

# Twelve River RIPPLES



## Favourite Poem

### **Ode on Melancholy**

by John Keats

No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist  
Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;  
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd  
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;  
Make not your rosary of yew-berries,  
Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be  
Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl  
A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;  
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,  
And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.

But when the melancholy fit shall fall  
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,  
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,  
And hides the green hill in an April shroud;  
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,  
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,  
Or on the wealth of globed peonies;  
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,  
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,  
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;  
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,  
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:  
Ay, in the very temple of Delight  
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,  
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue  
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;  
His soul shalt taste the sadness of her might,  
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

## Favourite Poem cont.

When I first encountered this poem, it was the sound of words, and the mental pictures, that delighted me

I didn't need to have experienced melancholy to be captivated by the beauty of the language, and the power and pictorial nature of the imagery; *salt sand-wave, globed peonies* not only sound good, but look good in the mind's eye. It is in later years that I have turned to consider the poem's message.

This advice comes from someone who from his own experience knows about his subject. It is in a form similar to his Odes, but isn't addressed to its subject, as, for example, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'.

Compare the opening lines with Nightingale's first lines of *a drowsy numbness pains my sense as though of hemlock I had drunk*, or *Autumn drowsed by the fume of poppies*. The Grecian Urn bears the picture of a lover who will never kiss *though winning near the goal*. *Cold pastoral* indeed!

Dividing lines between joy and loss, anticipation and disappointment run through these poems, and it is in Melancholy that Keats faces up to the issue.

Don't pursue 'remedies' which may cost you your life or your sensitivity.

Accept the melancholy fit when it overtakes you but find some beauty in which to bathe your soul.

Acknowledge that beauty, joy and pleasure are ephemeral. Come to terms with melancholy, bursting joy's grape against your palate.

To enjoy the qualities that enhance life you need to accept their transience.

The sorrows and sadness of Keats' life and death are linked inseparably with the wonder and delight of his poetry.

*Peter Sandberg*