



1953

Tragic Elements in Keat's "Eve of St. Agnes"

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TRAGIC ELEMENTS IN KEATS'S "EVE OF ST. AGNES"

BY

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

February

1953

LIFE

Paul John Clifford, S.J., was born in Chicago, Illinois, June 3, 1925.

After his elementary education at St. Ignatius's parish school, Chicago, he attended Loyola Academy, Chicago, graduating therefrom in June, 1943. In June of the same year he entered the Milford Novitiate of the Society of Jesus at Milford, Ohio. For the four years he spent there he was academically connected with Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"The Eve of St. Agnes" has always been considered one of Keats' most popular poems, and has been singled out for its luxurious sensuousness, its sweet Spenserian movement, and its haunting verbal music. The vision scene, especially, displays these qualities in their most exquisite form; the richness of its imagery and its rhythmic magnificence are unforgettable. Nevertheless, for a full appreciation of the poem, there are still other elements that should be given consideration. These are the elements of tragedy. It will be the purpose of this thesis to point out in the poem the presence of some elements of tragedy and to show that the life and outlook of Keats at the time in which he wrote "The Eve of St. Agnes" are related in a causative way to those same elements of tragedy. It is possible that Keats may have intended that Madeline and Porphyro die a tragic death. For all that Keats says regarding their fate is:

And they are gone: aye ages long ago
These lovers fled away into the storm.¹

¹ John Keats, Keats Poetry and Prose with Essays by Leigh Hunt, Bridges, and Others, ed. by Henry Ellershaw, Oxford, 1924, 106, ll. 370-371.

Whether or not Keats intended his readers to interpret the ending of the poem in such a way that Madeline and Porphyro meet a tragic end cannot, of course, be proved with certitude. Consequently, the thesis attempts to prove that some elements of tragedy are present in "The Eve of St. Agnes" and that the life and outlook of Keats at the period in which he wrote the poem would seem to have influenced him to surround his story of Madeline and Porphyro with some tragic elements.

Apparently, only one other person has attempted anything similar to the present thesis. In an article entitled "Has Keats's 'Eve of St. Agnes' a Tragic Ending?"², Herbert G. Wright indicates his belief that it is Keats's intention that the poem "The Eve of St. Agnes" ends in tragedy. Mr. Wright points out that the part played by the atmospheric elements which convey the intensity of the cold, the violence of the wind, and the terror of the storm, are the perfect setting for tragedy. Also the fact that death or the fear of death is mentioned frequently, and sometimes even in relation to Madeline and Porphyro, would seem, according to Mr. Wright, to be a further indication that Keats is warning his readers in a subtle way of the impending doom of the two lovers. Using the atmospheric factors and

² Herbert G. Wright, "Has Keats's 'Eve of St. Agnes' a Tragic Ending?", The Modern Language Review, XL, 1945, 93.

the idea of death, which is never far away in "The Eve of St. Agnes", as intrinsic proof, Mr. Wright then looks beyond the poem itself for additional proof. He proposes that an examination of other poems written at the same period provides support for the view that "The Eve of St. Agnes" ends tragically. Exterior influences stemming from Keats's illness, aggravated by tuberculosis, his unfortunate financial state, and especially his intense passion for Fanny Brawne would give Keats reason for writing of tragedy. Mr. Wright then proceeds to show how much more unified the poem would be, if it were interpreted to end in tragedy.

The present writer, realizing the difficulty of proving that "The Eve of St. Agnes" ends in tragedy, has nevertheless followed Mr. Wright's lead, but only in so far as Mr. Wright has proved the presence of tragic elements in "The Eve of St. Agnes". This thesis, then, will be an expansion and development of many of the ideas contained in Mr. Wright's article. Consequently, once the proof of the thesis has been established, it is hoped that "The Eve of St. Agnes" may be better understood and more deeply appreciated.

CHAPTER II

EXPLANATION OF TRAGIC ELEMENTS

It would be impossible, of course, to prove that "The Eve of St. Agnes" is a tragedy in the sense that Aristotle meant. For Aristotle, tragedy, among other things, must be a dramatic poem, not a narrative. "The Eve of St. Agnes" is undoubtedly a narrative poem, and the writer of this thesis or any other writer would find himself in great difficulty were he to attempt to prove that "The Eve of St. Agnes" fulfills the definition of dramatic poetry. Nevertheless, since other elements enter into tragedy besides that of drama, it would seem that at least some of these other elements could be found in narrative poetry as well as dramatic poetry. In order to prove this, the task of this second chapter will be to define tragedy according to Aristotle, explaining each term of the definition very carefully, and to show how some parts of the definition can be verified in "The Eve of St. Agnes". Examples of some of these tragic elements in "The Eve of St. Agnes" will be shown very briefly in this chapter, as this is the main work of the thesis and will be done in greater detail in later chapters.

Aristotle defines tragedy as:

Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic armament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper katharsis, or purgation of these emotions.¹

Aristotle breaks this definition down into four parts: first, the object imitated--men in action; second, the medium of imitation--embellished language; third, the manner of imitation--direct presentation; and fourth, the function of tragic art--the arousal and purgation of pity and fear.

