


Revision Guide

ISABELLA
or
THE POT OF BASIL
by
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Scrbblly.



FAIR ISABEL,
POOR SIMPLE ISABEL!

LORENZO, A YOUNG
PALMER IN LOVE'S
EYE!

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SUMMARY

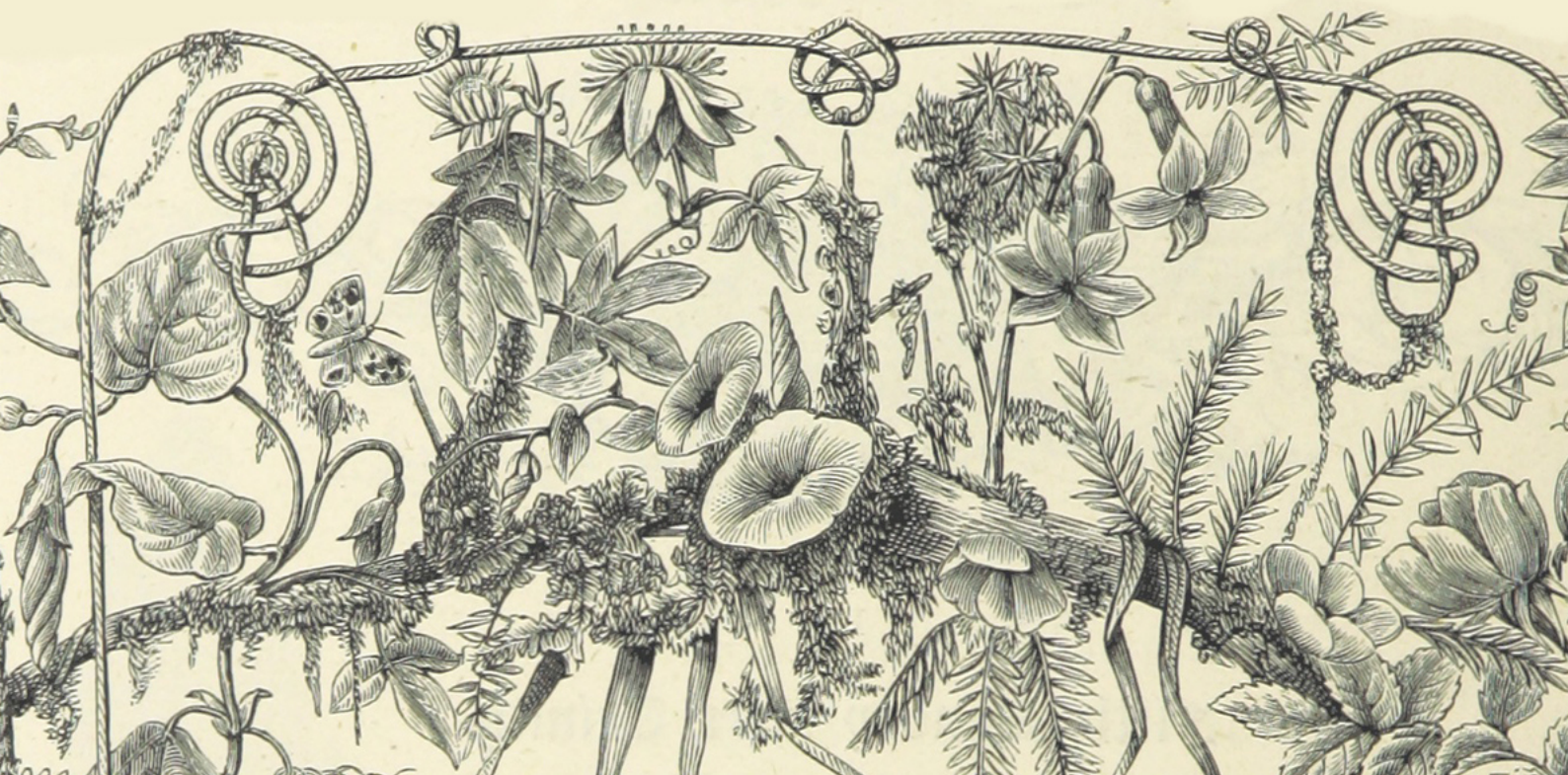
Lorenzo and Isabella are young Florentines, living in Florence, Italy during the Medieval era. At this time, Florence was one of the richest cities in the world, and the banking capital of Europe. Isabella is of aristocratic heritage, and her brothers are wealthy - so they are very set on preserving 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.



THE POEM WITH A BREAKDOWN OF STANZAS

Stanzas 1 - 11

ISABELLA, OR THE POT OF BASIL

A Story from Boccaccio

I.

FAIR Isabel, poor simple Isabel!
Lorenzo, a young palmer in Love's eye!
They could not in the self-same mansion dwell
Without some stir of heart, some malady;
They could not sit at meals but feel how well
It soothed each to be the other by;
They could not, sure, beneath the same roof sleep
But to each other dream, and nightly weep.

II.

With every morn their love grew tenderer,
With every eve deeper and tenderer still;
He might not in house, field, or garden stir,
But her full shape would all his seeing fill;
And his continual voice was pleasanter
To her, than noise of trees or hidden rill;
Her lute-string gave an echo of his name,
She spoilt her half-done broidery with the same.

III.

He knew whose gentle hand was at the latch,
Before the door had given her to his eyes;
And from her chamber-window he would catch
Her beauty farther than the falcon spies;
And constant as her vespers would he watch,
Because her face was turn'd to the same skies;
And with sick longing all the night outwear,
To hear her morning-step upon the stair.

MODERN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

I. Beautiful Isabel, poor simple Isabel! And Lorenzo too, he was a young pilgrim under Love's gaze! This pair of lovers couldn't live together in the same house, without feeling intense emotions, and love-sickness; they couldn't sit at dinner without feeling soothed by the company of each other's presence nearby; they definitely couldn't sleep in the same house without dreaming of each other, and crying at night because they couldn't be together.

II. Every morning their love became more tender, every evening it became tenderer still. Lorenzo couldn't move in the house, field or garden without seeing her shape everywhere; his continuous voice was more pleasing to her than than the noise of trees or hidden streams; the music from her lute echoed his name, and she spoiled her half-done sewing by writing his name there too.

III. He knew it was Isabella's gentle hand at the latch before she opened the door and he saw her with his eyes; from her bedroom window he would spot her beauty, with a sense sharper than a falcon's. And as constant as her prayers he'd watch her, because her face was turned to the same skies; and with sick longing he'd stay up all night just to hear her first steps in the morning upon the stairs of the house.

IV.

A whole long month of May in this sad plight
Made their cheeks paler by the break of June:
“To morrow will I bow to my delight,
“To-morrow will I ask my lady’s boon.” -
“O may I never see another night,
“Lorenzo, if thy lips breathe not love’s tune.” -
So spake they to their pillows; but, alas,
Honeyless days and days did he let pass;

V.

Until sweet Isabella’s untouch’d cheek
Fell sick within the rose’s just domain,
Fell thin as a young mother’s, who doth seek
By every lull to cool her infant’s pain:
“How ill she is,” said he, “I may not speak,
“And yet I will, and tell my love all plain:
“If looks speak love-laws, I will drink her tears,
“And at the least ’twill startle off her cares.”

VI.

So said he one fair morning, and all day
His heart beat awfully against his side;
And to his heart he inwardly did pray
For power to speak; but still the ruddy tide
Stifled his voice, and puls’d resolve away -
Fever’d his high conceit of such a bride,
Yet brought him to the meekness of a child:
Alas! when passion is both meek and wild!

VII.

So once more he had wak’d and anguished
A dreary night of love and misery,
If Isabel’s quick eye had not been wed
To every symbol on his forehead high;
She saw it waxing very pale and dead,
And straight all flush’d; so, lisped tenderly,
“Lorenzo!” - here she ceas’d her timid quest,
But in her tone and look he read the rest.

IV. They spent the whole of May in this state of sadness and by the time June came they looked more sickly. They spoke into their pillows: “Tomorrow, I will give in to my feelings, Tomorrow I’ll ask my lady to start a relationship” (Lorenzo speaking),

“O, I’d rather die, Lorenzo, than hear you say that you don’t love me”. But sadly, he did nothing and they carried on without sweetness in their lives for days and days.

V. Finally, Isabella succumbed to love-sickness, and her cheeks stopped being rosy and became pale. Her face grew thin like a young mother with a sick child. Lorenzo said: “She’s so ill, I am not supposed to confess my love, but I don’t care - I will tell her plainly that I love her. If looks can show love, I will drink her tears, and at the very least I can hope that my presence by her side will stop her from being worried or stressed.”

VI. This is what he said one beautiful morning, and all day it caused his heart to pound awfully. He prayed inwardly for his heart to give him the courage to speak; but the flow of his blood stopped his voice and took away his confidence with every pulse. He was passionate in his high belief that he deserved such a bride as Isabella, but his feelings made him weak and passive like a child: What a pity! When passion is both weak and wild at the same time!

VII. So he woke again in distress from a dull night of love and misery, Isabella’s keen eye noticed the signs of sickness on his forehead; she saw it turn pale and dead-looking, and then all of a sudden it flushed; “Lorenzo!” she whispered tenderly - at that point she stopped and said no more - but he could tell by reading her tone and look that she loved him back.

VIII.

“O Isabella, I can half perceive
That I may speak my grief into thine ear;
If thou didst ever any thing believe,
Believe how I love thee, believe how near
My soul is to its doom: I would not grieve
Thy hand by unwelcome pressing, would not fear
Thine eyes by gazing; but I cannot live
Another night, and not my passion shrive.”

IX.

“Love! thou art leading me from wintry cold,
Lady! thou leadest me to summer clime,
And I must taste the blossoms that unfold
In its ripe warmth this gracious morning time.”
So said, his erewhile timid lips grew bold,
And poesied with hers in dewy rhyme:
Great bliss was with them, and great happiness
Grew, like a lusty flower in June’s caress.

X

Parting they seem’d to tread upon the air,
Twin roses by the zephyr blown apart
Only to meet again more close, and share
The inward fragrance of each other’s heart.
She, to her chamber gone, a ditty fair
Sang, of delicious love and honey’d dart;
He with light steps went up a western hill,
And bade the sun farewell, and joy’d his fill.

XI

All close they met again, before the dusk
Had taken from the stars its pleasant veil,
All close they met, all eves, before the dusk
Had taken from the stars its pleasant veil,
Close in a bower of hyacinth and musk,
Unknown of any, free from whispering tale.
Ah! better had it been for ever so,
Than idle ears should pleasure in their woe.

VIII. “Oh Isabella, I can half tell that I could talk to you about my troubles, if you ever believed anything - believe how much I love you, believe how close my soul is to dying: I wouldn’t want to upset your hand by pressing it if you didn’t want me to, I wouldn’t make your eyes afraid by staring into them; but at the same time I can’t live another night without confessing my love for you.”

IX. (Lorenzo speaking further) “My Love! You’re leading me away from the cold of winter, Lady! You lead me to summer weather, and I have to taste the beautiful flowers that unfold under its sun in the lovely morning”. As he said this, his previously timid lips became brave and poetic, connecting with Isabella’s in dewy rhymes, they felt bliss and happiness grow like a lusty flower tended by the warmth of June.

X. When they separated, it was like they walked on air, and they resembled twin roses being blown apart by the wind; this made their meetings even closer and they shared the inward scents of each other’s heart. She went to her bedroom and sang a small song about delicious love and how she had been struck by Cupid’s honeyed arrow. He went up a hill to the west, stepping lightly and full of joy, to say goodbye to the setting sun.

XI. They met closely again before night time had taken its pleasant covering from the stars. They met closely every evening, before night time removed the pleasant sky that hid the stars. They sat close together in a shady, secret place full of hyacinth flowers and musk, no one knew they were there and they were free from being found out. Ah! It would have been better if it had been like this forever, than if listening ears had taken pleasure from their sadness.

Stanzas 12 - 22

XII

Were they unhappy then? - It cannot be -
Too many tears for lovers have been shed,
Too many sighs give we to them in fee,
Too much of pity after they are dead,
Too many doleful stories do we see,
Whose matter in bright gold were best be read;
Except in such a page where Theseus' spouse
Over the pathless waves towards him bows.

XIII

But, for the general award of love,
The little sweet doth kill much bitterness;
Though Dido silent is in under-grove,
And Isabella's was a great distress,
Though young Lorenzo in warm Indian clove
Was not embalm'd, this truth is not the less -
Even bees, the little almsmen of spring-bowers,
Know there is richest juice in poison-flowers.

XIV

With her two brothers this fair lady dwelt,
Enriched from ancestral merchandize,
And for them many a weary hand did swelt
In torched mines and noisy factories,
And many once proud-quiver'd loins did melt
In blood from stinging whip; - with hollow eyes
Many all day in dazzling river stood,
To take the rich-ored driftings of the flood.

XII. Were they unhappy even so early on in their relationship? They can't have been - too many tears have been shed over lovers, too many sighs have been paid to them, too much pity after they are dead, too many sad stories have been written about them. The content of these stories should be written in bright gold, except in pages such as those where Theseus' wife headed towards him over the pathless waves of the sea.

Note: Theseus was a Greek hero who featured in many myths, including overcoming the Minotaur. He was thrown to his death off a cliff when Athenian society turned against him, so Keats is perhaps foreshadowing Lorenzo's death with this allegorical reference.

XIII. But, the general gift of love is the small amount of sweetness that kills bitterness; Though Dido is silent in her grove, Isabella's love was a great distress, and even though young Lorenzo was not embalmed in Indian cloves, this truth about love is not diminished - Even bees, the little supporters of spring gardens know that the best juice comes from poisoned flowers.

