

ISABELLA, OR THE POT OF BASIL

SUMMARY

Lorenzo and Isabella are young Florentines, living in Florence, Italy during the Medieval era . At this time, Florence was one of the richest cities in the world, and the banking capital of Europe. Isabella is of aristocratic heritage, and her brothers are wealthy - so they are very set on preserving their wealth by marrying Isabella off to a rich suitor. Lorenzo is an unsuitable love interest for Isabella, as he is of a lower class - being employed by one of the brothers. In their eyes, he is not wealthy enough to be considered a suitable match for her, either financially or in terms of social status.

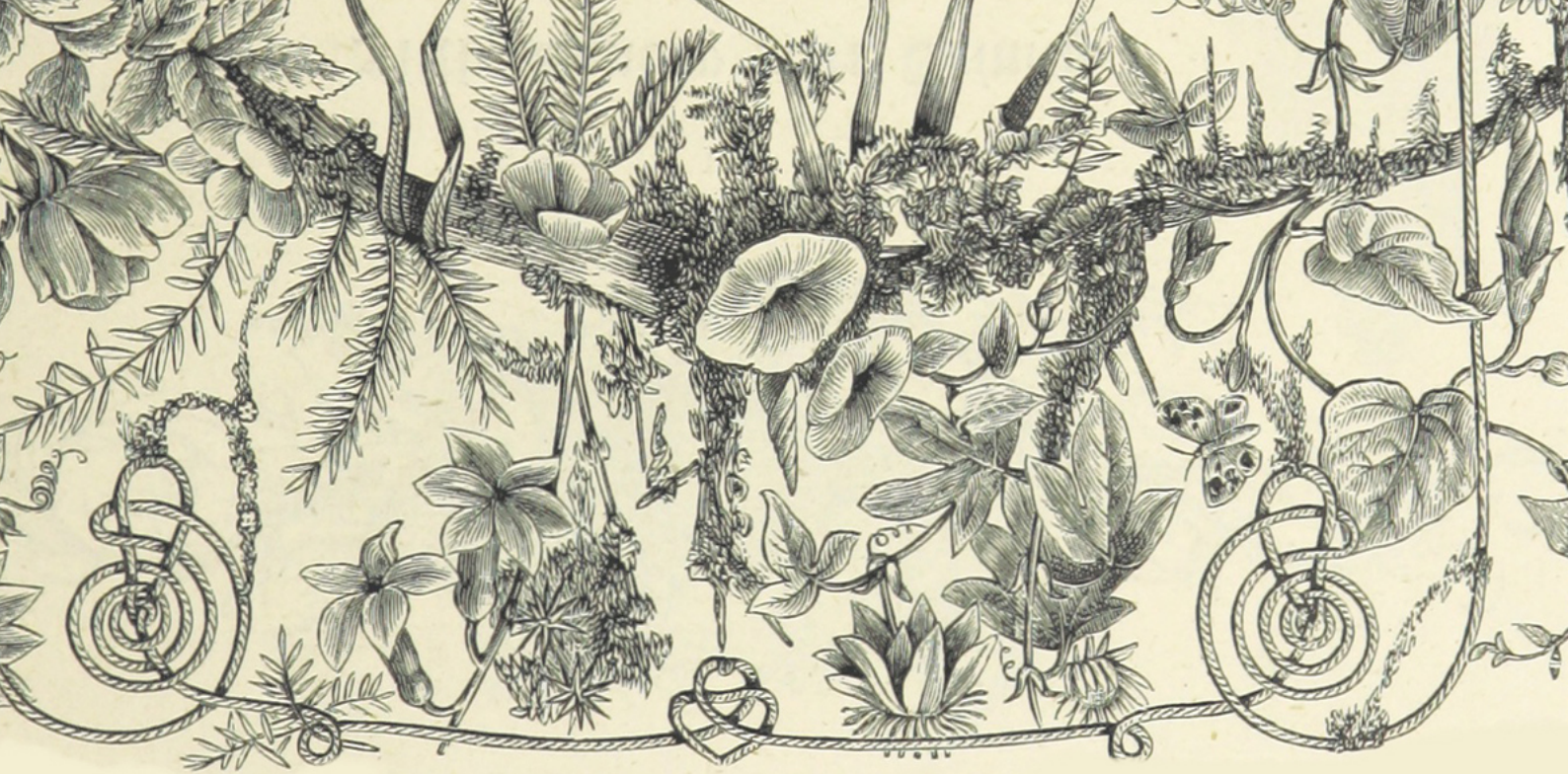
Lorenzo knows this, so even though he loves Isabella he tries hard to keep it a secret. She feels the same, and represses her intense feelings for the same reason. They cry into their pillows, saying they can't stand it any longer. Then one day, they are both sick from keeping their love to themselves, and Isabella faintly cries out Lorenzo's name, being stressed by how sick he looks - this is enough for him to realise that she loves him back, and they begin a hidden relationship, meeting in secret trysts at dawn and dusk.