By "embellished language" is simply meant language that is made beautiful by rhythm, meter, intonation, and song. There were some portions of a Greek tragedy, as the prologue and episode, which were rendered in verse alone, without being sung or chanted. The whole play, of course, was in meter.

Aristotle's catharsis of pity and fear is, according to Lane Cooper², a simpler matter than critics have made of it. Cooper believes whatever Sophocles's "Oedipus Tyrannus" has on a man of good reputation and normal sentiment is what Aristotle in his Poetics means by catharsis of the tragic emotions. The sus-

¹ Aristotle, Aristotle's Poetics, trans. by S.H. Butcher, St. Martin's Street, London, 1932, 23.

² Cooper, The Poetics of Aristotle Its Meaning and Influence, New York, 1927, 30-31.

pense, as Oedipus begins to learn that he unwittingly has slain his father and married his mother is thrilling, and the reader literally shivers with fear. Tension is relaxed after the discovery is made. This is the mark of the catharsis or relief of emotions. When tragedy brings these emotions of pity and fear to the surface, and discharges them, it brings to the soul a harmless relief which is caused not by actual events, but by an imitation of an action.

After Aristotle has given his definition of tragedy, he proceeds to analyze the elements that require separate attention from the poet. This first element is called "Spectacle", and it is concerned with stage-presentation, including costume, setting, and the like. "Composition of the music" is second; and the "Composition of words", that is the working out of the story in words, is third. The fourth is concerned with the agents of the action; each with a habit of choice or way of reacting to a situation. This fourth element is called "Moral Bent". The fifth element is "Thought", that is the agent's way of reasoning from which we ascribe goodness or badness, success or failure to his acts. The sixth and last element is the "Action" or "Plot". The Plot is the synthesis of incidents which gives form or being to the play as a whole.

Aristotle felt that the Plot was the most important of the six elements. For him all six elements are indispensable,

but the "Plot" of tragedy is of first importance. Next in importance is "Moral Bent". "Thought" comes third, for the tragic personages must speak and argue as befits a given situation. Fourth in importance is "Diction", For the modern reader it is the medium of poetic art. Fifth is "Music", and sixth is "Spectacle", important as arousing our interest, but demanding a lower kind of artistic skill.

Now the six elements just enumerated, and in the order of their importance according to Aristotle, are the elements of tragedy which are found, at least in part, in "The Eve of St. Agnes". Since the first four of these elements constitute both narrative poetry and tragedy, it is with the last element in particular, namely, "Spectacle", that the greater part of the thesis will concern itself. The other four elements will be pointed out briefly in this chapter. The fifth element--"Music" will be dismissed completely, since there is no music in "The Eve of St. Agnes" other than the music of poetry. However, before pointing out examples of these tragic elements in "The Eve of St. Agnes" it might be well to go back to Aristotle's Poetics and study his more lengthy explanation of the first four elements as found in tragedy.

In his treatment of "Plot", Aristotle begins with what may strike the modern reader as obvious. He says that a tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete in itself, and has

magnitude or extent; for a thing may be a whole; and yet wanting in magnitude.

A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles.³

If the definition of Aristotle were taken literally, since every event has both causes and consequences, it would mean that tragedy would last for eternity; but obviously this is not Aristotle's intention. All that Aristotle insisted upon is that a play should have good and obvious reasons for beginning where it begins and ending where it ends; and that its incidents should follow from one another by a clear chain of causation, without coincidence and without irrelevance. There should be nothing which is not clearly the cause of what follows. For example, Falstaff would probably be considered by Aristotle as quite out of place. For he seems to appear as a magnificent irrelevance in a play about Henry IV.

Moreover, the action must have magnitude, for the beauty of the work depends upon size as well as order. The work must be neither too small nor too great. A very small thing

³ Aristotle, Poetics, 31.

lacks beauty, for we lose the pleasure arising from a perception of order in the parts; and a very large thing lacks beauty since we are unable to see the whole at once. The plot of a tragedy, therefore, must have a proper length so that the parts and the whole may be readily embraced by the memory. The length of the poem should be such that the hero may fall from happiness to misery, or rise from misery to happiness, in a series of incidents linked together in a natural or inevitable sequence.

The plot must be unified. In a tragedy, therefore, the plot must represent an action that is organically one. The arrangement of the parts should be similar to an organic structure, in which the removal or the transposition of a single member would make the whole look disjointed. Every part must be necessary, and in place. There should be nothing that is superfluous.

Again, tragedy is not history. It represents ideal truth; not what has happened, but what is likely to happen, a sequence of events that is credible or inevitable. Poetry, since it tends to represent universal truth, is more philosophical than history. It attempts to present what a typical person will say or do in a given case. It would seem, then, that a poet, according to Aristotle, is more a maker of plots than of verses. He is a poet by virtue of imitating an action.

Tragedy must also arouse pity and fear. Such incidents

are most affecting when they are unexpected, if one incident gives rise to another. In an uninvolved plot, there is a single continuous movement, and the change of fortune occurs without reversal or discovery. On the other hand, in an involved plot this change is accompanied by a reversal or a discovery or by both. It is important that the reversal and the discovery grow out of the action itself, as the natural result of preceding events and not merely follow in point of time.