Note: Another allegorical reference, this time to the myth of Dido - the Queen of Carthage, an intelligent woman who escapes from her brother Pygmalion, after learning that he was involved in her husband's death. Her husband, like Lorenzo, appeared to his wife in a dream and told her what had happened.

XIV. This beautiful lady lived with her two brothers, they were all made rich from their family's business. This wealth was the consequence of many tired hands that worked in torched mines and noisy factories, and proud people who had melted in blood from their stinging whips; many people stood in a dazzling river with hollow eyes to catch small pieces of gold that drifted along with the flood of water (**a metaphor** - meaning that the family was surrounded by many hollow-eyed people who hung around them and tried to get little pieces of their wealth).

XV

For them the Ceylon diver held his breath,
And went all naked to the hungry shark;
For them his ears gush'd blood; for them in death
The seal on the cold ice with piteous bark
Lay full of darts; for them alone did seethe
A thousand men in troubles wide and dark:
Half-ignorant, they turn'd an easy wheel,
That set sharp racks at work, to pinch and peel.

XVI

Why were they proud? Because their marble founts
Gush'd with more pride than do a wretch's tears? -
Why were they proud? Because fair orange-mounts
Were of more soft ascent than lazarus stairs? -
Why were they proud? Because red-lin'd accounts
Were richer than the songs of Grecian years? -
Why were they proud? again we ask aloud,
Why in the name of Glory were they proud?

XVII

Yet were these Florentines as self-retired
In hungry pride and gainful cowardice,
As two close Hebrews in that land inspired,
Paled in and vineyarded from beggar-spies,
The hawks of ship-mast forests - the untired
And pannier'd mules for ducats and old lies -
Quick cat's-paws on the generous stray-away, -
Great wits in Spanish, Tuscan, and Malay.

XVIII

How was it these same ledger-men could spy
Fair Isabella in her downy nest?
How could they find out in Lorenzo's eye
A straying from his toil? Hot Egypt's pest
Into their vision covetous and sly!
How could these money-bags see east and west? -
Yet so they did - and every dealer fair
Must see behind, as doth the hunted hare.

XV. For the brothers, the diver of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) held his breath when he dived for pearls beneath the sea, swimming down naked and exposed to the hungry shark; for those brothers and their money he risked his life, his ears gushed with blood; for them too the seal lay on the cold ice, barking piteously, in pain from being hunted and dying from being full of darts; just for them alone a thousand men seethed in far reaching, dark troubles: half unaware of the system they were part of, the evil brothers turned an easy wheel that connected to sharp racks, that pulled all the humans that worked for them apart and pushed them to their limits, being pinched and peeled by the tasks they were forced to perform for the sake of making the brothers richer.

XVI. Why were they proud? Because their marble fountains gushed with more pride than the tears of a wretched person, their fair orange-groved gardens and lands were more pleasant to walk on than the steps to leper hospitals, because red-lined account books were richer than Ancient Greek songs? Why were they proud? We ask again, aloud. Why in the name of Glory were they so proud?

XVII. And still these Florentine brothers rested in hungry pride and money-grabbing cowardice, they were like two Hebrews that hid in their own vineyards from spies pretending to be beggars; like hawks in tall forests of ship masts, like the untired donkeys carrying baskets of gold coins and old lies, hiring 'cats-paws' or secret agents to do their bidding, doing business in Spanish, Tuscan and even Malaysian languages - all references to the business that the brothers conduct, implying that their wealth is built on dishonesty and exploitation.

XVIII. How could these same bankers spy on beautiful Isabella in her soft nest of a bedroom? How could they find out that Lorenzo's eye was distracted from work and focusing instead on Isabella? The plague of darkness jealously and slyly came into their vision. How could these money-bags notice everything that was going on in their world? Yet somehow they managed to pick up on it - and every fair, honest person must keep an eye out behind them, as though they are a hare that's being hunted.

XIX

O eloquent and famed Boccaccio!
Of thee we now should ask forgiving boon,
And of thy spicy myrtles as they blow,
And of thy roses amorous of the moon,
And of thy lilies, that do paler grow
Now they can no more hear thy ghittern's tune,
For venturing syllables that ill beseem
The quiet glooms of such a piteous theme.

XX

Grant thou a pardon here, and then the tale
Shall move on soberly, as it is meet;
There is no other crime, no mad assail
To make old prose in modern rhyme more sweet:
But it is done - succeed the verse or fail -
To honour thee, and thy gone spirit greet;
To stead thee as a verse in English tongue,
An echo of thee in the north-wind sung.

XXI

These brethren having found by many signs
What love Lorenzo for their sister had,
And how she lov'd him too, each unconfines
His bitter thoughts to other, well nigh mad
That he, the servant of their trade designs,
Should in their sister's love be blithe and glad,
When 'twas their plan to coax her by degrees
To some high noble and his olive-trees.

XXII

And many a jealous conference had they,
And many times they bit their lips alone,
Before they fix'd upon a surest way
To make the youngster for his crime atone;
And at the last, these men of cruel clay
Cut Mercy with a sharp knife to the bone;
For they resolved in some forest dim
To kill Lorenzo, and there bury him.

XIX. Oh, eloquent and famous Boccaccio! Of you we now ask a forgiving favour, the images you spoke of in your stories - your spicy myrtle bushes as they blow in the wind, your roses that are in love with the moon, your lilies that grow paler - they can no longer hear the tune of your lute, which accompanies the adventurous words you used for your original tale, words that seem to be almost too great for the quiet, gloomy and sad themes in Isabella's story.

XX. Please forgive me for copying your story, and then the story will carry on sensibly, as it is meant to do; there is no intention behind my worlds of another crime, nor mad criticism to make old stories sweet by putting them into modern rhyme: But this is what I've done - whether the poem succeeds or fails - and it is intended to honour you and touch your departed spirit; to benefit your work by turning it into English poetry, creating an echo of you sung by the north wind.

XXI. After these brothers found lots of proof of the love that Lorenzo had for their sister, and how she loved him too, each unleashed his cruel thoughts to the other, they were all close to madness after realising that their servant who works for them has become happy and carefree through receiving their sister's love, when it was their original plan to slowly persuade her to marry a high nobleman with olive trees, a man that they could do business with.

XXII. And they had many jealous meetings, and many thoughts by themselves, that caused them to bite their lips in frustration, before they decided on the surest way to make the young man pay for his crime; and finally these men who were made from cruel clay cut Mercy to the bone with a sharp knife; because they decided to kill and bury Lorenzo in a dim forest.

Stanzas 23 - 34

XXIII

So on a pleasant morning, as he leant
Into the sun-rise, o'er the balustrade
Of the garden-terrace, towards him they bent
Their footing through the dews; and to him said,
"You seem there in the quiet of content,
Lorenzo, and we are most loth to invade
Calm speculation; but if you are wise,
Bestride your steed while cold is in the skies.

XXIV

"To-day we purpose, ay, this hour we mount
To spur three leagues towards the Apennine;
Come down, we pray thee, ere the hot sun count
His dewy rosary on the eglantine."
Lorenzo, courteously as he was wont,
Bow'd a fair greeting to these serpents' whine;
And went in haste, to get in readiness,
With belt, and spur, and bracing huntsman's dress.

XXV

And as he to the court-yard pass'd along,
Each third step did he pause, and listen'd oft
If he could hear his lady's matin-song,
Or the light whisper of her footstep soft;
And as he thus over his passion hung,
He heard a laugh full musical aloft;
When, looking up, he saw her features bright
Smile through an in-door lattice, all delight.

XXVI

"Love, Isabel!" said he, "I was in pain
Lest I should miss to bid thee a good morrow
Ah! what if I should lose thee, when so fain
I am to stifle all the heavy sorrow
Of a poor three hours' absence? but we'll gain
Out of the amorous dark what day doth borrow.
Goodbye! I'll soon be back."—"Goodbye!" said she:—
And as he went she chanted merrily

XXIII. So, on a pleasant morning as he was leaning into the sunrise, over the balcony of the garden-terrace, they came walking towards him, stepping on the dewy grass, and they said to him "You seem quietly happy there, Lorenzo, and we don't want to intrude on your calm thoughts, but if you are wise you should stop what you're doing and go fetch your horse while the morning is still cold and fresh."

XXIV. "Today we intend, in fact this hour we're going to hunting and ride our horses three leagues (10 miles) towards the Apennine mountains; we beg you to come down and join us before the hot sun starts to touch the dewy rosary beads of the wild rose bushes." Lorenzo, being polite, as he was used to following their orders, bowed a lovely greeting to these whining snakes, and left quickly to get ready to ride - putting on his belt, spurs and hunting clothes.

XXV. And as he was passing through the courtyard of the house, he stopped every third step and listened to see whether he could hear Isabella singing her morning prayers, or hear the light whisper of her soft footsteps; and as he lingered over his passion like this, he heard a musical laugh from one of the windows above; he looked up and saw her bright features and smiling face through an indoor lattice, full of delight.

XXVI. "My love, Isabel!" he said, "I was upset in case I missed the opportunity to say good morning to you: Ah! What would I ever do if I lost you, when I am so compelled to suppress the heavy sorry I feel from being even three hours away from you? But we can make up our lost time in the passionate darkness that daylight has borrowed from us. Goodbye! I'll be back soon." "Goodbye!" she said: - and as he left she chanted her prayers happily.

XXVII

So the two brothers and their murder'd man
Rode past fair Florence, to where Arno's stream
Gurgles through straiten'd banks, and still doth fan
Itself with dancing bulrush, and the bream
Keeps head against the freshets. Sick and wan
The brothers' faces in the ford did seem,
Lorenzo's flush with love. - They pass'd the water
Into a forest quiet for the slaughter.

XXVIII

There was Lorenzo slain and buried in,
There in that forest did his great love cease;
Ah! when a soul doth thus its freedom win,
It aches in loneliness - is ill at peace
As the break-covert blood-hounds of such sin:
They dipp'd their swords in the water, and did tease
Their horses homeward, with convulsed spur,
Each richer by his being a murderer.

XXIX

They told their sister how, with sudden speed,
Lorenzo had ta'en ship for foreign lands,
Because of some great urgency and need
In their affairs, requiring trusty hands.
Poor Girl! put on thy stifling widow's weed,
And 'scape at once from Hope's accursed bands;
To-day thou wilt not see him, nor to-morrow,
And the next day will be a day of sorrow.

XXX

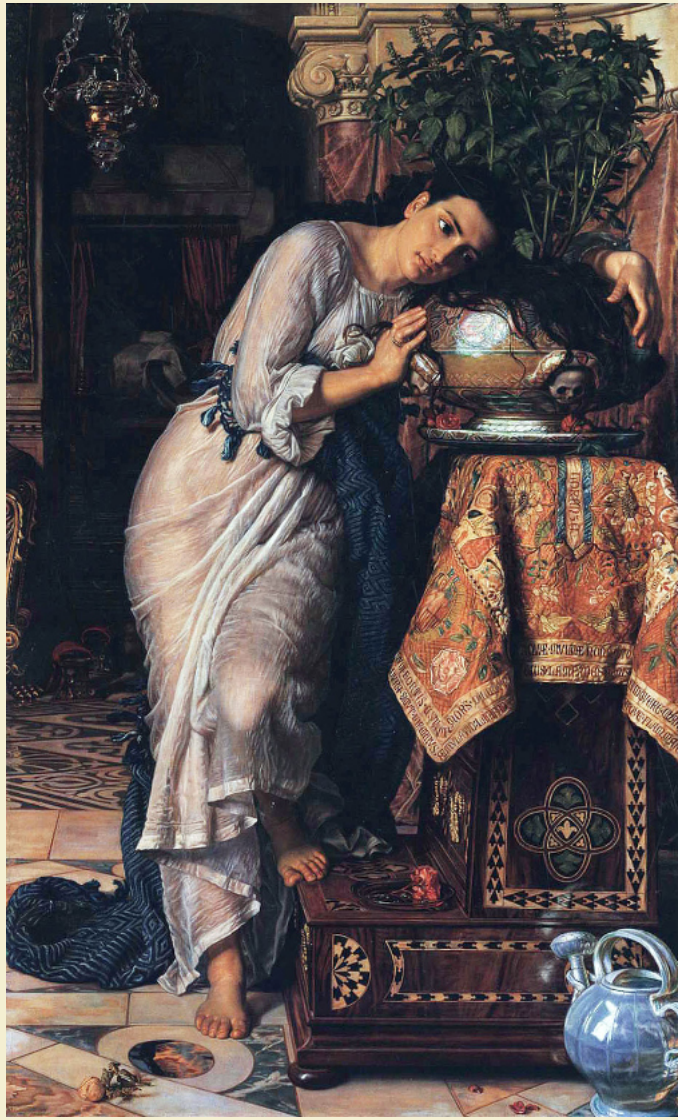
She weeps alone for pleasures not to be;
Sorely she wept until the night came on,
And then, instead of love, O misery!
She brooded o'er the luxury alone:
His image in the dusk she seem'd to see,
And to the silence made a gentle moan,
Spreading her perfect arms upon the air,
And on her couch low murmuring, "Where? O where?"

XXVII. So the two brothers and the man the planned to murder rode past lovely Florence, to where the river Arno gurgles through river banks that have been constrained, though the river even there still fans itself with bulrushes and the fish manage to swim upriver against floods. The brothers' faces seemed sick and pale when they reflected in the ford but Lorenzo's seemed flush with love. - They passed over the water into a forest that was quiet and prepared for the slaughter of Lorenzo.

