. Poetic inversion is the convention that we recognize, however unconsciously, that prevents us from mentally rewriting the line to "...while he saith his prayer."

Examining the function of rhyme throughout the poem can help us understand the relationship between meaning and word choice. When conducting an analysis, it is not necessary to describe what happens in each stanza, but picking out particular pertinent examples will help us argue a case. With only the first two stanzas of this poem to work with, we could say that, if nothing else, the intricate rhyme pattern seems appropriate not only for the detailed descriptions, but also for the medieval, slightly gothic setting of the chapel where the holy man prays.

3. Reading a Tennyson Excerpt

Read the first stanza of the poem. As you read, ask yourself the following questions:

- What type of rhyme is used in this stanza?
- What is this stanza about?

From "Mariana" by Alfred Tennyson (1830)

With blackest moss the flower-plots
Were thickly crusted, one and all:
The rusted nails fell from the knots
That held the pear to the gable-wall.

The broken sheds looked sad and strange:
Unlifted was the clinking latch;
Weeded and worn the ancient thatch
Upon the lonely moated grange.
She only said, 'My life is dreary,
He cometh not,' she said;
She said, 'I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!'

(Trilling and Bloom, 1973, p. 396)

4. Analyzing a Tennyson Excerpt

As with the Keats poem, the rhyme scheme here is quite complicated. Using the same diagrammatic formula of a letter for each new rhyme sound, we could describe this rhyme scheme as *a b a b c d d c e f e f*. While we are only looking at the first stanza here, it is worth knowing that each of the stanzas in this poem ends with a variation of the line "I would that I were dead" (this is known as a refrain). Thus, as in Christina Rossetti's "Love From the North," a dominant sound or series of sounds throughout helps to control the mood of the poem.

We may not know who Mariana is, or why she is in the lonely, crumbling grange, but she is obviously waiting for a man who is slow in arriving. The "dreary"/"aweary" and "dead"/"said" rhymes, which, if you read the rest of the poem, you will see are repeated in each stanza, convey her dejection and express the boredom of endless waiting.

As with the stanzas from Keats' "The Eve of St Agnes," there is plenty of carefully observed detail – black moss on the flower-plots, rusty nails, a clinking latch on a gate or door – whose description contributes to the desolation of the scene and Mariana's mood. Were the moated grange a lively, sociable household, the poem would be very different. Either Mariana would be cheerful, or her misery would be in sharp contrast to her surroundings. It is always worth considering what settings contribute to the overall mood of a poem.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you began by **reading an excerpt from Keats'** poem "The Eve of St. Agnes," and **analyzing the Keats excerpt** by focusing on the use of rhyme. You then **read an excerpt from Tennyson's** poem "Mariana," and **analyzed the Tennyson excerpt** through the lens of rhyme.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This content has been adapted from Lumen Learning's "Approaching Poetry" tutorial.