A change from one situation to its opposite, that is from good fortune to bad, or from bad to good, is what Aristotle means by reversal. For example, in the "Oedipus Tyrannus" the Messenger comes intending to rid Oedipus from the fear that he will wed his mother, but, as a matter of fact, the Messenger brings Oedipus misery by disclosing his real parentage.

A discovery is a transition from ignorance to knowledge and may concern persons, things, or events, but chiefly touches persons, and causes love or hate between them. Discoveries that would bring love or hate, and reversals that bring happiness or misery, will excite pity or fear. And these emotions, indeed, are the very emotions that tragedy should arouse.

For Aristotle, then, reversal and discovery are two main parts of the action. Suffering may be considered a third part, and is an incident of a destructive or painful sort, as violent death, physical agony, or bodily wounds.

Since the plot should be involved, with reversal and discovery, and the events piteous and terrible, Aristotle would say that the following types of story must be avoided. First, a good and just man must not come into misery, for this would not elicit pity and fear, but would be revolting. Second, a bad man must not rise to happiness, for this would stir no human feeling in us. Third, an excessively bad man should not fall from prosperity into misfortune, for this may, perhaps, stir some human feeling, but certainly not tragic pity and fear. What does arouse our pity is a misfortune that goes beyond what the hero deserves, and fear is aroused when misfortune befalls a person like ourselves. The ideal tragic story would be concerned with a person not exceedingly good, who falls, not through vice or depravity, but through some mistake or shortcoming.

For perfect tragedy, then, the issue should not be double, fortunate for the good, unfortunate for the bad. There should be rather a single change of fortune, from happiness to misery, caused not by vice or depravity, but by a serious defect in judgement or shortcoming in conduct, in a person as good as the average or better than that.

It is also necessary that the tragic quality be impressed upon the incidents. When an enemy attacks an enemy, there is nothing in his act or intention to arouse our pity-- though we may pity the victim. The same is true when the agents

are neither friends nor enemies. However, when a murder is committed or intended by brother against brother our pity is aroused. The worst is a plot in which some one knowingly is about to injure a blood-relation, and then desists. The intention of the one about to cause the injury is revolting, and no pity follows since the victim is spared.

In Aristotle's definition of imitation he is very insistent that the poet should make the agents good, true to type, true to life, and self-consistent. They must tend toward goodness. A woman, for example, who would possess manly valor or virile eloquence would not be true to type. The agents must appear to be natural human beings. As for self-consistency, even if a changeful person is represented, his changefulness must be consistently depicted.

Just as the plot should show a probable or necessary relation between one incident and another, so, too should character. A certain type must speak or act in a certain way as the necessary or natural outcome of his inner being. Then one thing will grow out naturally from another in a necessary or probable sequence throughout; and, as a result, the solution of dramatic crises will develop from the progress of the story.

When the poet points out the tragic flaw, he should observe the method of portrait-painters. He should endeavor to preserve distinctive features like the wrath of Achilles and yet

be sure that his good qualities are portrayed too.

Discovery, as has been previously noted, is a passage from ignorance to knowledge. The least artistic sort of discovery is recognition by signs and tokens, recognition by a scar, for example. The second type of discovery is arbitrarily introduced by the poet, and does not arise from the progress of the action. An example of this second type Cooper gives us; "when Orestes simply reveals himself to his sister, saying not what the drama requires, but what the poet wishes."⁴ The third sort of recognition is by memories, and again Cooper gives us an example of this; "when Odysseus hears the minstrel chant the adventure of the Wooden Horse, he weeps, is observed by Alcinous, and so is identified."⁵ The fourth type comes from inference, that is by passing logically from one judgement to another. However, the best discovery of all grows out of the very nature of the incidents, as in "Oedipus Tyrannus" an extraordinary revelation comes about from natural antecedents, without any recourse to argument or the evidence of scars or heirlooms.

Having treated of plot and character, Aristotle then goes on to thought and diction. Thought is to be found in the speeches--in the efforts of the actors to prove and refute, to

⁴ Cooper, Aristotle's Poetics, 52.

⁵ Ibid., 52.

arouse one another's pity, or fear, or anger, and to exaggerate or to discount the importance of things.

Finally, there is diction. Beginning with the simplest sounds, Aristotle proceeds to the point where he calls a good piece of poetry one utterance through the union of more than one. He also treats of current terms, rare words, and metaphors. He says the poet should strive for clearness through the use of familiar terms and for distinction through an admixture of rare words, metaphors, and other deviations from custom. Most important of all is a command of metaphor.

Now that Aristotle's concept of tragedy has been summarized, it remains but to point out some of these tragic elements in "The Eve of St. Agnes".

The most important of Aristotle's six tragic elements is plot--and the story of Madeline and Porphyro in "The Eve of St. Agnes" comes very close to the tragic plot of Aristotle.