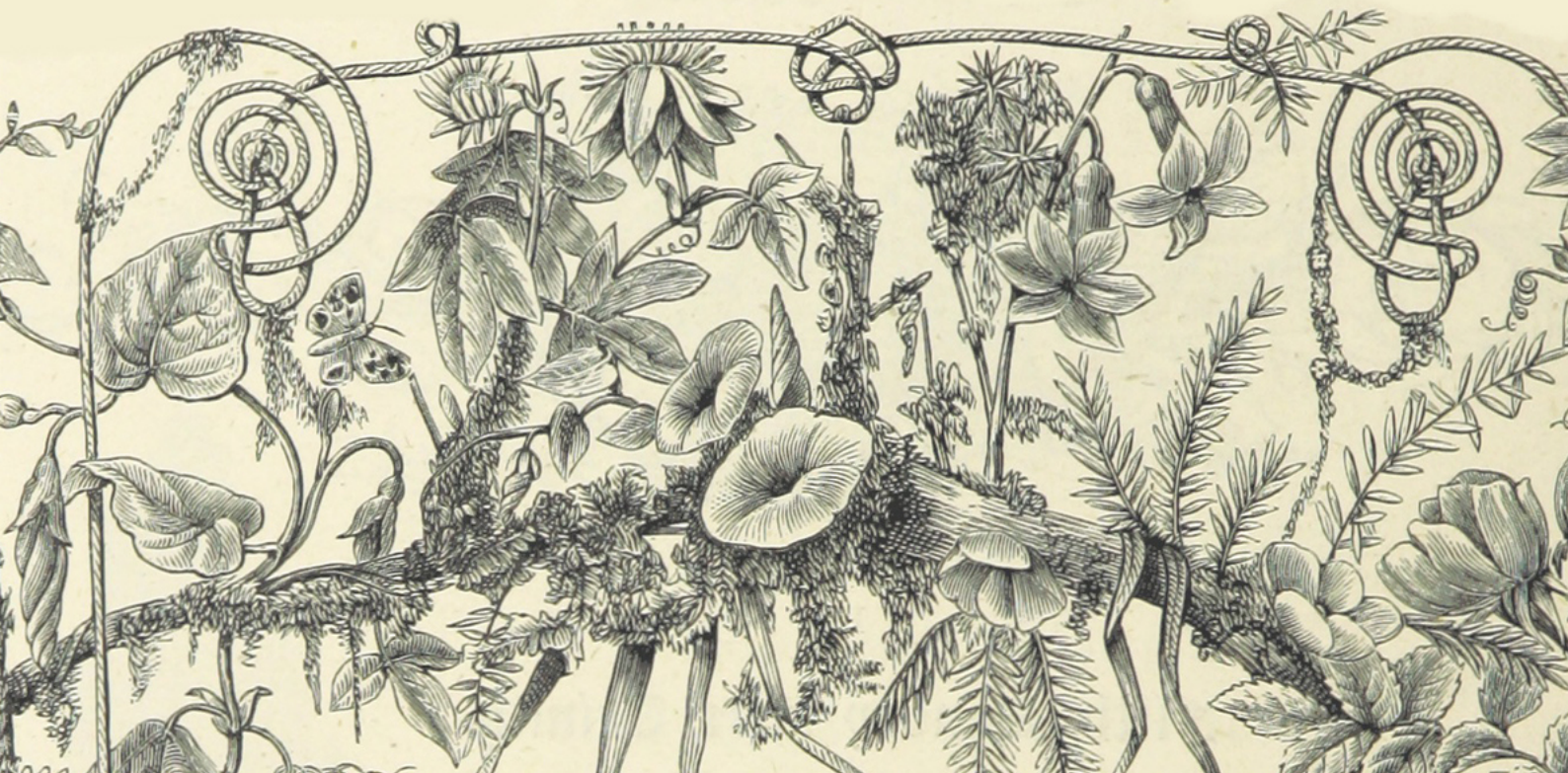
XXVIII. There in the forest Lorenzo was killed and buried, there in that forest his great love stopped; Ah! When a soul is separated from the body and wins its freedom this way, through murder, it aches in loneliness - it can't rest in peace, and like a bloodhound following the scent of an animal, it will seek out the sin that was committed against it: the brothers washed their swords in the water and encouraged their horses homewards, sticking their spurs into their horses, each man richer because of the murder.

XXIX. When they returned, they told their sister how, suddenly, Lorenzo had set off on a ship bound for foreign lands, because of some urgent business matter that they could only entrust to him. Poor Girl! Put your suffocating widow's clothes on, and escape at once from the wretched bands of Hope. You won't see him today, nor tomorrow, and the next day will bring sadness.

XXX. She cries alone for the pleasures she'll never be able to enjoy, sorely she cried until the night came along, and then, instead of love, oh misery! She thought alone over the luxury they used to share in darkness: she seemed to see his image in the dusk, into the silence she moaned gently because of suffering, spreading her perfect arms into the air, lying on her couch and murmuring "Where? Oh where is he?"



A painting of Isabella with the pot of basil by the Pre-Raphaelite artist **William Holman Hunt**.
From the Laing Art Gallery Collection.



XXXI

But Selfishness, Love's cousin, held not long
Its fiery vigil in her single breast;
She fretted for the golden hour, and hung
Upon the time with feverish unrest -
Not long - for soon into her heart a throng
Of higher occupants, a richer zest,
Came tragic; passion not to be subdued,
And sorrow for her love in travels rude.

XXXII

In the mid days of autumn, on their eves
The breath of Winter comes from far away,
And the sick west continually bereaves
Of some gold tinge, and plays a roundelay
Of death among the bushes and the leaves,
To make all bare before he dares to stray
From his north cavern. So sweet Isabel
By gradual decay from beauty fell,

XXXIII

Because Lorenzo came not. Oftentimes
She ask'd her brothers, with an eye all pale,
Striving to be itself, what dungeon climes
Could keep him off so long? They spake a tale
Time after time, to quiet her. Their crimes
Came on them, like a smoke from Hinnom's vale;
And every night in dreams they groan'd aloud,
To see their sister in her snowy shroud.

XXXIV

And she had died in drowsy ignorance,
But for a thing more deadly dark than all;
It came like a fierce potion, drunk by chance,
Which saves a sick man from the feather'd pall
For some few gasping moments; like a lance,
Waking an Indian from his cloudy hall
With cruel pierce, and bringing him again
Sense of the gnawing fire at heart and brain.

XXXI. But Selfishness, the cousin of Love, didn't hold its fiery vigil in her lonely chest for long, she worried and waited for the golden hour of the dawn to arrive, watching the time with feverish unrest - not long - for soon into her heart rushed a crowd of other more important things, a richer spread of emotions, tragic modes of being; she felt strong passion and sorrow for her love who was sent off on rough travels.

XXXII. In the middle days of Autumn, during the evenings, the breath of Winter arrives from far away, and the sick West wind continually knocks the gold tinged leaves off their branches, and plays a song of death among the bushes and leaves, making all of them bare before he dares to leave his arctic cavern. In the same way as this, sweet Isabel's beauty gradually decayed.

XXXIII. Because Lorenzo never came back. Often, she'd ask her brothers, with an eye pale with fear, but trying to seem normal, what harsh, imprisoning weathers must be keeping Lorenzo away from Florence for so long? They told her lies, time after time, to keep her quiet. Their crimes came over them, like a smoke from Hinnom's vale; And every night they had nightmares that caused them to groan aloud, seeing their sister covered in a shroud (a sheet used to cover a dead body) of snow.

XXXIV. And she would have died in sleepy ignorance of the truth, except for one thing that was more deadly and dark than all; it came like a fierce potion, drunk by accident, which saves a sick man from death for a few gasping moments; like a sword waking an Indian from his cloudy halls of heaven with a cruel, piercing pain, and bringing to him once again a sense of the gnawing fire in his heart and brain.

Stanzas 35 - 46

XXXV

It was a vision.—In the drowsy gloom,
The dull of midnight, at her couch's foot
Lorenzo stood, and wept: the forest tomb
Had marr'd his glossy hair which once could shoot
Lustre into the sun, and put cold doom
Upon his lips, and taken the soft lute
From his lorn voice, and past his loamed ears
Had made a miry channel for his tears.

XXXVI

Strange sound it was, when the pale shadow spake;
For there was striving, in its piteous tongue,
To speak as when on earth it was awake,
And Isabella on its music hung:
Languor there was in it, and tremulous shake,
As in a palsied Druid's harp unstrung;
And through it moan'd a ghostly under-song,
Like hoarse night-gusts sepulchral briars among.

XXXVII

Its eyes, though wild, were still all dewy bright
With love, and kept all phantom fear aloof
From the poor girl by magic of their light,
The while it did unthread the horrid woof
Of the late darken'd time,—the murderous spite
Of pride and avarice,—the dark pine roof
In the forest,—and the sodden turfed dell,
Where, without any word, from stabs he fell.

XXXVIII

Saying moreover, "Isabel, my sweet!
Red whortle-berries droop above my head,
And a large flint-stone weighs upon my feet;
Around me beeches and high chestnuts shed
Their leaves and prickly nuts; a sheep-fold bleat
Comes from beyond the river to my bed:
Go, shed one tear upon my heather-bloom,
And it shall comfort me within the tomb.

XXXV. It was a vision - in the sleepy darkness, the dull of midnight, at the end of her couch Lorenzo stood, and cried: the forest tomb had spoiled his glossy hair which once shot beams of light into the sun, and put cold doom upon his lips, and took the soft music out of his lonely voice, and past his dirt-covered ears the tomb had made a muddy channel for his tears to flow down like rivers.

XXXVI. It was a strange sound when the pale shadow spoke; for it was trying, in its pitiful voice, to speak like it had when it was alive on earth, and Isabella listened intensely to the strange musical sound it made: there was languor in it, and a trembling, as if a shaking wizard was playing a badly strung harp; and through this sound it moaned a ghostly and quiet song, like the rough sound that comes from the gusts of wind which blow through the thorny bushes in graveyards.

XXXVII. Even though the ghost's eyes were wild, they were still dewy and bright with love for Isabella, stopping her from being afraid of the phantom by their bright magic, the whole time it unravelled the horrid threads of recently darkened time - the spite, pride and greed that caused the brothers to murder him, the dark pine roof of the forest and the wet, grassy valley where, without saying a word, he died from being stabbed by their swords.

XXXVIII. He said "Isabel, my sweet! Red bilberries droop above my head and a large flint-stone weighs upon my feet, beeches and chestnut trees surround me, shedding their leaves and prickly nuts; the bleating of sheep comes from across the river to where I lie: Go, cry upon the heather where I'm dead, and it will comfort me within the tomb."

XXXIX

"I am a shadow now, alas! alas!

Upon the skirts of human-nature dwelling

Alone: I chant alone the holy mass,

While little sounds of life are round me knelling,

And glossy bees at noon do fieldward pass,

And many a chapel bell the hour is telling,

Paining me through: those sounds grow strange to me,

And thou art distant in Humanity.

XL

"I know what was, I feel full well what is,

And I should rage, if spirits could go mad;

Though I forget the taste of earthly bliss,

That paleness warms my grave, as though I had

A Seraph chosen from the bright abyss

To be my spouse: thy paleness makes me glad;

Thy beauty grows upon me, and I feel

A greater love through all my essence steal."

XLI

The Spirit mourn'd "Adieu!"—dissolv'd, and left

The atom darkness in a slow turmoil;

As when of healthful midnight sleep bereft,

Thinking on rugged hours and fruitless toil,

We put our eyes into a pillowy cleft,

And see the spangly gloom froth up and boil:

It made sad Isabella's eyelids ache,

And in the dawn she started up awake;

XLII

"Ha! ha!" said she, "I knew not this hard life,

I thought the worst was simple misery;

I thought some Fate with pleasure or with strife

Portion'd us—happy days, or else to die;

But there is crime—a brother's bloody knife!

Sweet Spirit, thou hast school'd my infancy:

I'll visit thee for this, and kiss thine eyes,

And greet thee morn and even in the skies."

XXXIX. I'm a shadow now, sadly! I live alone on the edge of human nature: alone I chant the holy mass while little sounds of life around me make noises and glossy bees at midday buzz past me towards the field, many chapel bells ring out the hours, which pains me through: those sounds are becoming strange to me, and you are distant in Humanity (as she is alive and he is dead).

XL. "I know what happened, I feel fully now what is happening, and I would be angry, if spirits like me could be enraged; although I forget the taste of earthly happiness, the paleness of what happened to me warms my grave, as if I had an angel chosen from the bright universe to be my wife, your paleness makes me happy, your beauty grows upon me and I feel a greater love flooding through my being."

XLI. The Spirit said sadly "Goodbye!" - dissolved, and left the complete darkness around him in a slow chaos; like when a person deprived of healthy, midnight sleep thinks of the difficult hours they have to spend working without reward, and we put our eyes into a pillow and see the world around us sparkle and swirl in the darkness, as if it is frothing and boiling: what the ghost had said made sad Isabella's eyelids ache, and as soon as the day came she sat up awake.

XLII. "Ha! Ha!" She said, "I didn't know how hard life could be, I thought simple misery was the worst that could happen, I thought some Fate controlled our lives, giving us pleasure or stress - deciding if we would be happy, or else die; But there is a crime involved in this - a brother's bloody knife! Sweet Spirit, you have educated me and let me know about this: so I'll visit you, and kiss your eyes and greet you morning and evening in the skies."

XLIII

When the full morning came, she had devised
How she might secret to the forest hie;
How she might find the clay, so dearly prized,
And sing to it one latest lullaby;
How her short absence might be unsurmised,
While she the inmost of the dream would try.
Resolv'd, she took with her an aged nurse,
And went into that dismal forest-hearse.

XLIV

See, as they creep along the river side,
How she doth whisper to that aged Dame,
And, after looking round the champaign wide,
Shows her a knife.—"What feverous hectic flame
Burns in thee, child?—What good can thee betide,
That thou should'st smile again?"—The evening came,
And they had found Lorenzo's earthy bed;
The flint was there, the berries at his head.

