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The Eve of St. Agnes

John Keats · *1819 (published 1820)* · *original English text*

On the cold night before St. Agnes's Day, young Madeline goes to bed hoping for a vision of her future husband, as the old legend says. Her lover, Porphyro, whose family is an enemy of hers, steals into her father's castle during a feast. Keats's poem is a romance of cold and warmth, risk and love.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can love break through hatred and the cold of the world, and what is the cost of a dream becoming real?

The poem sets the lovers against a house that would harm them and a winter that seems to freeze everything. Porphyro, helped by the old nurse Angela, hides in Madeline's room and wakes her from a dream with a song. She finds that the real lover is not the dream, and they flee into a storm. The ending adds a sad note for the old people left behind, so that the poem's warmth is felt against its cold.

KEY CHARACTERS

Madeline
A young woman who hopes for a vision of her future husband.

Porphyro
Her lover, whose family is her family's enemy.

Angela
An old nurse who helps the lovers.

the Beadsman
An old man who prays in the cold chapel.

Grades 10–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
The Cold Night
OPENING STANZAS

An old Beadsman prays in the cold chapel while the castle prepares a feast. The legend says that a maiden who follows certain rites on St. Agnes's Eve will dream of her lover.

- The Beadsman is a figure of age and cold.
- The castle is full of noise and warmth.
- The legend sets up the whole plot.

02
Porphyro Arrives
EARLY STANZAS

Madeline thinks only of the legend. Porphyro comes through the moonlight and stops at the castle, though his enemies are inside.

- Madeline is half in a trance.
- Porphyro's danger is real.
- The feast is the cover for his entrance.

03
Angela and the Plan
MIDDLE STANZAS

The old nurse Angela helps him to hide in Madeline's room. She is frightened for him and agrees to the plan.

- Angela's fear is natural.
- The plan relies on the old woman's kindness.
- Porphyro's promise is not kept simply.

04
Madeline's Bedroom
LATER STANZAS

Madeline undresses by the moonlight and falls asleep. Porphyro lays out a feast of sweets and plays a lute.

- The colored window is a famous image.
- The feast of fruits is a sensuous scene.
- The song wakes her.

05
The Flight
CLOSING STANZAS

Madeline wakes and finds her lover real. They escape into the storm. The poem ends with a note on the Beadsman's and the Angela's deaths.

- The waking is a shock between dream and reality.
- The storm hides their escape.
- The old people are left behind.

Love and Risk · Dream and Waking · Cold and Warmth · Sensuous Detail

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. Notice how the poem moves between cold and warm images.
2. The legend of St. Agnes drives the plot. Ask how much Madeline believes.
3. The colors of the window and the feast are described with great care. Ask what they do.
4. Look at the poem's last stanza. What tone does it close on?

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