First of all the story has Aristotelian unity, that is, it has the beginning, middle, and end which Aristotle requires of all tragic plots. "The Eve of St. Agnes" opens very smoothly with a description of the setting and moves along with one incident following another in logical order, and without irrelevance. The ending of the poem, although somewhat abrupt with Madeline and Porphyro fleeing away into the storm, certainly cannot be

considered haphazard.

Moreover, the magnitude of the action seems neither too long nor too brief. The whole story could take place within a few hours, and yet just enough is told to give us a complete picture. All the commentators on this poem of Keats have outdone themselves in praise of its magnificent beauty. And a thing cannot be beautiful if it lacks proportion or is too big or too small.

Does "The Eve of St. Agnes" represent ideal truth? Is the sequence of events within the story credible or inevitable? Conceivably, the story could end in tragedy. It is necessary, however, to interpret the poem since Keats does not explicitly say that it does end in tragedy. This interpretation will be made will be made in the following chapter.

"The Eve of St. Agnes" does arouse pity and fear, and by means of an involved plot. In the involved plot the change of fortune is made by reversal or discovery, or by both. In "The Eve of St. Agnes" there is a discovery when Madeline awakes to discover "a painful change" in her lover. He is not the same as he was in her dreams.

'Ah, Porphyro!' said she, 'but even now
 'Thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear,
 'Made tuneable with every sweetest vow;
 'And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear:
 'How chang'd thou art! how pallid, chill, and drear!
 'Give me that voice again, my Porphyro,

'These looks immortal, these complainings dear!
'For if thou diest my love, I know not where to go.' 6

Up to this point in the poem, Madeline has been intensely happy in the sweet dreams of her lover, but there is a sudden change of fortune when she awakes to find Porphyro quite different from the man of her dreams. Fear, almost terror, is written on Porphyro's face. His skin is pale, and his voice trembles as he speaks. This does arouse a certain amount of pity and fear on the part of the reader.

This change of fortune was obviously not brought on by any vice or depravity of Madeline. And yet, perhaps, we can point out a weakness in her character which brought on this change of fortune. Madeline's acceptance of the belief that on St. Agnes Eve a maiden might win sight of her future husband in a dream by going to bed supperless, silent, and without looking behind her, and sleeping on her back with her hands on the pillow above her head is assuredly superstition. Had Madeline not believed in this childish legend, perhaps she would not have made any connection between the man of her dreams and Porphyro, and the change from her pleasant dream to stark reality would

6 John Keats, "The Eve of St. Agnes", Keats Poetry and Prose, Oxford, 1924, 104. This volume will henceforth be known as Poems.

not have been so great. She would not have expected Porphyro to appear exactly as the man in her dreams.

The second tragic element which will be found exemplified in "The Eve of St. Agnes is the character or "moral bent" of the agents, that is their ordinary way of reacting toward situations. First, according to Aristotle, the agents must tend toward goodness. Throughout the poem Madeline's innocence and purity are made manifest. Angela speaks of Madeline as a "sweet lady" who dreams "alone with her good angels, far apart from wicked men like thee" ⁷ (Porphyro). While Porphyro watches Madeline in her chamber as she prepares for bed, he is deeply impressed by her goodness:

She seemed a splendid angel, newly drest,
Save wings for heaven:--Porphyro grew
faint;
She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint.⁸

And there is nothing in the portrayal of Porphyro that would lead us to believe that he is evil. He is pictured as virile, strong of passion, and daring; but intending no harm. He begs Angela to bring him to Madeline:

'I will not harm her, by all saints I swear',
Quoth Porphyro: 'O may I ne'er find grace
'When my weak voice shall whisper its last prayer,
'If one of her soft ringlets I displace,

⁷ Keats, "The Eve of St. Agnes", Poems, 130, ll. 9-11.

⁸ Ibid., 131, ll. 11-15.

'Or look with ruffian passion in her face:
'Good Angela believe me by these tears;'⁹

The agents must also be true to type. The woman must be completely feminine, and she must possess none of the characteristics that are typical of men. Madeline is such a woman. Her longing for a lover who would fill her life with happiness, her piety as she kneels to pray before retiring, her fear and helplessness when she awakes to find Porphyro changed, are all typically feminine characteristics. The man, on the other hand, should be completely virile. Porphyro is certainly this. The mere fact that he came alone to an enemy castle to see Madeline is an indication that there were no marks of cowardice in him. And again, these characters are consistent throughout the poem. Madeline remains throughout a sweet, innocent, helpless creature, while Porphyro from beginning to end is determined and courageous, and yet gentle.