XLV

Who hath not loiter'd in a green church-yard,
And let his spirit, like a demon-mole,
Work through the clayey soil and gravel hard,
To see scull, coffin'd bones, and funeral stole;
Pitying each form that hungry Death hath marr'd,
And filling it once more with human soul?
Ah! this is holiday to what was felt
When Isabella by Lorenzo knelt.

XLVI

She gaz'd into the fresh-thrown mould, as though
One glance did fully all its secrets tell;
Clearly she saw, as other eyes would know
Pale limbs at bottom of a crystal well;
Upon the murderous spot she seem'd to grow,
Like to a native lily of the dell:
Then with her knife, all sudden, she began
To dig more fervently than misers can.

XLIII. By the time the full morning had come she had planned how to secretly go to the forest, how she might find the body (the clay), so precious to her, and sing to it one last lullaby; how her short absence from the house might go unnoticed by the brothers, while she would try to enact what the ghost in the dream had told her. Resolved, she took an old nurse with her and they went into that dismal forest.

XLIV. See, as they creep along the side of the river how she whispers to that old woman, and after looking around the countryside to check that nobody's watching, shows her a knife. "What sick and chaotic flame burns in you, child? What goodness could happen to you to make you smile again?" The evening came, and they found Lorenzo's grave; The flint and berries were there, as he'd said they would be,

XLV. Who hasn't hung around a green graveyard before and allowed their spirit, like a demon mole, to travel through the clay-like soil and gravel to imagine the skull, confined bones and shrouds that lay underneath the earth, pitying every body lying down there that has been spoiled by hungry Death, and trying to once more imagine it as a human soul? Ah! This is like a holiday compared to what Isabella felt when she knelt by Lorenzo's body in the forest.

Note: A strange question! Basically Keats' narrative voice is explaining here the feeling that we have when we go to a graveyard and start to imagine the bodies left under the earth, and the souls that used to inhabit them

XLVI. She looked into the freshly turned earth, as though she could fully reveal all the secrets hidden there; Clearly she saw, as her brothers would have seen, pale limbs at the bottom of a crystal well; upon the murderous spot she seemed to grow like a lily that was native to the forest clearing: then with her knife, all of a sudden, she began to dig passionately - far more passionately than the misers (her money-grabbing brothers) dug before her.

Stanzas 47 - 58

XLVII

Soon she turn'd up a soiled glove, whereon
Her silk had play'd in purple phantasies,
She kiss'd it with a lip more chill than stone,
And put it in her bosom, where it dries
And freezes utterly unto the bone
Those dainties made to still an infant's cries:
Then 'gan she work again; nor stay'd her care,
But to throw back at times her veiling hair.

XLVIII

That old nurse stood beside her wondering,
Until her heart felt pity to the core
At sight of such a dismal labouring,
And so she kneeled, with her locks all hoar,
And put her lean hands to the horrid thing:
Three hours they labour'd at this travail sore;
At last they felt the kernel of the grave,
And Isabella did not stamp and rave.

XLIX

Ah! wherefore all this wormy circumstance?
Why linger at the yawning tomb so long?
O for the gentleness of old Romance,
The simple plaining of a minstrel's song!
Fair reader, at the old tale take a glance,
For here, in truth, it doth not well belong
To speak:—O turn thee to the very tale,
And taste the music of that vision pale.

L

With duller steel than the Perséan sword
They cut away no formless monster's head,
But one, whose gentleness did well accord
With death, as life. The ancient harps have said,
Love never dies, but lives, immortal Lord:
If Love impersonate was ever dead,
Pale Isabella kiss'd it, and low moan'd.
'Twas love; cold,—dead indeed, but not dethroned.

XLVII. Soon she unearthed a dirty glove, which used to play with the silk of her own dress in romantic dreams and fantasies, she kissed the glove with lips colder than stone, and put it in her chest, where it dries and freezes completely to the bone, like those tokens created to comfort children and stop them from crying: Then she began work again, letting nothing stop her from digging - although at times she paused to throw back her veiling hair.

XLVIII. The old nurse stood beside her in wonder, until her heart felt such complete and utter pity at the sight of her digging there, that she kneeled, with her grey hair falling, and put her skinny hands to work on the horrid thing: three hours they worked sorely; until at last they felt the coffin - the kernel of the grave, and Isabella did not stamp and rave.

XLIX. Ah! Why am I telling you about all these morbid, deathly things? Why do I linger at the yawning tomb for so long? Oh, to convey the gentleness of old Romance, the simple mourning of a minstrel's song! Fair reader, look back to the old tale, because it doesn't do me well to speak directly to you - O turn your thoughts back to the story and taste the music of that pale vision.

L. With duller steel than the Perséan sword, they didn't cut away the head of a formless monster (as Perseus did in the story of Medusa), instead they cut away the head of a man whose gentleness suited death well, as it had suited his life. The ancient harps have told us that Love never dies, but lives, immortal God: If the spiritual force of Love was ever dead between these two, pale Isabella kissed it, and moaned sadly. It was love; cold, - dead for sure, but still the most powerful presence (throned like a king) reigning over them.

LI
In anxious secrecy they took it home,
And then the prize was all for Isabel:
She calm'd its wild hair with a golden comb,
And all around each eye's sepulchral cell
Pointed each fringed lash; the smeared loam
With tears, as chilly as a dripping well,
She drench'd away:—and still she comb'd, and kept
Sighing all day—and still she kiss'd, and wept.

LII
Then in a silken scarf,—sweet with the dews
Of precious flowers pluck'd in Araby,
And divine liquids come with odorous ooze
Through the cold serpent-pipe refreshfully,—
She wrapp'd it up; and for its tomb did choose
A garden-pot, wherein she laid it by,
And cover'd it with mould, and o'er it set
Sweet Basil, which her tears kept ever wet.

LIII
And she forgot the stars, the moon, and sun,
And she forgot the blue above the trees,
And she forgot the dells where waters run,
And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze;
She had no knowledge when the day was done,
And the new morn she saw not: but in peace
Hung over her sweet Basil evermore,
And moisten'd it with tears unto the core.

LIV
And so she ever fed it with thin tears,
Whence thick, and green, and beautiful it grew,
So that it smelt more balmy than its peers
Of Basil-tufts in Florence; for it drew
Nurture besides, and life, from human fears,
From the fast mouldering head there shut from view:
So that the jewel, safely casketed,
Came forth, and in perfumed leafits spread.

LI. In nervous secrecy they took home the head, and then the prize was all for Isabel: she calmed its wild hair with a golden comb, and all around each eye's tomb'd socket she made his lashes stick out; she soaked the smeary mud on his face away with tears, as cold as a dripping well - and still she combed, and kept sighing all day, and still she kissed the head, and cried.

LII. Then she wrapped it up in a silk scarf - the scarf was covered in nectar from precious flowers plucked in Arabia, whose divine liquids and strong scent refreshed the cold smell of the head, and she chose a garden pot to bury it in, covering it in earth and planting Sweet Basil over it, which she watered constantly with her tears.

LIII. And she forgot about the stars, moon and sun, she forgot about the blue sky above the trees, she forgot the grassy valleys where rivers run, and the chilly autumn breeze; she had no idea when the day was over, and she didn't see the new morning after night had passed; but in peace she hung there over her sweet Basil forever, and fully drenched it with her tears.

LIV. And so she fed it constantly with tears, from which the basil plant grew thick, and green, and beautiful, so that it smelled more refreshing than all of the other basil pots in Florence; because it was fed on the nurturing care and life of Isabella, and the fast decaying head of Lorenzo that no one could see underneath. That precious head (the jewel) was safely locked in its plant pot, and its energy grew up through the plant, spreading perfumed leaves out into the air.

LV

O Melancholy, linger here awhile!
O Music, Music, breathe despondingly!
O Echo, Echo, from some sombre isle,
Unknown, Lethean, sigh to us—O sigh!
Spirits in grief, lift up your heads, and smile;
Lift up your heads, sweet Spirits, heavily,
And make a pale light in your cypress glooms,
Tinting with silver wan your marble tombs.

LVI

Moan hither, all ye syllables of woe,
From the deep throat of sad Melpomene!
Through bronzed lyre in tragic order go,
And touch the strings into a mystery;
Sound mournfully upon the winds and low;
For simple Isabel is soon to be
Among the dead: She withers, like a palm
Cut by an Indian for its juicy balm.

LVII

O leave the palm to wither by itself;
Let not quick Winter chill its dying hour!—
It may not be—those Baälites of pelf,
Her brethren, noted the continual shower
From her dead eyes; and many a curious elf,
Among her kindred, wonder'd that such dower
Of youth and beauty should be thrown aside
By one mark'd out to be a Noble's bride.

LVIII

And, furthermore, her brethren wonder'd much
Why she sat drooping by the Basil green,
Greatly they wonder'd what the thing might mean:
They could not surely give belief, that such
A very nothing would have power to wean
Her from her own fair youth, and pleasures gay,
And even remembrance of her love's delay.

LV. Oh Melancholy, stay at this point in the story a while longer! Oh Music, Music, breathe tragically, Oh Echo, Echo from some dark, serious island, unknown, Lethean, sigh to us - Oh sigh! Spirits in grief, lift up your heads and smile; lift your heads heavily and make a pale light in the gloomy dark cypress trees, tinting your marble tombs with a pale silvery glow.

LVI. (Keats, speaking to the words of his poem) Moan here, all you sad words, from the deep, sad throat of Melpomene, the muse of tragedy, play through a bronzed lyre in a tragic order, and create a mythological, mysterious story that will be remembered forever more. Sound out sadly upon the winds and speak, for simple Isabel is soon to be dead herself, she withers like a palm tree cut down by an Indian who wanted to make use of its sap.

LVII. Oh, let the palm wither by itself - don't let a quick Winter chill it further as it dies! Unfortunately, those heathen misers, her brothers, noticed the continual shower of tears from her dead eyes, and many a curious person hanging around her house, wondered how such a young and beautiful woman with so much to give in life could throw aside all of her gifts, even though the brothers had marked her out to marry a nobleman.

LVIII. Furthermore, her brothers wondered why she sat drooping next to the beautiful, flourishing basil, which looked as if it grew that way by magic; they wondered a lot what the basil meant to her, they surely couldn't believe that something so pointless had the power to take away her beautiful youth, and happy pleasures, and even the memory that her love was still delayed somewhere in a foreign land.

Stanzas 59 - 63

LIX

Therefore they watch'd a time when they might sift
This hidden whim; and long they watch'd in vain;
For seldom did she go to chapel-shrift,
And seldom felt she any hunger-pain;
And when she left, she hurried back, as swift
As bird on wing to breast its eggs again;
And, patient as a hen-bird, sat her there
Beside her Basil, weeping through her hair.

LX

Yet they contriv'd to steal the Basil-pot,
And to examine it in secret place:
The thing was vile with green and livid spot,
And yet they knew it was Lorenzo's face:
The guerdon of their murder they had got,
And so left Florence in a moment's space,
Never to turn again. - Away they went,
With blood upon their heads, to banishment.

LXI

O Melancholy, turn thine eyes away!
O Music, Music, breathe despondingly!
O Echo, Echo, on some other day,
From isles Lethean, sigh to us - O sigh!
Spirits of grief, sing not your "Well-a-way!"
For Isabel, sweet Isabel, will die;
Will die a death too lone and incomplete,
Now they have ta'en away her Basil sweet.

LXII

Piteous she look'd on dead and senseless things,
Asking for her lost Basil amorously:
And with melodious chuckle in the strings
Of her lorn voice, she oftentimes would cry
After the Pilgrim in his wanderings,
To ask him where her Basil was; and why
'Twas hid from her: "For cruel 'tis," said she,
"To steal my Basil-pot away from me."

LIX. So they watched and waited for a time when they could take away the hidden fancy of the basil pot, and they watched without success for a long time; for rarely did she ever go to church, she seldom felt hunger, and when she left, she hurried back as quickly as a mother bird flies back to her nest to care for its eggs, and, patient as a hen, she sat next to her basil, crying through her hair.

LX. But they planned to steal the basil and secretly examine it: They unearthed Lorenzo's head, which was vile and covered in green and livid spots, but they still knew it was his face: They received a fair reward for their murder, as being terrified by the head and thinking it might be used as evidence for their crime, they instantly left Florence, never to come back again. They left with blood upon their hands, forever banished from the city.

LXI. Oh Music, Music, breathe tragically! Oh Echo, Echo, on some other day, sigh to us from Lethean islands (the underworld) - oh sigh! Spirits of grief, don't sing your "Well-a-way!" Because Isabel, sweet Isabel, will die: She will die a death too lonely and incomplete, now they have taken away her sweet basil.

LXII. In a pitiful way she looked on dead and senseless things, asking everywhere for her lost Basil lovingly: and with a melodious sob in the strings of her lonely voice, she would shout at pilgrims that wandered past, to ask them where her basil was, and why it had been hidden from her "Because it's cruel" she said, "To steal my Basil-pot away from me."

LXIII

And so she pined, and so she died forlorn,
Imploring for her Basil to the last.

No heart was there in Florence but did mourn
In pity of her love, so overcast.

