

Aspects of tragedy: Text overview – Keats: 'Isabella', 'Lamia', 'The Eve of St Agnes' and 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'

Read our overview which shows how teachers can consider 'Isabella', 'Lamia', 'The Eve of St Agnes' and 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' in relation to the genre of tragedy. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.



La Belle Dame Sans Merci – Sir Frank Dicksee (c.1901)

"I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long,
For sidelong would she bend, and sing
A faery's song."

Tragic heroes or tragic victims

When examining any text through the lens of the genre of tragedy, the first question to consider is who the protagonist or the tragic hero is. Here, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' may be the most straightforward to read. If a tragic plot describes the disastrous downfall of the protagonist, it is easy to see that the knight-at-arms undergoes a disastrous downfall set up after his encounter with the faery child whom he places on his steed and who sings to him all day long. He ends the poem in a limbic condition, neither alive nor dead, neither up nor down, and capable only of relating his story to passers-by. For all this, Keats only allows us to guess at the knight's life before his encounter with the lady, and hence at the height from which he has fallen. However, his status as a knight is key in establishing his high degree and by association, his nobility. In

'*Lamia*' and '*Isabella*', just who the tragic heroes and victims are is very much open to debate. Keats names his poems after his female characters, and both suffer tragic fates. Lamia, who at first seems magical and perhaps divine, loses her power, and ultimately succumbs to mortality. Isabella loses the love that makes her "tread upon the air", and "die[s] forlorn / Imploring for her basil to the last." However, the suffering that these characters encounter or cause on their way to death might suggest a more central role for apparently secondary characters. Lycius' death is the last to occur in '*Lamia*'. The image of the "pale kings and princes" inhabiting the knight's dream is likely to linger in a reader's memory for as long as the "palely loitering" knight himself; and Lorenzo's death and return from the grave forms a more dramatic focal point of that poem than does Isabella's death, which is almost made incidental. It may be possible to construct a reading in which the beloved women are femmes fatales, antagonists, luring otherwise happy and prestigious men to their tragic fates. Likewise, in '*The Eve of St Agnes*' these roles are not clear cut. Porphyro could be read as a tragic hero who rescues Madeline from the "barbarian hordes" at great personal risk all for a romantic ideal, eventually meeting an uncertain fate at the hands of the storm and time. Alternatively, he may be perceived as a predatory villain more akin to Hardy's Alec D'Urberville. He voyeuristically spies on Madeline when she is most vulnerable and brings about a "painful change" that shatters her illusions and forces her, "beset with fears", to rush out into the storm. Thus Porphyro's role in the tragedy can provide grounds for interesting debate.

Loss of identity

A key aspect of tragedy is the protagonists' loss of identity. Who can tell me who I am? asks Lear and Othello's identity is lost when he falls down in a fit. As Lycius goes past his teacher, the rational philosopher Apollonius, while leading Lamia through the streets of Corinth, Lycius hides his face. Lamia refuses to invite Apollonius (her nemesis) to the wedding and Lycius is ashamed. Keats' intention seems quite clear: in loving Lamia with all her "brilliance feminine" and supernatural ability, Lycius is rejecting the guide who can take him into the rational and masculine world of Corinth. Isabella is also removed from the dominance of her family's structures by her obsession with Lorenzo's corpse. Similarly, Madeline's fantasies could be said to remove her from the safety of her family and leave her exposed to Porphyro's advances whilst the manner in which he literally forces her out of the castle where they become "like phantoms" or ghostly beings that no longer have substance, implies an intrinsic loss of self and even humanity. Perhaps most graphically of all, because unresolved, the knight-at-arms is transmuted from a chivalric figure of action into a tragic one of stasis. Tragic falls would first seem to "melt" or "dissolve" social identities and then kill.

Resolution

In most dramatic tragedies the resolution is brought about by the deaths of many of the major characters. This is often followed by a brief nod to the future, which is shown to be in safe, if uninspiring, hands. Lodovico in *Othello* has the role in his closing speech of perhaps reassuring the audience that the danger is now past. Keats contrives to create some restoration of the social order in '*Lamia*' and in '*Isabella*', but in '*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*' the despair is absolute: "And no birds sing" closes the poem's circle and leaves no room for hope. Similarly, the conclusion of '*The Eve of St Agnes*' seems equally bleak in structurally returning us to the opening images of "frosted breath" and "frozen grass" through the depiction of the "ashes cold" that seem to imply that the only conclusion for both love itself and those involved with the narrative, is death. Again, this deviation from the usual pattern of dramatic tragedy may illuminate students' responses to "tragic" endings.

Inevitability

Jean Anouilh's description of tragedy as "clean" and "restful"—"The spring is wound up tight. It will uncoil of itself"—is useful when considering the impact of Keats' narratives. Readers are left in no doubt as to the tragic nature of the endings, for all the narrators' attempts perhaps to avoid them. Porphyro seems to rush headlong into his ending, hurrying Madeline into the "elfin storm" where an ambiguous "home" awaits her. It is clear what Lamia desires, but Keats and the genre make us understand that as soon as she desires it, she is doomed just as the lovers in '*The Eve of St Agnes*' are (the author here refuses to reveal their fate or offer the traditional fairy-tale denouement that might be expected). The inadequacy of a response such as "What a shame!" or "If only..." to the grandeur of tragic plots seems to be indicated by the idea that characters are locked in a pattern which is controlled by forces beyond their knowledge and whose motivations are left beyond the readers' understanding.

Setting

All four poems use a contrast between a "sublime" world of happiness and the quotidian world, which is usually marked by death. The "elfin grot", the classical world of invisible nymphs and walking gods, the imaginative world of Madeline's dreams within the comfort of her room and Isabella and Lorenzo's "close...bower" are all left behind by these narratives; they are replaced by "the cold hill's side", noisy, bustling, Corinth, the "bitter chill" of the outside world and Lorenzo's grave, where he lies, with "a large flint-stone" weighing upon his feet. A biographical reading is superficially very tempting here: the number of deaths that Keats dealt with in his short life and his description of the everyday world as a place "Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies" in '*Ode to a*

Nightingale' may contribute to the sense that he is inclined to take a tragic view of life. Tempting and intriguing as this may be, such a reading may not do much to illuminate the impact of oppositions on the narrative organisation of the texts. What is significant is that Keats' representation of his real, as opposed to faery, worlds tends to suggest that death or stasis dominate those worlds; while in his sublime world, movement, love and vigour are all emphasised.