The third tragic element, "thought", is manifest in the speeches of the agents and should be consistent with their characters. The agents should also arouse the pity and fear of one another as well as that of the reader. The speeches of Madeline and Porphyro beginning "Ah, Porphyro", said she, 'but even now thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear",¹⁰ and the following

⁹ Keats, "The Eve of St. Agnes", Poems, 130, ll. 13-20.
¹⁰ Ibid., 133, l. 21.

stanza are meant to arouse these emotions:

'Tis dark: quick pattereth the flaw-blown sleet:
 'This is no dream, my bride, my Madeline!
 'Tis dark: the iced gusts still rave and beat:
 'No dream, alas! alas! and woe is mine!
 'Porphyro will leave me here to fade and pine--
 'Cruell what traitor could thee hither bring?
 'I curse thee not, for my heart is lost in thine,
 'Though thou forsakest a deceived thing;--
 'A dove forlorn and lost with sick unpruned wing.'¹¹

In this stanza Porphyro tries to awaken Madeline to reality;

"This is no dream, my bride, my Madeline!" Madeline seems terrified at Porphyro's words. She does not seem to know what to expect from Porphyro. Does he intend to leave her, now that she realizes how much she loves him? In the next two stanzas Porphyro tries to calm Madeline's fears:

'My Madeline! sweet dreamer! lovely bride!
 'Say, may I be for aye thy vassal blest?
 'Thy beauty's shield, heart-shap'd and vermeil dyed?
 'Ah, silver shrine, here will I take my rest
 'After so many hours of toil and quest,
 'A famish'd pilgrim,--saved by miracle.
 'Though I have found, I will not rob thy nest
 'Saving of thy sweet self; if thou think'st well
 'To trust, fair Madeline, to no rude infidel.'¹²

'Hark! 'tis an elfin-storm from faery land,
 'Of haggard seeming, but a boon indeed:
 'Arise--arise! the morning is at hand;--
 'The bloated wassaillers will never heed:--
 'Let us away, my love, with happy speed;
 'There are no ears to hear, or eyes to see,--
 'Drown'd all in Rhenish and the sleepy mead:
 'Awake! arise! my love, and fearless be,
 'For o'er the southern moors I have a home for thee.'¹³

11 Ibid., 133, ll. 7-22.

12 Ibid., 133, ll. 23-36.

13 Ibid., 133, 37-49.

In the second of these two stanzas, especially, there is the impression that Porphyro is trying to convince himself as well as Madeline that there is nothing to fear. In the first two lines of this second stanza he admits that the storm is out of the ordinary--"elfin-storm from faery land" and a very severe one--"of haggard seeming". All this, as mentioned previously, tends to arouse in the hearts of the agents in the poem as well as the readers, the emotions of pity and fear.

Diction is the last of the tragic elements that Aristotle treats of at length. If "The Eve of St. Agnes" excels in anything it is in diction. All who have had anything to say about "The Eve of St. Agnes" sing its praises for the beautiful way in which it is written. Sidney Colvin, in his life of John Keats, points out examples of superb description contained in "The Eve of St. Agnes":

The painted panes in the chamber window, instead of trying to pick out their beauties in detail, he calls, "Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes as are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings",-- a gorgeous phrase which leaves the widest range to the colour-
imagination of the reader, giving it at the same time a sufficient clue by the simile drawn from a particular specimen of nature's blazonry. In the last line of the same stanza--"A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings,"--the word 'blush' makes the colour seem to come and go, while the mind is at the same time traveling from the maiden's chamber on thoughts of her lineage and ancestral fame.¹⁴

11 Sidney Colvin, John Keats, New York, 1925, 400.

There is no need, I believe, to set down endless quotations proving how Keats excelled in expressing the thoughts and images contained in "The Eve of St. Agnes". Any one who doubts Keats's talent, has but to sit down and read a few lines from "The Eve of St. Agnes".

The last two tragic elements that Aristotle has laid down as absolutely necessary for a successful tragedy were given very little space in his Poetics. Perhaps little was said of music because Aristotle himself was not too well acquainted with this art. "Spectacle" was treated lightly because stage-presentation, costume, setting, etc. do not concern the tragic poet as such. Nevertheless, although nothing will be said of music regarding "The Eve of St. Agnes" since there is no music other than the music of the poetry, a great deal will be said regarding "spectacle". Here, indeed, as mentioned before, is where narrative poetry especially differs from dramatic poetry. In dramatic poetry there is exterior action; there can even be sound effects; masks were sometimes employed. In narrative poetry, however, the poet himself must supply for the lack of these dramatic aids by his own descriptions. The narrative poet must see to it that his story is given the proper setting. He must construct this setting by the adroit use of words alone. If this thesis can prove that the setting which Keats describes in "The Eve of St. Agnes" is a tragic setting, the major part

of the thesis will have been proved.

After pointing out some of the more important influences of Keats's life and their causative relation to the spirit and mood of Keats's poetry, the rest of the thesis will prove that the sixth Aristotelian tragic element, "spectacle", can be found in "The Eve of St. Agnes".

CHAPTER III

TRAGIC INFLUENCES OF KEATS'S LIFE

No other poet of the Romantic period seems to have been influenced so deeply by a woman than John Keats. ✓ For it was his love for Fanny Brawne that inspired Keats to write much of his poetry after December of 1818.

The critics never cease to wonder at Keats's sudden spurt of productiveness beginning in January with "The Eve of St. Agnes", and then, after a vacant interval, bursting out in magnificent effervescence with "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", the "Ode to a Nightingale", the "Ode on a Grecian Urn", and the less important odes "To Psyche", "On Melancholy", and "On Indolence". The clue I believe to lie in just the fact of Keats's reciprocated love for Fanny Brawne.¹

The above quotation from Amy Lowell's life of John Keats illustrates rather well the common opinion of most of Keats's biographers and commentators. But it is in "The Eve of St. Agnes" in particular, to which the influence of Fanny Brawne is especially exemplified.