And a sad ditty of this story born

From mouth to mouth through all the country pass'd:

Still is the burthen sung - "O cruelty,

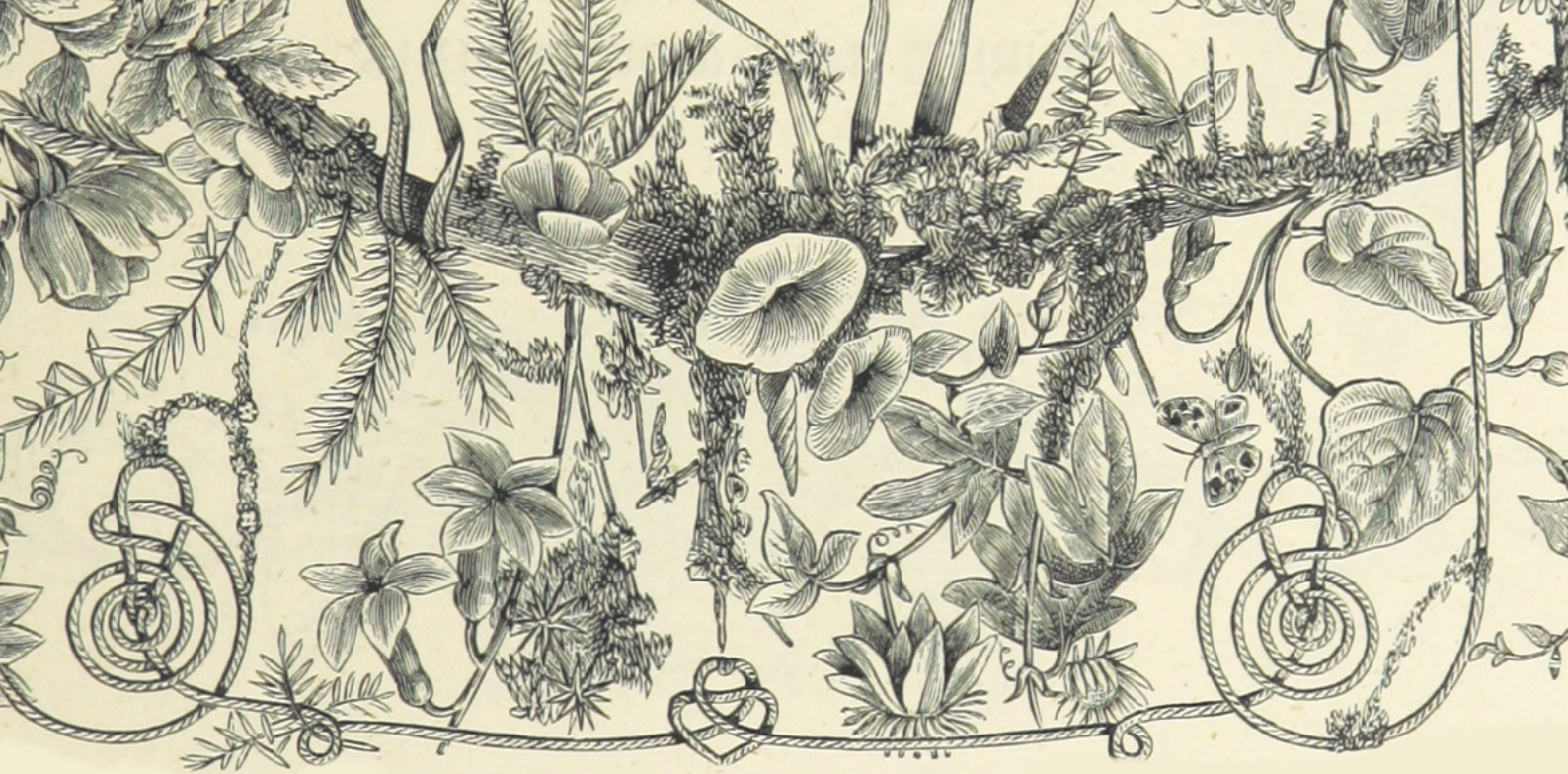
To steal my Basil-pot away from me!"

LXIII. And so she grieved for Lorenzo, and died alone, asking for the pot of basil until the very end. There wasn't anyone in Florence who didn't pity the despair she felt over her lost love. And so this sad story has been passed on by word of mouth all around the country: Isabella's burden is still sung - "Oh how cruel, to steal my Basil pot away from me"



Lorenzo's
head

pot of basil



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

Lisped - 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

Gittern - 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

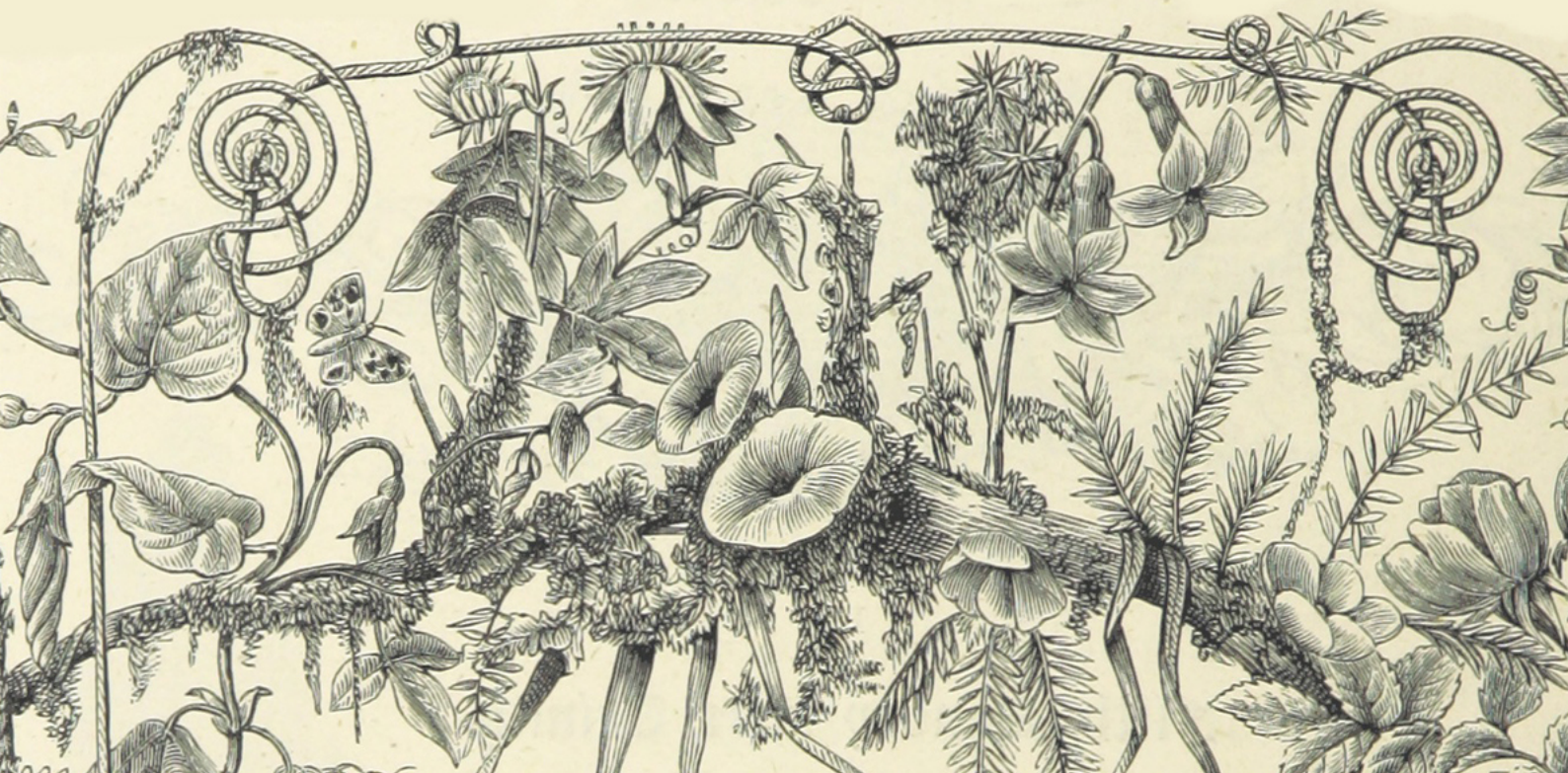
Pined - longed for sadly

Imploring - begging

Overcast - covered over in grey clouds

Ditty - narrative song

Burthen - burden



SPEAKER / VOICE

The omniscient third person narrator of the tale has a voice that sympathises with the lovers, despite being aware of their imminent demise. This creates a kind of overarching tragic mood to the tale as we know that they are true lovers, and yet they are also doomed. The narrator approximates Keats' own voice, which is different from Boccaccio's original tale of the same name, where the story is told by a lady called Philomena. In this poem, we are presented with many of Keats' sociopolitical and personal beliefs - he particularly criticises the notion of marriage for wealth and status over love; he also feels that true love is to do with spiritual and artistic connection. He seems to respect the restraint and gentleness of the two main characters, who try hard to repress their love despite feeling it so strongly.

LANGUAGE

Antithesis: "Alas! when passion is both meek and wild!" The opposition of "meek" and "wild" implies a seeming contradiction in the characters of Isabella and Lorenzo - they are timid and shy, yet also wild, energetic and passionate. It is arguable that Keats saw these qualities as present within his own personality, too, and his interest in the story of Isabella parallels his own doomed love affair with Fanny Brawne. It could be interpreted, therefore, that this narrative interjection is a lament of Keats' own situation as well as demonstrating his pathos for Isabella and Lorenzo.

Antithesis: "wintry cold" "summer climes" - Keats often favours the use of antithetical extremes to heighten the dramatic impact of his narratives, it is also a common technique used in Romantic poetry. Here, the complete shift in Lorenzo's disposition is shown when he transforms from feeling as though he is surrounded by 'wintry cold', symbolic of death and stagnation to 'summer climes', symbolic of life and growth. The use of seasons to exemplify different states of being in the poem is a feature which Keats sustains throughout - the imagery of death is always described in terms of coldness and the imagery of life in terms of warmth and growth.



Foreshadowing, metaphor: “Twin roses by the zephyr blown apart” - the adjective ‘twin’ emphasises the sense of harmony that the lovers share, that their natures are perfectly suited to one another. Roses in the 19th century are common motifs of love and romance, so the description of the lovers as ‘roses’ connotes their beauty, fragility and intense passion. The phrasal verb ‘blown apart’ implies that they are separated - at this moment the separation is temporary, but the line perhaps foreshadows Lorenzo’s death later on.

Aphorism: “there is richest juice in poison-flowers.” - Keats here uses an **extended metaphor** of horticulture to suggest that the best nectar comes from tainted or poisoned flowers. The **symbolic** effect is to suggest that the best stories or the ideas with the strongest depth to them always come from a place of danger, suffering or hardship. We may relate this to the intentions of the tragic genre - tragedy being a form of literature that always conveys valuable messages through the trials and suffering of its central characters. This perhaps also recalls Keats’ own belief of ‘negative capability’, that intense beauty and positivity can come from times or states of difficulty (see context for more info).

Rhetorical questions, repetition: “Why were they proud? Because red-lin’d accounts / Were richer than the songs of Grecian years?” The **repetition** of the **rhetorical question** ‘Why were they proud?’ creates an **insistent tone** where Keats’ narrative voice lingers over the sinful behaviour of the brothers, implying that pride is the root of their villainy. In between this question, he asks other accusatory **rhetorical questions** that **pragmatically** imply the faults of the brothers. For instance, the idea that in the brothers’ minds ‘red-lin’d accounts / Were richer than the songs of Grecian years’ implies that they favoured business and money making over the beauty of myth and poetry. They are depicted as practical, uncreative beings who are obsessed with building wealth, yet unable to exist positively in the world due to their lack of spirituality and appreciation for beauty - this in turn is the reason why they cannot understand or condone the relationship between Isabella and Lorenzo.

Synecdoche: “these money-bags” Keats refers to the brothers by their purses, demonstrating that the only thing that defines them is their wealth; this further emphasises their lack of goodness or creativity and underscores their limited view over the world.

Simile: “every dealer fair / Must see behind, as doth the hunted hare.” - all fair, honest people must keep an eye out as they are like the hunted hare, being preyed upon by a predatory force. In this case, the line is **foreshadowing** the tragic demise of Lorenzo, who is hunted down in the forest like an innocent, unsuspecting prey.



Apostrophe: “O eloquent and famed Boccaccio!”; “O Melancholy”; “O Echo” - Keats uses the Classical technique of **apostrophe**, often found in Ancient Greek poetry, to directly address different forces which oversee the telling of his tale. Firstly, he speaks directly to Boccaccio, demonstrating his reverence and respect for the man who first wrote the story of Isabella and the Pot of Basil. He also addresses ‘Melancholy’ - a state of beautiful sadness which is often captured in poetry through poignant, **tragic imagery**. Furthermore, he speaks to ‘Echo’ - the nymph who wasted away waiting for her lover, Narcissus, to hear her. This also references the sad, passive ending of Isabella’s own tale.

Foreshadowing: “they resolved in some forest dim / To kill Lorenzo, and there bury him.” - there’s a sense of foreboding, inescapable tragedy present throughout the narrative, which heightens the **pathos** that readers feel for the **tragic protagonists** as we know their deaths are inevitable.

Dramatic tension: “on a pleasant morning, as he leant / Into the sunrise, o’er the balustrade/ Of the garden-terrace” - the brothers break Lorenzo from his perfect, happy state of being; he is presented as being in a state of bliss that accompanies true love, and Keats describes the **setting** as if nature is responding in harmony to Lorenzo’s joyfulness, the morning is ‘pleasant’ and the ‘sun-rise’ welcoming and nourishing. The fragility of the state of love is also inherent in this scene, as we know it is the last time Lorenzo will wake and bask in the morning sun.

Dramatic irony: Lorenzo is dressed to go into the forest “With belt, and spur, and bracing huntsman’s dress.” - we are aware that Lorenzo will be the prey, not the hunter, and that the excuse of going on a hunt is being used to mask the brothers’ true intentions of murder.

Symbolism: “the amorous dark” - curiously, though darkness is typically used to symbolise fear, evil or the unknown in literature, here Keats portrays it as a friend to the lovers, for it provides them with the cover that they need to be able to meet in secret, away from the prying eyes of a society which would shun them. The adjective “amorous” occurs several times throughout the poem, alluding always to the intense love that Isabella and Lorenzo feel for one another.