They have a brief moment of happiness, but then the brothers catch on to their love. Jealous and angry, they conspire to lead Lorenzo into a forest and brutally murder him. Then, they tell Isabella that he's gone away to a far off land, and they don't think that he'll ever return. Isabella is heartbroken; her beauty and youth begin to wither away.

Lorenzo visits Isabella as a ghost, perhaps while she's dreaming. He reveals that he was murdered and tells her where he was buried - in his 'forest tomb'. With a maid, Isabella goes back to the forest and digs him up. She takes his head back to Florence with her, and cries over it. To keep it hidden but also close to her, she buries it in a pot and plants basil over it; she spends most of her free time crying into the pot, and as a result it grows into the most beautiful basil in the whole kingdom.

The brothers eventually realise that the pot contains Lorenzo's head, they steal it and Isabella becomes frantic, not understanding why they would take it from her. She dies soon afterwards.





VOCABULARY

Stanzas 1 - 6

I

Fair - beautiful, as in a 'fair maiden', but also 'good', 'holy', 'just', 'right'

Palmer - a pilgrim, someone on a spiritual journey

Self-same - the same

Stir of heart - moving the heart to feel a strong emotion, such as love or inspiration

Malady - sickness

Weep - cry

II

Morn - morning

Tenderer - softer, more loving

Eve - evening

Stir - move

Rill - a small stream

Lute-string - the strings on a 'lute', a medieval instrument that's similar to a guitar

Broidery - embroidery, sewing

III

Latch - the door handle

Chamber - bedroom

Vespers - prayers

Turn'd - turned

IV

Plight - suffering

My lady's boon - my lady's favour (ask for her to begin a relationship)

V

Domain - world, home - 'fell within the rose's just domain' is a phrase meaning 'the story belonged to the realms of love', as the rose symbolises love

VI

Conceit - a symbol or metaphor, but also an absurd belief, such as an arrogant belief

Yet - but

Meek - week and feeble

Stanzas 7 - 16

VII

Wak'd - awoke

Anguished - stressed

Waxing - fading, as in the 'waxing' cycle of the moon when it disappears

Flush'd - flushed

Lisp'd - whispered, spoke softly

VIII

Ceas'd - ceased, stopped

Timid - shy, fearful

Shrive - confess

IX

Clime - climate, weather

Gracious - pleasant and kind, but also divine and spiritual

Erewhile - some time ago

Poesied - made into poetry

Dewy - covered in dew, condensation

X

Parting - separated

Zephyr - the west wind

Ditty - a small song

XII

Dusk - night time

Eves - evenings

Bower - tree

Hyacinth - a beautiful, scented spring flower

Musk - a heavy, perfumed scent

Idle - lazy, not working

Woe - sadness

XIII

Award - gift, token or reward

Doth - does

Under-grove - underneath the forest

Embalm'd - embalmed, covered in a balm such as those that are used for the dead

Almsmen - men who give aid in the form of charitable donations

XIV

Fair - beautiful, just and honest

Dwelt - lived

Ancestral - relating to ancestors

Merchandize - products sold by a company

Weary - tired

Swelt - swelled

Proud-quiver'd loins - strong, healthy bodies

Rich-ored - ore is a valuable metal found in rocks, sometimes sifted out of river beds

Driftings - things that drift along water

XV

Ceylon - Sri Lanka, an island off the coast of India

Piteous - sad and full of suffering

Seethe - writhe in pain or worry

Half-ignorant - the brothers were only half aware of what harm they were causing

Racks - torture devices that stretch humans until their limbs break

XVI

Founts - fountains

Wretch - a destroyed or broken person

Orange-mounts - hills covered in orange trees

Lazar stairs - stairs in a lazar house, designed for the poor and sick

Grecian - greek

Stanzas 17 - 24

XVII

Ledger-men - accountants or bankers

Downy - feathered

Toil - hard work

Hot Egypt's pest - the plague of darkness which descended on Egypt, described in Exodus, in the Bible

Covetous - being jealous of what others have, desiring possessions

Money-bags - a derogatory term used to describe the greedy brothers, suggesting their obsession with wealth

