

## “Sonnet to Sleep” by John Keats

O soft embalmer of the still midnight,  
Shutting with careful fingers and benign  
Our gloom-pleas'd eyes, embower'd from the light,  
Enshaded in forgetfulness divine:  
O soothest Sleep! if so it please thee, close,  
In midst of this thine hymn, my willing eyes,  
Or wait the Amen ere thy poppy throws  
Around my bed its lulling charities.  
Save me from curious conscience, that still hoards  
Its strength for darkness, burrowing like the mole;  
Turn the key deftly in the oiled wards,  
And seal the hushed casket of my soul.

This poem is about the longing to escape physical and emotional suffering. Keats expresses deep anguish which appears to be a combination of bodily pain accompanied by thoughts and memories which torment him. As he lies awake in bed, he longs for the forgetfulness of sleep, but sleep eludes him.

Sleep is a common metaphor for death, and Keats uses certain words associated with death to convey the sense that he is weary of living and longs to pass from mortal existence. The words “embalmer” in the opening line and “casket” in the closing line actually serve as a way of entombing the entire poem. Also, the fact that the poem is set at midnight implies that he is at a symbolic threshold, ready to move on to the next plane of existence.

There is one last thing I feel is worth noting. In lines 7 and 8, there is a reference to the use of poppy, which in Keats' time would be opium. It appears that Keats has turned to narcotics as a way to ease his physical and spiritual pain. But in spite of his self-anesthetizing, he is still unable to numb the darkness, “burrowing like the mole” into the deepest regions of his psyche.

### **To Sleep by John Keats**

In *To Sleep*, John Keats presents a [lyrical](#) voice that desires to go to sleep. The action of sleeping will be associated with a place of wellness and calmness in [comparison](#) with the troubles of the daytime. Therefore, throughout the poem, there will be a constant tension between the daytime and the nighttime. *To Sleep*

will also depict a distance between these two antagonistic spaces that we already mentioned. Furthermore, the action of sleeping represents a new kind of experience that the lyrical voice will evoke and yearn in *To Sleep*. Moreover, the action of sleeping will be a [metaphor](#) for death. In *To Sleep*, the moment of rest will be similar to a sort of death, which brings a state of pleasure and joy to the lyrical voice. This poem is a [sonnet](#), a variant of the Shakespearian sonnet.

### *To Sleep Analysis*

O soft embalmer of the still midnight,  
Shutting, with careful fingers and benign,  
Our gloom-pleas'd eyes, embower'd from the light,  
Enshaded in forgetfulness divine:

In this first stanza, the lyrical voice evokes the dream directly. The voice talks to the moment of sleep and asks to be possessed by it. The dream is also described as pleasurable and with the ability to keep the lyrical voice from troubles. The daytime appears as a horrid place that can be escaped through sleep. Notice the adjectives and the [imagery](#) that surrounds the dream, “soft embalmer” “forgetfulness divine”, and the ones that describe the daytime, “gloom-pleas'd eyes”. Moreover the movement between light and darkness which correspond to the dream-time and the daytime is also crucial, both for the dramatic and lyrical aspects of the stanza, and the rest of the poem.

O soothest Sleep! If so please thee, close  
In midst of this thine hymn my willing eyes,  
Or wait the “Amen”, ere thy poppy throws  
Around my bed its lulling charities.

In this stanza the lyrical voice calls to the sleep once again. However, this time the lyrical voice is more direct and expresses a concrete wish. Here, the voice asks to be put to sleep by the gentle manners of the dream. Notice the relationship of being put to sleep and the “hymn” and the “lulling charities”. Furthermore, the sleep is evoked here as a metaphor of death. The lyrical voice is a passive agent who waits

for the sleep to take him in that compassionate and tender scenario. Also take into account the integration of religion in that “Amen”.

Then save me, or the passed day will shine

Upon my pillow, breeding many woes,-

Save me from curious Conscience, that still lords

Its strength for darkness, burrowing like a mole;

In this third stanza, notice how the invocation to sleep is more direct and more dramatic. The lyrical voice asks the sleep to save him on two different moments. The lyrical voice wants to escape from the daytime, from the horrid things that involve being awake, and mentions what would happen to him/her if the sleep doesn't come ( “breeding many woes”). Also notice how the lyrical voice mentions the Conscience and how the poem capitalizes that word. Therefore, according to the lyrical voice, having a Conscience, being Conscientious, is one of the most terrible things of daytime.

