

MELANCHOLY, BEAUTY, AND IMPERMANENCE John Keats's "Ode on Melancholy" is a rich and complex poem that offers a way of responding to deep despair. Put simply, it encourages people to embrace sadness, not by seeking to end or soften it, but by living within it--that is, by actively acknowledging its presence. People ought to embrace "melancholy" because, even though it brings "sorrow," it's also a fundamental part of beauty, joy, and pleasure. This in turn makes anything good in life full of sadness before it's even over--but the best response to this sad fact, argues the poem, is simply to embrace it. Indeed, that's why the poem's ending praises those people who "can burst Joy's grape against [their] palate fine." Someone like that accepts that beauty and melancholy "dwell" together, and "bursts" this metaphorical grape--a stand-in for all the good things in life--in full knowledge that doing so will eventually bring about a time when "Joy" will be gone. If people try to numb or end their "anguish," the poem argues, they won't make the most of their melancholy--they won't be able to see its close relationship with beauty at first hand. Instead, they just will be overwhelmed by their sadness. The second stanza then tells people what they should do when a melancholy mood strikes. Essentially, this boils down to embracing melancholy by seeking out beauty in the natural world. People should "glut"--that is, feed--their sorrows by looking at a "morning rose," a rainbow that appears over the sea, or a peony. And though people can experience pleasure, it's always metaphorically in the process of "turning to poison"--because time will eventually bring about its end. Inherent to beauty, the poem thus argues, is a sense of poignant sadness given the knowledge that beauty will one day be gone. For that reason, then, "Melancholy" is like a kind of goddess who rules over the "temple of Delight."