Foreshadowing: “Ah! when a soul doth thus its freedom win, / It aches in loneliness - is ill at peace” - we know that Lorenzo’s soul is going to be restless and likely refuse to leave the Earth or ascend to heaven, as he is so unfairly and abruptly murdered. Though Lorenzo and Isabella are passive figures who have no malicious intentions, the strength of their love transcends the boundary between life and death and overall is arguably strong enough to overcome the evil of the brothers as they are forced into exile and destroyed by their own sinful behaviour. Though “Each [is made] richer by his being a murderer”, because they intend to marry Isabella to a wealthy aristocrat in order to increase their own family’s wealth and power, this plan is thwarted as Lorenzo is unable to rest peacefully and Isabella is unable to forget him or move on with her life.

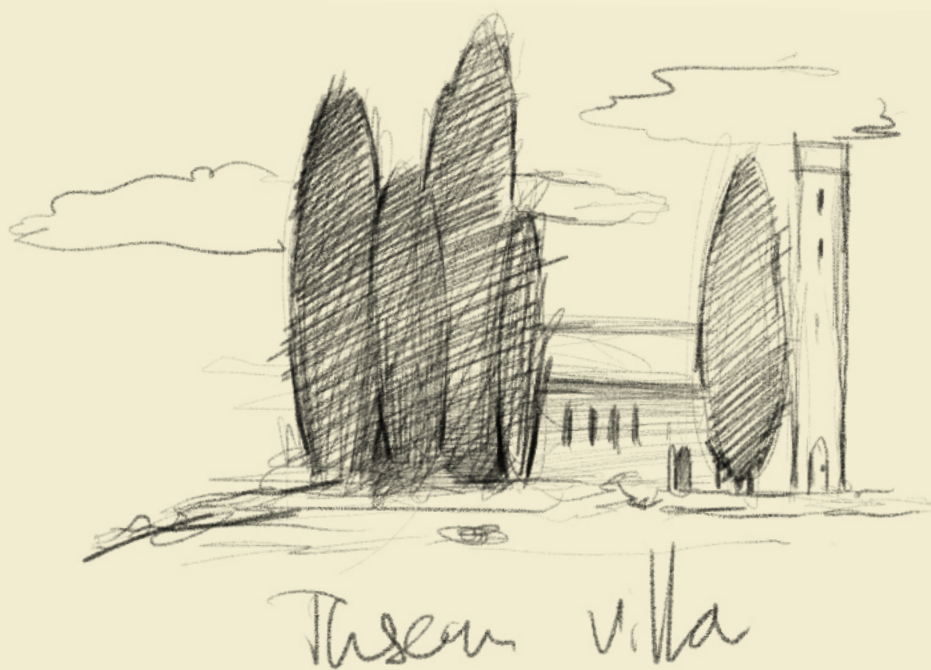
Juxtaposition: “The forest tomb / Had marr’d his glossy hair... put cold doom / Upon his lips... taken the soft lute / From his lorn voice” - the states of life and death are juxtaposed in the imagery used to describe Lorenzo’s ghostly form; his body is ‘marr’d’, ‘cold’ and ‘lorn’ in the state of death.

Extended metaphor - “Woof” - Keats makes an extended metaphor of the idea of unravelling a story, 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.

Semantic field of sin: “Spite” “pride” and “avarice” are all **abstract nouns** that refer to various deadly sins, which Keats’ audience would have recognised as severe flaws of character - these are all used to refer to the brothers, reinforcing their evil natures.

Anagnorisis: “But there is crime - a brother’s bloody knife!” - in tragic literature, the “anagnorisis” of a narrative, the moment of realisation where the full truth of the story is revealed to the tragic hero, always comes too late. As a tragic narrative, readers of the poem would feel **pathos** (pity and fear) at the moment where Lorenzo reveals his murderers’ identities to Isabella, because suddenly she realises that her own family is responsible for his death, and her own brothers murdered him because they planned to marry her off for business purposes.

Symbolism: “Soon she turn’d up a soiled glove, whereon / Her silk had play’d in purple phantasies,” - the **juxtaposition** of romantic memory upon the tragic moment where Isabella unearths her dead lover is present in this scene, as she remembers the glove, on Lorenzo’s hand when he was alive, playing with her silk dress. The adjective ‘purple’ has further connotations of eroticism and sexuality, but Keats is careful not to make the details of their romance too explicit.



Narrative interjection: “Ah! wherefore all this wormy circumstance? Why linger at the yawning tomb so long?” - after spending a long time describing the gory particulars of Isabella digging away at Lorenzo’s grave, Keats pauses and **humorously** asks his readers a **rhetorical question**: why the need to be so morbid and gross at this point in the story, describing the act of unearthing the body in so much detail? He uses **hypophora** to answer his own question, stating that it is for the “gentleness of old Romance”, perhaps to give the lovers a poignant moment of pause in the too fast action of the tale, or to enhance the **pathos** and intensity of the scene. The **abstract noun** ‘gentleness’ is often repeated in reference to the lovers, further implying their kind, soft characters in contrast to the harsh, unfeeling brothers.

Plosive alliteration: “’Twas love; cold, - dead indeed, but not dethroned.” - this emphatic statement feels assertive and clear, underscored by the **plosive ‘d’ sounds** that run throughout the line. The **caesura** (;) between the phrase “’Twas love” and “cold” acknowledges the separation between life and death, yet at the same time affirms the continued connection between the lovers - perhaps to underscore the point that Isabella’s death is inevitable as it is the only way in which the two can be together once again.

Religious allegory: “each eye’s sepulchral cell” - like a relic, Isabella worships the head of Lorenzo, keeping it near her at all times and being sent into a state of meditation over it. Depending on the spiritual beliefs of the reader, this could be potentially interpreted as blasphemous - as Isabella is raising her love of Lorenzo to the level of religious devotion. However, Keats himself struggled with religion and therefore would have likely only intended it to be interpreted as a sign of the extreme passion and spiritual connection of the couple.

Semantic field of sensuality: “roses” “fragrance” “moan” “purple phantasies” “amorous”

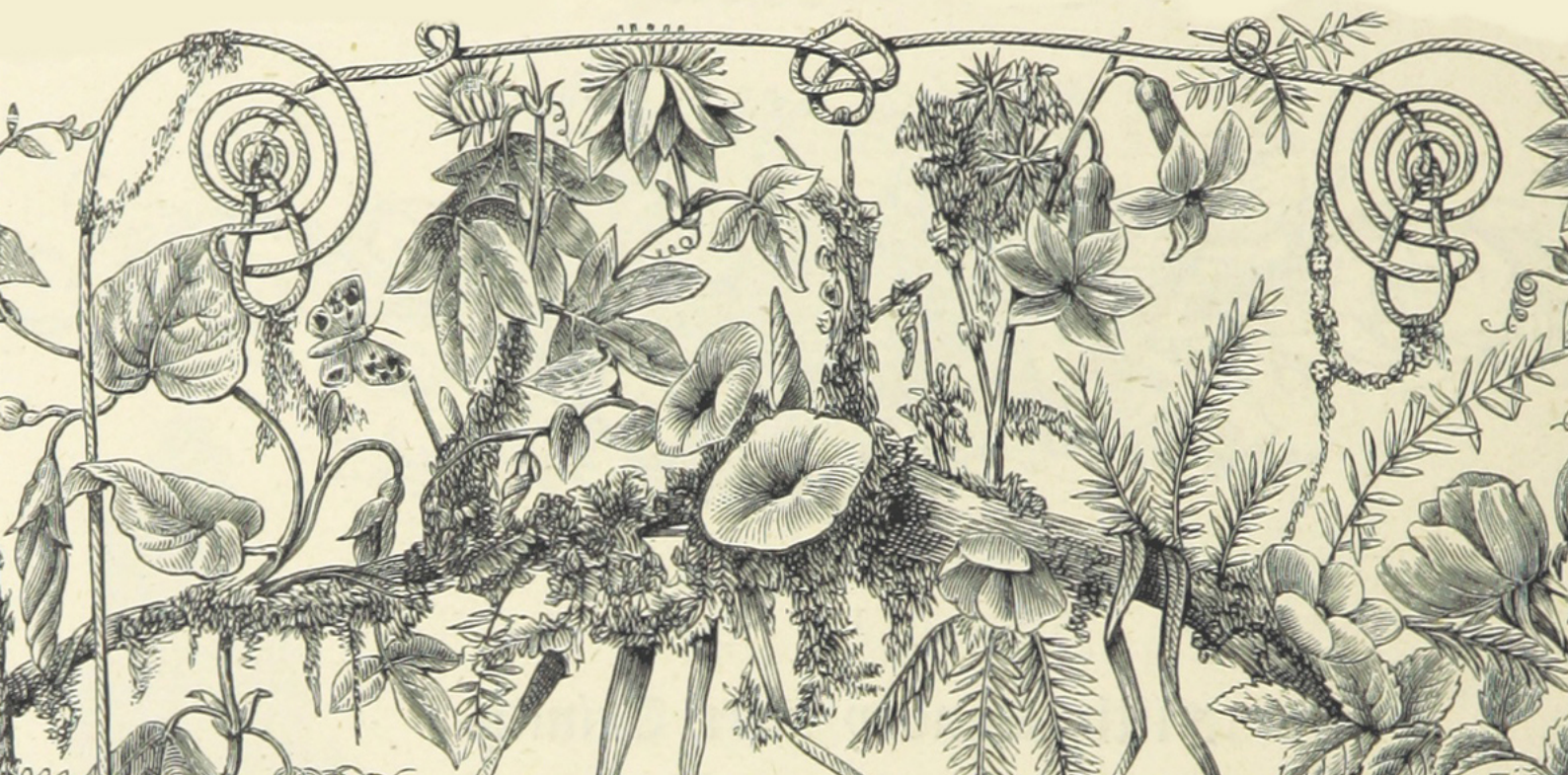
Semantic field of death: “mouldering” “cold” “doom” “forest-tomb” -

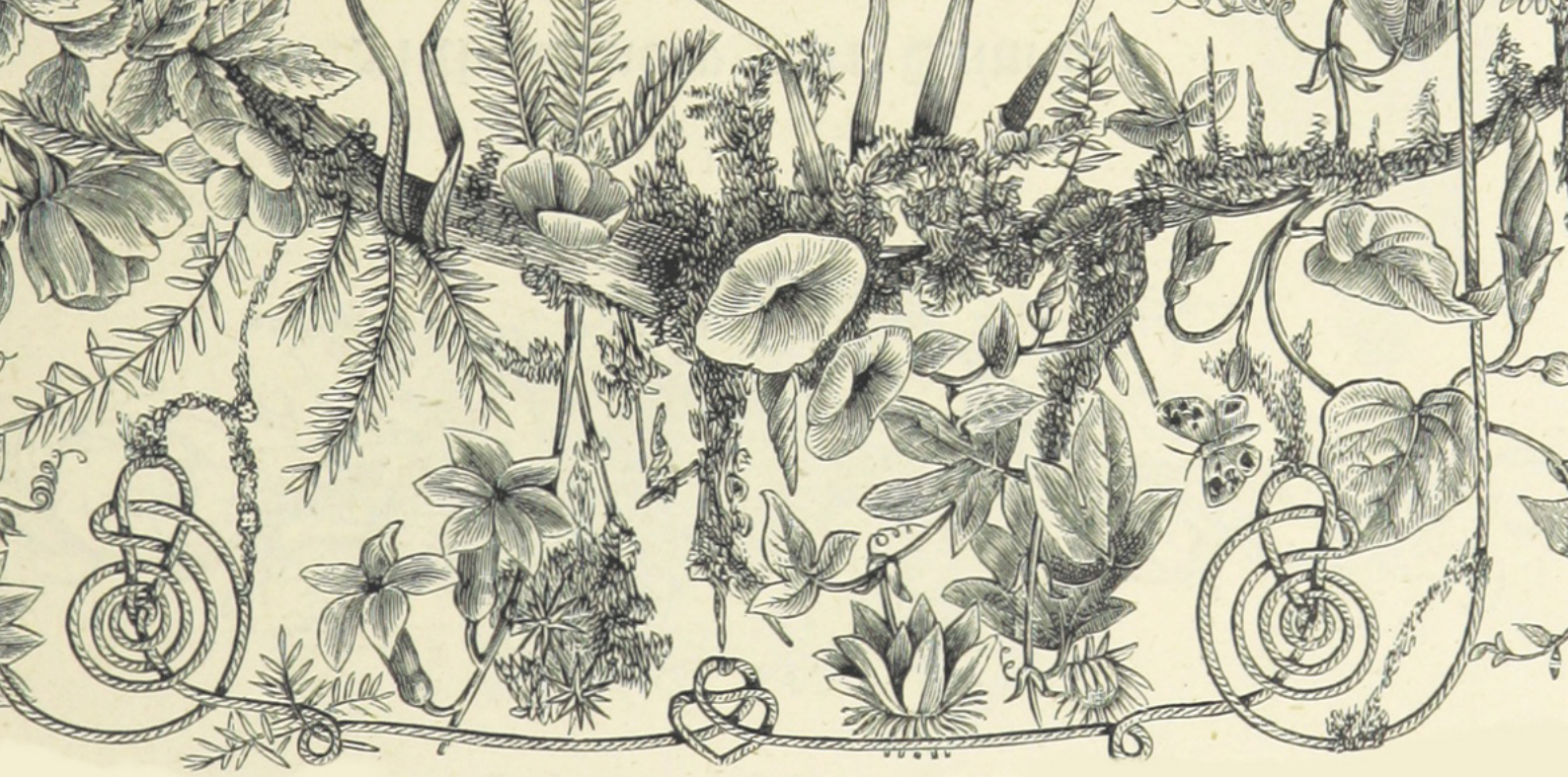
- These two semantic fields are often intertwined throughout the poem, giving it a **proto-gothic atmosphere** and heightening the sense of tragedy.