"St. Agnes Eve" was a great choral hymn written to celebrate his love for Fanny Brawne.²

149. 1 Amy Lowell, John Keats, Boston and New York, 1925, II,

2 Ibid., 129.

Horace E. Scudder³, seems to say indirectly at least, that it was Fanny Brawne who was the inspiration for Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes", for it was after meeting her that Keats wrote "the great group of poems" beginning with "The Eve of St. Agnes".

But before this ravaging of his powers set in, that is during the first half of 1819, when he was at once deepened by sorrow, and excited by love, he wrote that great group of poems which begins with "The Eve of St. Agnes" and closes with "Lamia".⁴

Granting Fanny Brawne's influence on Keats during his composition of "The Eve of St. Agnes", the question still remains just what kind of influence was it? Did her influence inspire him to write of joy or tragedy?

Certainly a deep and passionate love was the source of this influence; and, apparently it took hold of Keats almost immediately after his first meeting with Fanny.

By what stages the coils closed on him we can only guess. His own account of the matter to Fanny Brawne was that he had written himself her vassal within a week of their first meeting: which took place, we know, sometime during the period of watching by Tom's sick bed.⁵

3 Keats, Poems, xxii.

4 Ibid.

5 Sidney Colvin, John Keats, 332.

This must have been sometime between September and December 1818.

Before many weeks he was hopelessly enslaved, and passion teaching him a sensitive secretiveness and reserve, he says to brother and sister no more of his enslaver except by way of the slightest allusion.⁶

When a man falls in love for the first time, and especially when that love is guided by strong passions, frustration is frequently present. He wants to do all he can to deepen and enrich that love, and yet he feels that his love will never reach the depth and fulness that he desires. He is forever afraid that his love may be lost or that he must share it with someone else. Such would seem to have been Keats's state of mind.

Keats first met Fanny Brawne between September and December 1818; the first draft of "The Eve of St. Agnes" was written in January, only a few months after this meeting. Sir Sidney Colvin describes Keats's emotional reaction at this time.

The heightened emotional strain of his weeks of tendance on his dying brother laid Keats open to both influences at their fullest power; he was ripe as several passages from his letters have made us feel, for the tremendous adventures of love; and the "new, strange and threatening sorrow", from which he had with relief declared himself escaped when the momentary lure of the East-Indian Charmian left him fancy-free, was fated to fall on him in good earnest now.⁷

6 Ibid., 330.

7 Ibid., 329.

The East-Indian Charmian mentioned in the quotation above was a cousin of the Reynoldses who, in turn, were intimate friends of Keats. In a letter to his brother George, Keats describes the beauty of this East-Indian Charmian and the impression she made on him.⁸ But it seems to have been only an infatuation and not real love, for there is no sign of reciprocation on her part.

The sensitive and emotional John Keats always longed for intimacy and love. His affection for his mother and brothers was strong and sincere. Sidney Colvin relates how lovingly he cared for his mother when she was dying,⁹ and how he would stand up against boys bigger than himself in defense of his brothers.

Upon one occasion, when an usher, on account of some impertinent behaviour, had boxed his brother Tom's ears, John rushed up, put himself in the received posture of offense, and, it was said, struck the usher--who could, so to say, have put him into his pocket.¹⁰

It is not at all surprising, then, that a man so affectionate and in need of love could become deeply enamoured of Fanny Brawne in a short time. His brother George, in whom Keats had always confided had married and gone to America; his younger brother

8 Keats, Poems, 334, letter written about Oct. 25.

9 Colvin, Keats, 14-15

10 Lowell, Keats, I, 22.

Tom had just died of consumption. The absence of his dear ones, together with the deep sorrow at he brother Tom's death, and his own illness which, indeed, proved to be the beginnings of consumption--were than enough to make him especially sensitive not only to Fanny Brawne, but to almost any one who would manifest affection toward him.

Blow on blow had in truth begun to fall on Keats, as though in fulfilment of the constitutional misgivings to which he was so often secretly a prey. First the departure of his brother George had deprived him of his closest friend, to whom alone he had from boyhood been accustomed to confide these obsessions of his darker hours, and in confiding, to find relief from them. Next the exertions of his Scottish tour had proved too much for his strength, and laid him open to the attacks of his hereditary enemy, consumption. Coming back, he found his brother Tom almost at his last gasp in the clutch of that enemy, and in nursing him, had both lived in spirit through all his pains and breathed for many weeks a close atmosphere of infection. At the same time the gibes of the reviewers, little as they might touch his inner self, came to teach him the harshness and carelessness of the world's judgements, and the precariousness of his practical hopes from literature. Now there were to be added the pangs of love, love requited, indeed, but having no near or sure prospect of fruition; and even love disdained might have made him suffer less.¹¹

Thus there were sufficient reasons for Keats to write stories of tragic love. He was madly in love, and yet saw no

