John Keats

‘Eve of St. Agnes’
St. Agnes, the patron saint of virgins, died a martyr in fourth century Rome. She was condemned to be executed after attempts to rape her in a brothel; however, a series of miracles saved her from rape. She was then burned at the stake and then beheaded. St. Agnes Day is Jan. 21. The Second feast is on Jan. 28.
Keats’ inspiration for the poem

F Keats based his poem on the belief that a girl could see her future husband in a dream if she performed certain rites on the eve of St. Agnes; if she went to bed without looking behind her and lay on her back with her hands under her head, he would appear in her dream, kiss her, and feast with her.

F In the original version of this poem, Keats graphically emphasized the young lovers' sexuality, but his publishers, who feared public reaction, forced him to tone down the eroticism.
Negative Capability

‘the ability to contemplate the world without the desire to try and reconcile contradictory aspects or fit it into closed and rational systems.’

--Cornel West
Keats on Negative Capability

To George and Thomas Keats  
Dec 1817

'Negative Capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'

‘With a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration'
Keats’ Poetic Style

F What do we notice about his style so far?
Establishing Character

F In what ways can a writer establish character?

F Internal: thoughts, motives. In poetry, narrative perspective plays a significant role.

F External: physical appearance, names, speech habits etc. In poetry especially, may have symbolic ‘short cuts.’ Ex. ‘The Beadsman’
What different viewpoints/ voices have we been introduced to in the poem?

What might be the effect of having multiple viewpoints on the reader?
Ambiguity and Keats:

F What ambiguities/ uncertainties/ contradictions do there appear to be in the poem so far?

F Look specifically at Stanzas 12-19 in small groups.

F Look the very last stanza: “These lovers fled away into the storm”
Ambiguity: ‘Beldame’ and Porphyro

Consider the shifting representation of Porphyro and the old beldame.

How are we supposed to react to them?
Keats’ Imagery: Especially Stanzas 20-25

- Concrete
- Pictorial
- Compressed
- Associational/Allusions
- Synaesthetic
One of the fundamental Romantic techniques is the use of imagery. Five main kinds of imagery characterise Keats’ writing:

1. **Concrete**: the use of tangible forms in order to aid in conveying abstract ideas.
   
e.g. “ruffian passion” (XVII)
2. **Pictorial**: the presentation of ideas in an intensely visual form; the essence of imagery.

   e.g. “tiger-moth’s deep damask’d wings” (XXIV)
3. **Compressed**: condensing multiple meanings into a tightly contained image.

   e.g. “made purple riot” (XVI)
4. **Associational**: imagery whose power lies in its use of connotations and allusions to create varying layers of meaning.

   e.g. “Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt” (XIX)
5. **Synaesthetic**: the combination and substitution of one sense for another, typically pairing visual imagery with other sensory description.

   e.g. “Filling the chilly room with perfume light” (XXXI)
Contrast – Stanzas 26-31

F What contrasts have you noticed so far in the poem?
- cold versus warmth
- noise versus quiet
- snarling trumpets versus tender chords
- past tense versus present tense
- dream versus reality

F What is the effect of using a wide variety of contrasts in the poem?

F ‘Beauty and evil are never far apart in Keats’ poetry’. How far do you agree with this view?
Stanzas 32-38: Madeline and Porphyro’s Relationship

F How does Madeline react when she wakes to discover Porphyro in her chamber?

F What might her reaction symbolize?

F What might this relationship symbolize? (think opposition between dream & reality).
Scenes and Places

F What are the various settings in the poem?

F What connotations does each carry?

F How does this contribute to how Keats tells the story?
The significance of the meagre/sombre/desolate opening as a contrast to the atmosphere of the party.

Medieval setting – the medieval world is associated with chivalry, magic, marvels and wonders. It is often depicted as an idealised, marvellous world far-removed from the real world. As such it provided Keats with a suitable world to explore central ideas such as escapism and romance.
Scenes and Places

F The secret chamber that the beldame takes Porphyro to – suggestive of a witch-like cavern/ supernatural connotations.

F Madeline’s bedchamber – images of opulence/ luxury & abundance of colour imagery – there are various suggestions as to what this might signify; the references to the colour ‘red’ could be interpreted as a sign of danger (ie Madeline is in danger) but could also represent passion/ heat (ie Madeline is sexually aroused)
As the beadsman moves through the chapel and into the adjoining chamber, we as the reader experience a sense of movement – this is achieved by the frequent references to movement and entrances.

Notice the changes in tense from past to present at certain moments to increase the sense of immediacy/tension (verse VII & X).

Sudden switches in the narrative to incorporate different points-of-view.

The use of dialogue in verse XXXVII – XXXIX creates a sense of immediacy/panic as the poem draws to a conclusion and the lovers leave the castle.
Characterization
Who is each? What is the significance of each character?

F Beadsman - representative of the poorer classes; aging; death... any sort of joy in life...

F Madeline - represented by the narrator as blind/foolish/bewitched. In verse XXIV – XXVII she is presented in an ambiguous way – is she being portrayed by Keats as a victim or a seductress or a lover?

F Porphyro - represented by the narrator as gallant/chivalric/obsessive/predatory. Verse XXIX suggests that Porphyro drugs Madeline so that he can finish his preparations before she awakes.

F Angela (Beldame) - represented by the narrator as weak and fragile (verse XI) but when she speaks she is seen as cunning and a bit sassy (verse XIV)
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The voice of the narrator/poet often intrudes into the action to direct how we should interpret the events. This voice is often skeptical/mocking of the events & characters within the poem (line 55). It also adds to the sense of foreboding/heightens the tension when it warns of the dangers to come (verse XIX & verse XXII)
Voice

F  We hear the voice of the Beldame warning Porphyro to leave the castle (presented as a concerned protector at this point).

F  We hear the voice of Porphyro in verse XII and it offers a different interpretation of his character; at this point he comes across as confident/arrogant in that he does not listen to the Beldame’s warnings.

F  Later still (verse XVII) he comes across as desperate and voyeuristic.
Begins from the point-of-view of the beadsman; allows for a sombre opening to contrast with the vitality of the party and Porphyro’s Romanitic roguishness.

The point-of-view of the narrator provides perhaps a negative portrayal of Madeline (verse VII & VIII for example).
The point-of-view of the narrator provides an initial impression of Porphyro as chivalric and gallant (verse IX) but his behaviour could also be interpreted as obsessive and predatory.

As Porphyro prepares his feast there is a sense of opulence/ mystery/exoticism but when the narrative switches to Madeline’s point-of-view this is undercut by her sense of disappointment.
Aspects of Language, Form, Structure

F **Color imagery** – ‘whiteness’ of the chapel as opposed to the opulent colours of the party

F **Contrasts** – cold/warmth; light/dark; rich/poor

F **Sensual imagery** – luxurious/excessive quality to the descriptions – particularly of Madeline’s bedchamber and of the feast that Porphyro provides.

F **Concrete & pictorial imagery.**

F **Sense of foreshadowing/ foreboding** as there are several warnings/predictions of the dangers that lie ahead (verse XII for example).

F **Synaesthesia.**
What are the key concepts raised in this poem?

- **Love** is an incredibly powerful emotion that can induce people to behave irrationally.
- **Appearances** can be deceiving.
- **Man cannot rule the supernatural world;** Porphyro tries to ‘cheat’ the superstition by making sure he is the person that Madeline falls in love with but in doing so, we are made to see that she is maybe disappointed by the ‘real’ Porphyro and would far prefer the Porphyro of her imagination.
- The **imaginary world** is favorable to reality.
What are the key concepts raised in this poem?