Visual imagery: “she sat drooping by the Basil green... it flourish’d, as by magic touch;” - Isabella wastes away once she realises Lorenzo can never return to her, the continuous verb ‘drooping’ implies that she is similar to a flower being starved of nourishment, in this case love and affection. In contrast, the basil is said to have ‘flourish’d’, being fed by Lorenzo’s rotting head. There is a kind of deliberate sensual disgust created here, as we realise that the decaying flesh of a human is causing the herb - a foodstuff - to grow stronger, and yet it is also an underlying truth about nature and matter that Keats exposes, making us all aware of our own mortality and think about the future decay of our own bodies. As a physician, Keats perhaps had a medical interest in this topic - furthermore, 19th century writers were often fascinated by the separation between body and soul that occurs at death, and the idea that the body withers while the spirit lives on.

Parallelism: “his lorn voice” / “her lorn voice” - earlier in the poem, Lorenzo’s voice is described as ‘lorn’ - forlorn, lost and abandoned. As Isabella begins her descent into death, her voice is described using the same **adjective** - signifying that she will soon be in the same state as her lover.

Dialogue: “For cruel ’tis,” said she, / To steal my Basil-pot away from me.” - at the end of the poem Isabella is given a voice, though by this point she is hysterical and at a loss in terms of what to do, so she can only repeat how cruel her brothers have been and how sad it is that they took away her single comfort in life. The repetition of her words perhaps again evokes the Greek nymph Echo, who wasted away in a cave until only her voice was left, repeatedly calling out for her lover.





FORM AND STRUCTURE

Narrative Poem: The form of the poem is a narrative, it tells a full story using a poetic structure. From 1818-20 Keats wrote several famous narrative poems, 'Isabella' being one of the first. Narrative poems are often told by a single speaker, who functions as an objective narrator of the story.

Opening line: "Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel, / Lorenzo, a young palmer in love's eye!" - from the offset, the lovers and their harmony are foregrounded. The **premodifying adjectives** 'fair', 'poor' and 'simple' establish the **tragic heroine** as a sweet, gentle figure who isn't a threat to anyone. This amplifies the pathos we feel for her demise, as she is so innocent and unassuming and yet we know from the opening line that her tale will not end well.

Characterisation: As the protagonists, Isabella and Lorenzo are characterised as gentle, innocent beings who fall earnestly in love. Keats uses **comparative adjectives** such as 'tenderer' and 'pleasanter' to convey how much better life is when they find each other. From the offset, they are in a 'sad plight' as they cannot express their love openly to one another, due to the rigid strictures of medieval Florentine society. The brothers are a reflection of this society; they are **characterised** as miserly, selfish, cruel and villainous, filled with "hungry pride and gainful cowardice" that compels them to commit evil deeds such as theft and murder. We are told that "each unconfines / His bitter thoughts to other" - the **adjective** 'bitter' perhaps implies that there's a kind of jealousy expressed in that Isabella is capable of finding true love. It also conveys the sourness and selfishness of their personalities. The **verb** 'unconfines' suggests latent violence as they are aware that their thoughts are sinful and evil, yet they are comfortable speaking between themselves about them. They are further referred to as 'men of cruel clay' and 'serpents', using **biblical allusions** to the story of Adam and Eve to demonstrate their evil natures.

Ottava Rima: Keats uses a rhyming stanza form that is borrowed from traditional Italian poetry called “**ottava rima**” - it consists of 8 line **stanzas**, **iambic pentameter** (10 syllables per line, arranged into unstressed-stressed **feet**) and an **abababcc rhyme scheme**. Each stanza is split into a **sestet** - a group of six lines - and a **couplet** - a pair of rhymed lines at the end.

All close/ they met/ again, /before/ the dusk

(An example line of iambic pentameter)

So on a pleasant morning, as he **leant**
Into the sun-rise, o'er the **balustrade**
Of the garden-terrace, towards him they **bent**
Their footing through the dew; and to him **said**,
“You seem there in the quiet of **content**,
Lorenzo, and we are most loth to **invade**
Calm speculation; but if you are **wise**,
Bestride your steed while cold is in the **skies**.”

(This is a demonstration of the **ABABABCC** rhyme scheme)

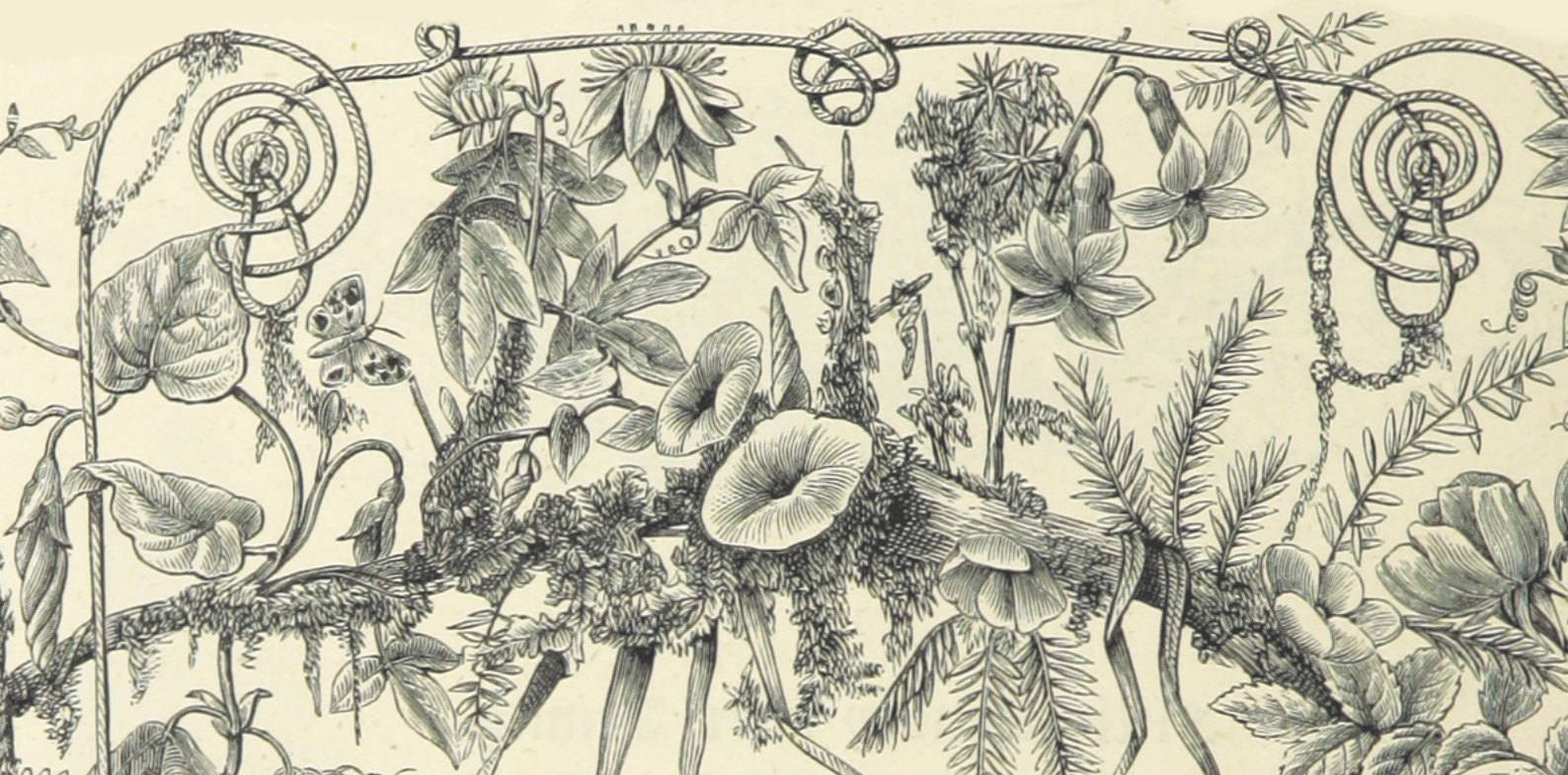
The effect of the rhyme scheme is to create momentum through the sestet via the use of alternate rhyme (ababab) propelling the story forwards. Then, the **rhyming couplet** at the end (cc) creates a sense of closure to the stanza. Most couplets in the poem also use ‘**rhyme royal**’ - a full rhyming sound such as ‘name/same’ or ‘alas/pass’ to emphasise the sense of closure to the stanza.

The use of ottava rima demonstrates Keats’ respect for the traditional Italian medieval source material out of which he constructed the poem; it also creates a **predictable rhythm and sound pattern** to the stanzas that encourages the reader to go along with the story. We could also say that it creates a kind of rigid structure that parallels the deterministic fate of the tragic heroes - they are stuck in a rigid society which refuses to acknowledge or sanction their love, and the strict rigidity of the stanzas could be said to imitate this. Ottava rima is also often used in heroic or mock-heroic poetry, so Keats in some ways could be said to adapt the form to suit his tragic narrative poem. Rhyming couplets are further associated with love poetry and harmony, signifying the union of two souls.



Speech: "To morrow I will bow to my delight, / To-morrow will I ask my lady's boon" / "O may I never see another night, / Lorenzo, if thy lips breathe not loves tune" - the two lovers speak using **rhyming couplets** and parallel each other's thoughts, suggesting perfect harmony between them. Keats uses **dialogue** to reveal the characters' personalities - they are both depicted as mirroring each others' words and behaviour, both passionate yet shy and reticent, perfectly matched in intelligence, sensitivity and temperance. Their inequality in terms of social status is of no concern to them, yet they are aware that it is socially unacceptable in the wider community, and this causes pressure and constraints on the relationship from the offset, causing them for instance to meet in secret, under cover of darkness.

Literary Allusion: There are numerous references throughout the poem to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, a tragedy which is also set in medieval Italy and has two doomed lovers as its central figures. Lorenzo is described as 'a palmer in Love's eye', recalling Juliet's line that 'palm to palm is holy palmers kiss', demonstrating Keats' intention to continue the Shakespearean trope of love being intertwined with spiritual exaltation.



ATTITUDES

Wealth and social customs can destroy true love: The tension between marrying for personal love or marrying for wealth and status is at the heart of many great love narratives, and *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil* is one of them. Isabella's brothers are depicted as the villains of the piece, yet they are also products of their environment - it could be said that Keats is more critical of the social norms and strictures that oppress true love than he is of the individual villains themselves, because their values are pretty much aligned with the values of their Renaissance society (until the point where they commit murder). They believe women are their property, to be used as bargaining chips to barter and secure wealth and business connections through marriage. They believe that lower born folk have no right to fall in love with or marry those of a higher status, and they believe that Florentine Renaissance culture and society is far superior to others of its time because it is the richest, being the banking capital of Europe - these were all commonly accepted attitudes in their time and place.

Love and suffering are co-integrated: As Keats had such a tragic life, he was wont to believe that the extreme pleasures of love could not be possible without difficulty and suffering; there is a sense that perhaps Lorenzo and Isabella are so strongly bound together because of the adverse circumstances, rather than just in spite of them.



Forbidden love is often tragic and painful: Isabella and Lorenzo are 'twin roses', they are clearly matched for one another and their union is pure and honest; however, due to the disparity in wealth and status, society would dictate that Lorenzo is an unfit match for Isabella. For this reason, their love is socially forbidden and this puts a lot of pressure on the relationship, forcing it into secrecy. The lovers are still happy with arrangements until the brothers intervene, feeling that it is their right to murder Lorenzo and wed Isabella to a wealthier suitor, to further their own profits and connections. The scenario parallels the tragic tale of Romeo and Juliet, another Italian Renaissance story of doomed lovers where the central characters are perfectly suited, yet the wider context of their feuding families prevents them from achieving a happy union. Keats uses **allegorical** referencing to Shakespeare's play to place his own tale (originally Boccaccio's) within the discourse of tragic love narratives.



CONTEXT

Written 1818: This is one of Keats' most prolific and famed years in terms of his poetic career; the poem was also published around the same time as Keats' relationship with Fanny Brawne began to blossom. Frances Brawne Linden, otherwise known as Fanny, was Keats' neighbour in Hampstead, London. She was striking and distinctive looking rather than conventionally attractive, and she had a fiery passion for literature and politics that fascinated and perplexed Keats. They began a courtship in 1818 and were engaged in October 1819, but Fanny's mother refused to sanction the marriage until Keats had achieved financial stability - at that time he had stopped his training as a physician to dedicate more time to poetry, which was (as it is now) an unstable career choice. Keats' own physical health deteriorated, and by February 1820 it was clear that he suffered from tuberculosis; he was forced to take a trip to Italy with hopes that the weather would improve his health but sadly he died in February 1821 without ever marrying his beloved. When applying this contextual knowledge to the poem, be careful of dates - at the time that 'Isabella' was written Keats had not yet been diagnosed with tuberculosis or had troubles with his engagement, he had however met Fanny Brawne and begun a courtship with her; he had also cared for his brother Tom since 1817, who was himself sick with tuberculosis and died of it in late 1818 - it is thought that Keats' care of his brother was the reason that he himself contracted the disease.

Medievalism: Keats' work is infused with his love of all things medieval; which is equalled only by his passion for classical literature. His fascination with Italy in the **Renaissance period** comes across in his decision to re-tell a tale from Boccaccio's **The Decameron**. Keats is very interested in elements of medieval culture, such as the prevailing rules of courtly love and belief that men should be noble and adopt the chivalric code, but he does also often criticise these tropes too and suggests that they are outdated by 19th century standards. His political objections to the wealth and prowess of Florentine society are central to the narrative of 'Isabella'; his disdain for the evil brothers comes across most strongly when he critiques their love of money and inscrutable business affairs. Keats was interested in the idea of contemporising medieval literature, bringing the stories and forms up to date with the morality of his time, but also using the distant time period and geographical location to subtly hint at flaws that were still present in his own society - such as the belief that women should marry for wealth and status, which prevented himself from marrying his beloved Fanny Brawne. Other motifs, such as the 19th century preoccupation with mourning, death and superstition, can be seen intertwined with the more typically Renaissance themes of the poem.