¹¹ Colvin, John Keats, 331.

way whatsoever of satisfying this love, for he had a premonition of his death as the following sonnet, written 1817, indicates:

When I have tears that I may cease to
 be
 Before my pen had glean'd my teeming
 brain,
 Before high piled books, in charactry,
 Hold like rich garner's the full-ripen'd
 grain;
 When I behold, upon the night's starr'd
 face,
 Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
 And think that I may never live to trace
 Their shadows, with the magic hand of
 chance;
 And when I feel, fair creature of an hour!
 That I shall never look upon thee more,
 Never have relish in the faery power
 Of unreflecting love;-- then on the shore
 Of the wide world I stand alone, and think,
 Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.¹²

Keats wrote this sonnet at the time his brother George was about to emigrate to America and break the family tie. His younger brother Tom was also about to emigrate to his final home. Thus already Keats has begun to brood on theme which later so fascinated him, the thought of his own death. In another sonnet written in March 1819, after his engagement to Fanny Brawne, Keats again reflects upon death.

Why did I laugh to-night? No voice will
 tell;
 No God, no demon of severe response,
 Designs to reply from Heaven or from Hell:

¹² Keats, "Sonnet", Poems, 39.

Then to my human heart I turn at once.
 Heart! Thou and I are here sad and alone;
 I say, why did I laugh? O mortal pain!
 O Darkness! Darkness! ever must I moan,
 To question Heaven and Hell and Heart
 in vain.

Why did I laugh? I know this Being's
 lease,
 My fancy to its utmost blisses spreads;
 Yet would I on this very midnight cease,
 And the world's gaudy ensigns see in
 shreds;
 Verse, Fame, and Beauty are intense
 indeed,
 But Death, intenser--Death is Life's high
 meed.¹³

It would be surprising indeed, if a mind so preoccupied with the thought of death could turn at once to the composition of a light romance without these more ominous tones somehow making themselves heard above the lighter notes of "The Eve of St. Agnes".

As a matter of fact, practically everything Keats wrote after falling in love with Fanny Brawne was pitched in a melancholy or tragic key. In "Isabella" a young maiden keeps the head of her lover in a pot of Basil; in "Lamia" a serpent appears as a beautiful young maiden to Lycius. He asks her hand in marriage only to discover at the marriage feast that she is a serpent; at which she vanishes and he dies. The "Ode on Melancholy" no less by its very title than by its theme indicates

¹³ Ibid., "Sonnet", 137.

Keats's prevailing mood at this time. The tragic wasting power of love is symbolised in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci". Both "I had a Dove and the Sweet Dove Died" and "Ode to a Nightingale" present a melancholy poet envious of the happiness of the Nightingale. Thus a brief sampling of the poems Keats wrote at this time seems to indicate that Keats intended the final lines of the "Eve of St. Agnes" to strike a tragic note.

Herbert G. Wright says that Keats's

...own love for Fanny Brawne at the time when he wrote the group of poems that has been considered, in the midst of his battle with an untoward fate in the form of illness, would afford a psychological explanation of his repeated choice of bliss of love thwarted by adverse events as a theme.¹⁴

Miss Lowell gives us a quotation from William Sharp's biography of Joseph Severn, a painter and good friend of Keats, which helps to prove that Keats himself did not really feel that his love for Fanny would ever terminate in happiness:

During the Autumn of 1818 Severn saw little of Keats. When they did meet, he noticed that his friend was distraught and without that look of Falcon-like alertness which was so characteristic of him... It certainly seemed as though the poet was losing strength and energy, for he ceased to take much interest in intellectual matters and declared himself unable to take long walks or indulge in any unnecessary exercises.¹⁵

93.

¹⁴ Wright, "Has Keats' Eve of St. Agnes a Tragic Ending?"

¹⁵ Lowell, John Keats, 144.

Miss Lowell adds:

Severn may have been thinking of the months which preceded Tom's death. But as he Severn himself was only convalescent from his serious illness in the middle of October, we may take his description as covering the weeks succeeding Tom's death as well as the earlier ones. Probably Keats refused to walk with Severn that he might walk with Fanny Brawne; we know that they were in the habit of strolling on the heath together.¹⁶

Keats's whole behaviour, mood, and physical condition during the months of December, 1818, and January, 1819 were certainly far from conducive to the writing of happy romances. He was constantly troubled with sore throats, symptoms of the dreaded disease of consumption which would soon bring him to his death bed; he was still mourning over Tom's death; and he was not only fearful that his love for Fanny could not be realized because of his consumption, but he was also suffering from jealousy. Such factors entering into a poet's life would warrant one suspecting that his poetical efforts during that time might, perhaps, be rather somber.

Miss Lowell, to establish the fact that Keats was not in a happy mood in the December of 1818, the month immediately preceding his writing of "The Eve of St. Agnes", writes:

There is no doubt that Keats was a difficult and uncomfortable lover. His self-imposed absences must

16 Ibid.

have been extremely trying. Keats leaves Fanny Brawne for months at a time and waxes jealous and miserable if she goes out for an evening. Within two weeks of this Christmas day, he left her for nearly two weeks. Indeed, I think Fanny had much to bear.¹⁷

Miss Lowell gives at least one reason why she thinks Keats was avoiding Fanny.