Turn the key deftly in the oiled wards,

And seal the hushed Casket of my soul.

The final lines of the poem refer more explicitly to death. Like death, sleep gives the lyrical voice the possibility of a different experience and the access to a new kind of knowledge. Notice the importance of the capitalization of the word “Casket”. These final lines will give a closure to this wish that the lyrical voice displays through a melancholic and dramatic [tone](#).

### About John Keats

[John Keats](#) was an English poet. He was one of the main figures of the second generation of [Romanticism](#). He was born in 1795 and he died in 1821. His work was critically acclaimed after his death. John Keats is considered to be one of the finest English poets of all times.

### ***To Sleep: Imagery, symbolism and themes***

## Imagery and symbolism in To Sleep Themes in To Sleep

### Imagery and symbolism in *To Sleep*

Sleep is personified as an embalmer with fingers capable of shutting human eyes and as someone with a key which can lock troubling thoughts inside the soul. It is also endowed with life-saving properties, able to exclude the woes which lurk at the bottom of consciousness.

The conscience is depicted as a mole 'burrowing' its way through memory. Moles are destructive and the enemy of anyone who cares about an ordered life, as expressed through an ordered lawn.

The soul in turn is seen as a 'hushed casket', as something within which precious things are locked away. The surface of this 'casket' may give no indication (or perhaps a misleading impression) of what lies inside.

### Themes in *To Sleep*

The poem is about the power of sleep to restore the sleeper. The speaker clearly feels that human beings cannot tolerate too much consciousness and need periods of 'forgetfulness divine' when the soul can be protected from the troubling thoughts which lurk beneath the surface of conscious thought.

There is an ambiguity about 'curious conscience, that still hoards / Its strength for darkness,' (l.11-12). Is Keats saying that the conscience is something that operates most effectively during the hours of darkness, or is he saying that the conscience is strongest when it delves into the darkest deeds or attitudes? The image of the conscience digging down, disrupting things long buried and bringing spoil to the surface is disturbing. Rather than confronting the depths, Keats would rather that they were safely locked away and their power contained. Typically of a poet who valued pain alongside joy, the casket image also suggests the preservation of these memories for the future, rather than that they should be rejected or destroyed.

It is significant that Keats is not appealing for some sort of creative trance in this poem. This is not a writer imploring his Muse to grant him inspiration. Rather it is an appeal for the opposite. As Andrew Motion has said: '[The poem] hankers after

a calm nowhere, accepting that the pains of “curious conscience” cannot be deferred indefinitely.’

In John Keats's poem "To Sleep" the construction of the poem works to enhance the reader's interpretation. The poem dwells within a sonnet form, extolling all the virtues of "sleep." Falling within the general bounds of the sonnet, the poem is the obligatory fourteen lines of iambic pentameter coupled with an elaborate rhyme scheme. Although most closely resembling the English sonnet, the deliberate wanderings of the poem from this strict sonnet form merely serve to enhance the meaning of the poem.

— — — Within the first two quatrains of the poem "sleep" is personified to be an "embalmer of the still midnight," closing our eyes and offering a "forgetfulness divine." The voice of the poem speaks to "sleep," referring to his words as "thine hymn," and offering himself to "sleep" when it should choose. The rhyme scheme of these two quatrains follows the Shakespearian sonnet form, and does not deviate from the iambic pentameter.

This lends the poem a natural tone and the voice of the poem appears to be speaking in a quite ordinary manner. The words at the end of each line not only follow the rhyme scheme but serve a dual purpose, furthering the relationship between the form of the poem and the reader's interpretation. "Midnight," "benign," "light," and "divine," these four closing words of the first four lines establish an impression of the voice of the poem's position upon "sleep." This allows the reader to better understand the references to "hymn" and "Amen" in the second quatrain.

Although the majority of the lines within these two quatrains are end-stopped, in line 5 the voice of the poem becomes more emotional, and beseeches "sleep" to do as it will. The voice exclaims "O soothest sleep!," striking the reader to take notice that the line...

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