Neoclassicism: In the 18th century, a movement called 'Neoclassicism' started to take place - it pervaded many aspects of culture, including art, literature and architecture, and centred around the idea of reviving classical ancient Greek and Roman cultural tropes with the aim of integrating them into modern society. Neoclassical elements are present in Keats' poems; sometimes he outwardly and directly expresses his love for Classical literature - such as in his 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. At other times, such as within Isabella, Keats uses **allegorical references** to Greek and Roman mythology to help parallel the story of the two lovers. Neoclassicists also intended to apply modern and Christian frameworks of morality to originally pagan literature, using myths in a way that made them feel more Christian, and more acceptable in contemporary society. Keats, however, often struggled with religion and Christianity, so he does this less than his fellow writers.

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

Boccaccio's The Decameron

Boccaccio was a famous Italian Renaissance writer, best known for his work 'The Decameron', a collection of 100 stories told by seven female narrators as they are sheltering outside of Florence to escape the Black Death. The epidemic finished in 1348, and it is thought that Boccaccio started his tale around this time, completing it around 1353. The work is sometimes called 'The Human Comedy'; it portrays a wide array of love stories, often using wit and humour as well as tragic elements to the tales. Though Keats' interest in the story of Isabella is primarily tragic, we can detect similar complexities of tone in his narrative poem too. There are clear moments where Keats' narrative voice intrudes on the text, often to provide a comical interlude to otherwise morbid or intense moments of the tale. The rhetorical question "Ah! wherefore all this wormy circumstance?/ Why linger at the yawning tomb so long?" is surprisingly comic, interrupting the moment of horror where Isabella digs up Lorenzo's body and severs his head. The tone of Keats' work is respectful of the original, keeping the details but also the mood and atmosphere of his source material.

TASK: What similarities and differences can you find between Keats' poem and this extract from Boccaccio's original tale?

"Nor had she dug long, before she found the body of her hapless lover, whereon as yet there was no trace of corruption or decay; and thus she saw without any manner of doubt that her vision was true. And so, saddest of women, knowing that she might not bewail him there, she would gladly, if she could, have carried away the body and given it more honourable sepulture elsewhere; but as she might not so do, she took a knife, and, as best she could, severed the head from the trunk, and wrapped it in a napkin and laid it in the lap of her maid; and having covered the rest of the corpse with earth, she left the spot, having been seen by none, and went home. There she shut herself up in her room with the head, and kissed it a thousand times in every part, and wept long and bitterly over it, till she had bathed it in her tears. She then wrapped it in a piece of fine cloth, and set it in a large and beautiful pot of the sort in which marjoram or basil is planted, and covered it with earth, and therein planted some roots of the goodliest basil of Salerno, and drenched them only with her tears, or water perfumed with roses or orange-blossoms. And 'twas her wont ever to sit beside this pot, and, all her soul one yearning, to pore upon it, as that which enshrined her Lorenzo, and when long time she had so done, she would bend over it, and weep a great while, until the basil was quite bathed in her tears."

'Young Palmer': A metaphor recalling the line from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* that 'palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss'. Palmers were pilgrims who brought back palm leaves in the shape of a cross from the Holy Land. Later on in the poem, Isabella herself also 'withers / like a palm'; Keats uses the same figurative imagery for both lovers to signify their perfect union and twinned souls.

Lovesickness: From the Medieval era to the 19th century, it was common to depict the state of lovesickness as both a mental and physical illness, similar to modern day depression, where the mind's anguish wrought physical effects upon the body. In this poem, we can see that both Isabella and Lorenzo grow sick at first when they are unable to confess their love to one another - Lorenzo is consumed with 'sick longing' and his cheeks grow 'paler' the longer he suppresses his love; Isabella's 'untouch'd cheek' also falls 'sick within the rose's just domain', a specific reference that links love - symbolised by the 'rose' flower - to anguish and suffering. Later, Isabella wastes away crying over her basil pot and barely leaving even to eat, sleep or pray: "She withers / like a palm". The final stanza begins "And so she pined, and so she died forlorn," using parallelism to underscore the connection between her state of lovesickness and her tragic death. Keats himself arguably died from lovesickness following his unsuccessful courtship of Fanny Brawne (see above for further info).



Widow's weed: The term "widow's weeds" refers to the black clothing worn (principally) by female widows during the Victorian era, which dictated a strict "etiquette of mourning" that governed both their behaviour and their appearance following the deaths of their husbands.

Keats' medical background: Keats struggled to have enough money to work freely as a poet, so he trained alongside writing to become a physician, a medical doctor. His interest and expertise in medicine is present throughout many of his poems, and colours his outlook on life. For instance, upon the moment of murdering Lorenzo, the brother's faces are described as 'sick and wan' when reflected in the ford as they cross the river, in contrast to Lorenzo's which is 'flush with love'. There is a suggestion here that Lorenzo's behaviour is natural and healthy, causing him to glow and thrive, whereas the brothers' have some kind of mental illness that causes them to appear 'sick' and behave in a sociopathic manner - although the term 'sociopath' didn't exist at the time of Keats writing the tale, we can apply it to his depiction of the villains if viewed from a modern perspective. Isabella, too, is physically sick.



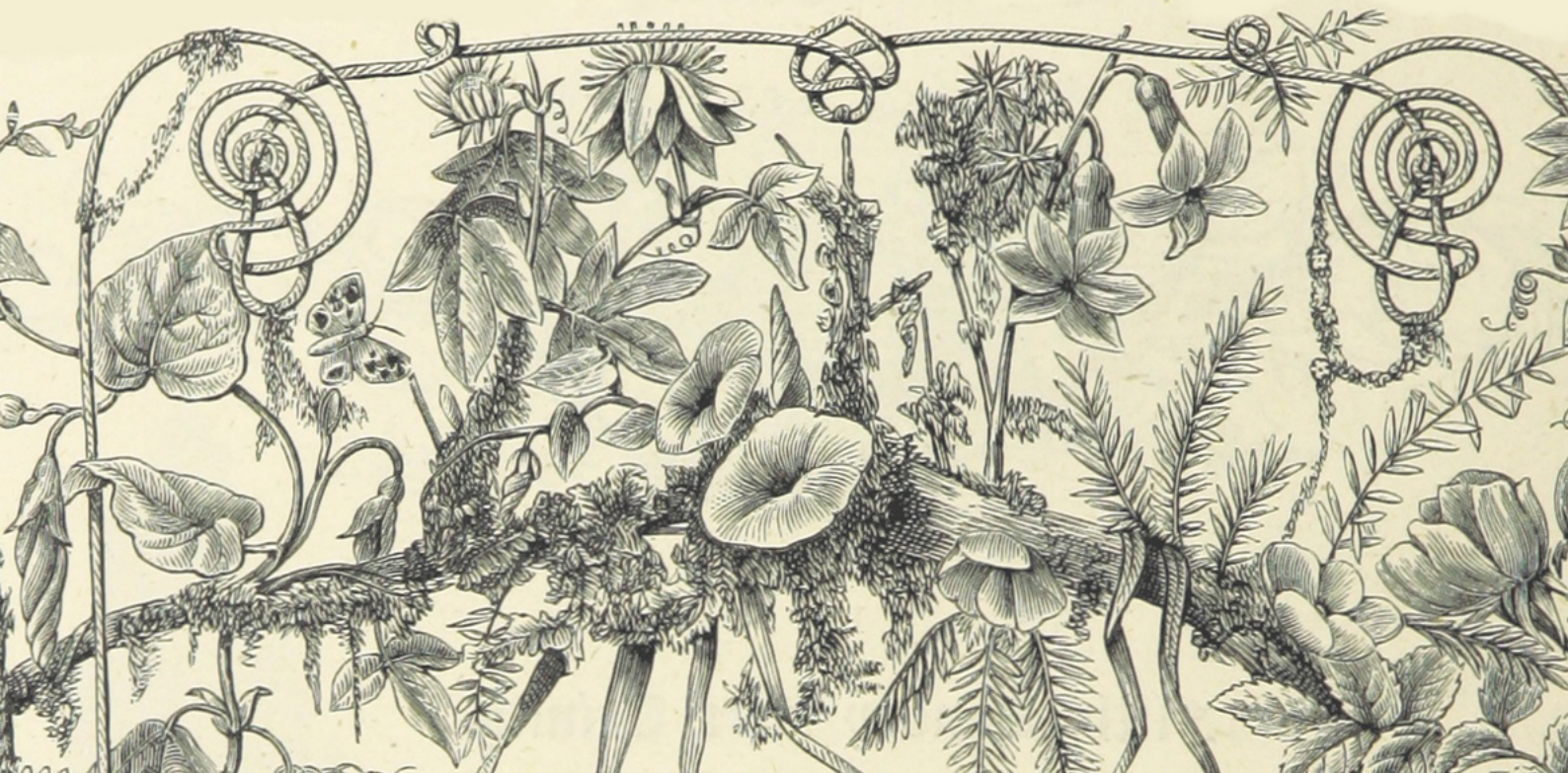
An old illustration of the Duomo Cathedral in Florence

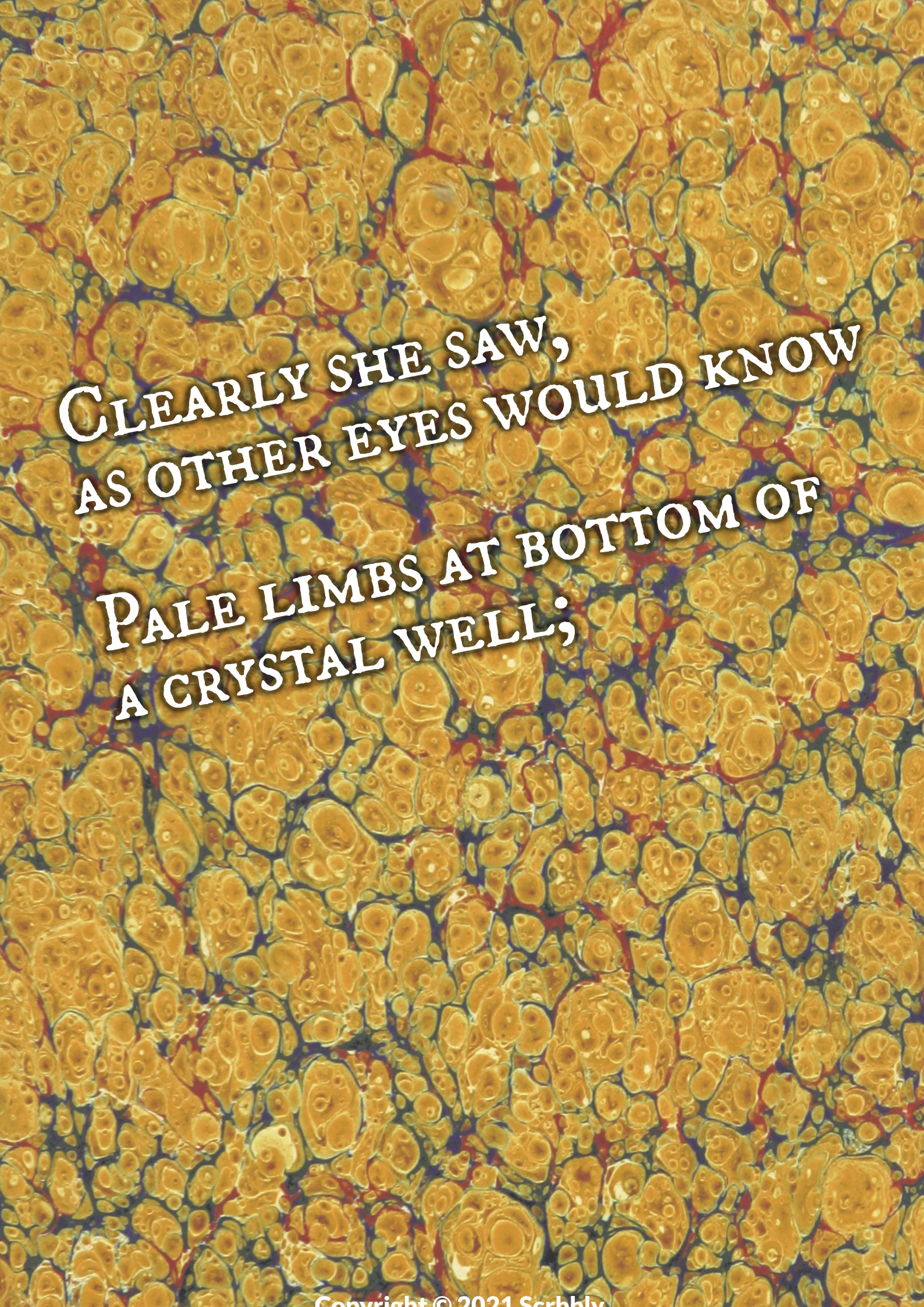


THEMES

TASK: For each of the themes below, collect together quotations, context points and your own thoughts that relate to them, including if possible an understanding of the overall message connected to the theme. You may find it helpful to use spider diagrams to plan your ideas and structure your revision.

- Young love
 - Doomed love
 - Forbidden love
 - Separation
 - Individualism vs Society
 - Spirituality
 - Criminality
 - Madness
 - Tragedy
 - Avarice
- Romantic Enchantment vs Harsh Reality
 - Capitalism
 - Empiricism
 - Idealism
 - Fate
 - Shame
 - Loss
 - Grief + Mourning
 - Traditionalism vs Modernity





CLEARLY SHE SAW,
AS OTHER EYES WOULD KNOW
PALE LIMBS AT BOTTOM OF
A CRYSTAL WELL;