XIX

Eloquent - great with words

Famed - famous

Boon - a favour or request

Myrtles - bushes with aromatic berries

Amorous of - in love with

Ghittern - a medieval stringed instrument, like a lute

Venturing - taking a risk, going on an adventure

Ill beseem - to badly fit or badly suit something

Piteous - sad, worthy of pity

XX

Grant - allow

A pardon - where you allow something to happen or let something go

Soberly - seriously, sensibly

Assail - an attack, criticism or sudden intense feeling

To stead - to help or benefit

North-wind - a wind that starts in the North and

blows South, a geographical reference to Keats writing in England to honour an Italian poet

XXI

Brethren - brothers

Unconfines - unleashes

Blithe - happy and carefree

Coax - encourage her

By degrees - slowly

High noble - an aristocrat

XXII

Conference - meeting

Fix'd - decided

Atone - make up for / pay penance for

Resolved - decided

XXIV

We purpose - we are intending to

Ay - yes

Spur three leagues - to ride ten miles

Appenine - an Italian mountain range

Ere - before

Rosary - prayer beads used in Catholicism

Eglantine - sweet briar, a wild rose with beautiful flowers but sharp thorns, the word also means 'needle'

Courteously - politely

As he was wont - as he was supposed to do / as he was used to doing

Stanzas 25 - 32

XXV

Oft - often

Matin-song - morning songs of prayer

Aloft - up high

Lattice - a criss cross patterned door or screen

XXVI

Lest - in case

Good morrow - good morning

To be fain - to be compelled, inclined, happy

Stifle - suppress

XXVII

Arno - the River Arno, the main river in Florence

Straiten'd - restricted or constrained, as a person may be through poverty

Bulrush - a plant that grows on the banks of rivers, with long reeds like grass

Bream - a kind of fish

Freshets - floods of water from sudden rain or melting ice

Wan - pale, ill

Ford - a shallow place in a river where people can cross over

XXVIII

Slain - killed

Break-covert - breaking the cover of something, discovering a hiding place

Blood-hounds - hunting dogs that follow the smell of blood

Convulsed spur - sharply sticking their spurs into the sides of the horses

XXIX

Ta'en - taken

Affairs - business

Trusty - trustworthy

Stifling - oppressive, suffocating

Widow's weed - the black mourning clothes worn by widows in the Victorian era

Hope's accursed bands - potentially a reference to 'wedding bands', the golden rings that signify marriage - the narrator appears to be suggesting that Isabella should not rest in a state of hope that Lorenzo will return, she should start grieving his death right away

XXX

Brooded - thought deeply

Murmuring - muttering, speaking quietly but deeply

XXXI

Vigil - staying up all night, sometimes from insomnia but also a vigil can be intentional to enact a spiritual or personal mission, such as watching over a sick or dying person

The golden hour - the break of dawn

Throng - a busy crowd of people or entities

Rude - crude or rough

XXXII

Eves - evenings

Bereaves - to lose someone close through their death

Roundelay - a simple song with a repeating refrain

Stanzas 33 - 40

XXXIII

Oftentimes - often

Dungeon climes - imprisoning weathers

Hinnom's vale - a valley in Jerusalem where children were sacrificed by fire

Shroud - a covering of a sheet, often used to cover bodies after death

XXXIV

Ignorance - not knowing the truth

Feather'd pall - a pall is a covering for a coffin, 'feather'd' suggests perhaps an inversion of the 'downy' pillows that Isabella and Lorenzo softly sleep on when they are happy and in love

XXXV

Marr'd - ruined

Lustre - shininess

Lute - a medieval instrument, used in love songs

Lorn - forlorn, lonely, abandoned

Loamed - covered in earth or dirt

Miry - full of muddy water, like a mire

Channel - a small flow of water, like a river

XXXVI

Spake - spoke

Piteous - pitiful

Languour - fatigue, but also listlessness, dreaminess

Tremulous - trembling

Palsied Druid - a druid, an ancient wizard, affected by a shaking sickness

Hoarse - a sharp, sore throated, rasping sound

Sepulchral - relating to tombs and graves

Briars - thorny bushes

XXXVII

Dewy - covered in dew, like the drops of condensation which cover everything in the morning

Aloof - distant

Woof - Keats makes an extended metaphor of the idea of unravelling a story here, Lorenzo's ghost 'unthread[s] the horrid woof' of what happened to him - the 'warp and woof' are terms used to describe the vertical and horizontal threads which run across a piece of fabric

Spite - bitterness

Avarice - greediness

Turfed dell - grass covered valley

XXXVIII

Whortle-berries - wild blueberries, bilberries

Flint-stone - a stone made of flint

Beeches and chestnuts - trees which produce nuts

Bleat - the sound a sheep makes, onomatopoeiac

Heather-bloom - purple heather flowers

XXXIX

Alas - an expression of sadness

Dwelling - living

Fieldward - towards the field

Knelling - the ringing sound of a bell

Humanity - human kind, as opposed to those who are just spirits and have passed on

XL

Seraph - an angel

Abyss - a giant, endless expanse - in this case the stars or heaven

Stanzas 41 - 48

XLI

Mourn'd - sadly lamented, said with grief

Adieu - goodbye

Atom darkness - complete, utter darkness - down to the atom

Turmoil - chaos

Bereft - deprived

Rugged - rough

Fruitless toil - work without any reward

Cleft - dipped shape

Spangly - speckled

XLII

Portion'd us - gave us a piece of something

School'd - educated

XLIII

Devised - planned

Hie - go

Unsurmised - unnoticed

Inmost - the deepest private thoughts and feelings

Resolv'd - decided

Dismal - dark, depressing

Hearse - a vehicle used at funerals

XLIV

Champaign - field, countryside

Feverous - sick and frenzied, as in a fever

Hectic - busy and chaotic

Betide - happen

XLV

Loiter'd - hung around, lingered

Clayey - made of clay

Funeral stole - a term for a shroud, a cloth covering of a coffin

XLVI

Gaz'd - gazed

Mould - rotting earth

Native lily of the dell - a natural lily flower that grows there - lilies in the 19th century are symbols of peace in death

Fervently - passionately

Misers - cruel money-obsessed people

XLVII

Soiled - dirty, covered in dirt

Bosom - chest

'Gan - began

Phantasies - fantasies, dreams and thoughts

Dainties made to still an infant's cry - delicate, beautiful things such as jewellery that were given to children to distract them and stop them from crying

XLVIII

Pity - sadness and sympathy

Dismal - depressing

Labouring - working

Hoar - grey-white

Travail - work

Kernel - the central part of something, usually a term applied to nuts

Stanzas 49 - 57

XLIX

Wherefore - why

Wormy circumstance - gross, extended descriptions of death

Linger - hang about

Plaining - complaining, mourning, lamenting

Minstrel - a medieval storyteller

L

Persèan sword - recalling the Greek myth of Perseus, a figure who was known for fighting monsters and beheading Medusa. Isabella's sword is made of 'duller steel', Keats is saying that it seems far less epic and heroic, but he is suggesting there is still a nobility in her obsession with the task of unearthing Lorenzo's head

Love impersonate - the personification of Love, using a capital letter to imply its spiritual force

LI

Calm'd - calmed

Sepulchral cell - the tomb-like prisons of the eye sockets - sepulchres are open tombs or monuments to the dead

Drench'd - drenched, soaked

LII

Araby - Arabia

Odorous - strong smelling

O'er - over

LIII

Morn - morning

LIV

Balmy - a refreshing, soft, soothing smell

Basil-tufts - basil plants

Mouldering - moulding

Casketed - locked in a basket

Leafits - little leaves, new shoots

LV

Melancholy - beautiful, soft sadness

Despondingly - tragically

Lethean - relating to the river Lethe, that in Greek mythology runs on the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead - also associated with sleep and forgetfulness

Cypress - tall, coniferous trees

LVI

Hither - here

Ye - you

Melpomene - the Greek muse of tragedy

LVII

Baalites - followers of Baal, a pagan god of rain and fertility often worshipped by ancient Middle Eastern cultures

Pelf - money gained by nefarious or dishonest means

Brethren - brothers, members of the same community

Kindred - relations or family, kin

Dower - dowry, gifts given to the husband in marriage from the wife or her family - in this case 'youth' and 'beauty' are the gifts Isabella would have given to her husband

Stanzas 58 - 63

LVIII

Flourish'd - flourished, grew tall and strong

To wean - to get a child used to feeding on adult food

LIX

Sift - sort out

Whim - sudden change of mind

Seldom - rarely

Chapel-shrift - church

LX

Contriv'd - planned

Guerdon - repayment, reward

Banishment - being permanently banned from entering a place, in this case the brothers are banned from Florence

LXI

Despondingly - tragically, losing confidence or hope

"Well-a-way!" - an old, sad song expressing sorrow and lamentation

Lone - alone

Ta'en - taken

LXII

Amorously - lovingly

Lorn - forlorn, abandoned

Oftentimes - often

Pilgrim - a person on a spiritual journey

'Twas - it was

'Tis - it is

LXIII

Pined - longed for sadly

Imploring - begging

Overcast - covered over in grey clouds

Ditty - narrative song

Burthen - burden