A curious aspect of Keats's state of mind was that he could not rid himself of the feeling that his having fallen in love with Miss Brawne was in some way a disloyalty to his brother and sister-in-law. It is unnecessary to point out how essentially morbid such an idea was, but morbidness and Keats were old companions. Even in this first lush of his acknowledged love he could write to George and Georgiana:

"I could have no thought pervading me so constantly and frequently as that of you--my Poem cannot frequently drive it away--you will retard it much more than you could by taking up my time if you were in England. I never forget you except after seeing now and then some beautiful woman--but that is a fever--the thought of you both is a passion with me, but for the most part a calm one."¹⁸

Although the above quotation was perhaps one reason why Keats wished to avoid Fanny, it certainly was not the chief one. Keats, it is true, was ridiculous in his exaggerated loyalty to his family; but once he had fallen in love with Fanny

17 Ibid., 149.

18 Ibid., 150.

even the love for his brother and sisters took second place. He was undoubtedly sincere in this letter to George and Georgiana in saying that the love he had for this beautiful woman was only a "fever". Maybe he even hoped that it was just a passing infatuation, but the letters that were written by Keats at this time to Fanny Brawne would certainly indicate something more than a mere infatuation. Such phrases as "I cannot exist without you";¹⁹ "I am forgetful of everything but seeing you again"²⁰; "I have no limit now to my love"²¹; "My creed is love and you are its only tenet"²²; and "I cannot breathe without you"²³, are found constantly in his letters to Fanny Brawne. And these were written several months after he had first been introduced to her. If it were merely a "fever", would it have lasted so long? More probably Keats's chief reason for avoiding Fanny was his own knowledge of his poor health. He knew that he had inherited the dread disease from which both his mother and brother Tom had died. It would not have been fair to ask a woman to marry a

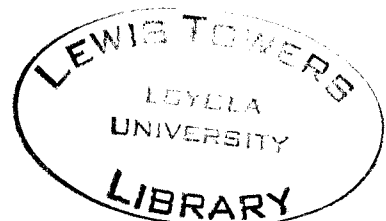
19 Keats, Poems, Letter 138 to Fanny Brawne, 414.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.



man who had not very long to live. Another reason was undoubtedly his poor financial status.

The "Ode to Fanny" was probably written toward the end of December 1818 or at the beginning of January 1819. Keats wrote it shortly after his engagement to Fanny which had probably taken place at Christmas 1818.²⁴

do not turn
The current of your heart from me so soon.²⁵

This is from the third stanza of the "Ode to Fanny"; in the seventh, he says again:

Ah! if you prize my subdued soul above
The poor, the fading, brief pride of an hour;
.....
Let none else touch the just new-budded
flower.²⁶

If this hypothesis is true, jealousy would be still another reason for believing that Keats was more inclined to write of frustrated love. In the fifth stanza of this same ode, he speaks of woman's fickleness in love, and in the sixth tells of his despair when the thought comes that Fanny might be fickle:

I know it -- and to know it is despair
To one who loves you as I love sweet

²⁴ Lowell, John Keats, 150-151.

²⁵ Keats, "Ode to Fanny", Poems, 138.

²⁶ Ibid.

Fanny!
 Whose heart goes fluttering for you every-
 where,
 Nor, when away you roam,
 Dare keep its wretched home:
 Love, love alone, has pains severe and
 many:
 Then, loveliest! keep me free
 From torturing jealousy.²⁷

Keats begs Fanny not to be too kind to the men with whom she will associate. He pleads to be kept free from torturing jealousy. Keats originally began the sixth stanza of the Ode.

I know it. But sweet Fanny I would fain
 kneel for a mercy on my lonely hours...

But he revised this draft to read:

I know it. But sweet Fanny I would fain
 Cry you soft mercy for a...

It was probably a few days later, in deep suffering, that Keats took up the abandoned phrase in the most moving of all his poems to Fanny:

I cry your mercy--pity--love!--aye, love!
 Merciful love that tantalises not,
 One-thoughted, never-wandering, guileless love,
 Unmask'd and being seen--without a blot!
 O! let me have thee whole,--all--all--be mine!
 That shape, that fairness, that sweet minor zest
 Of love, your kiss--those hands, those eyes divine,
 That warm, white, lucent, million-pleasured breast,--
 Yourself--your soul--in pity give me all,
 Withhold no atom's atom or I die,
 Or living on perhaps your wretched thrall,
 Forget, in the mist of idle misery,

27 Keats, "Ode to Fanny", Poems, 138.

Life's purposes, --the palate of my mind
Losing its gust, and my ambition blind!²⁸

J. Middleton Murry feels that nothing could have saved Keats except the physical consummation of his passion. Murry doubts, indeed, whether even that could have saved him, but thinks that it might at least have prolonged his life for a few years. At the very end of Keats's life, when whatever bitterness he had ever felt against Fanny Brawne was completely washed away, the poet still believed that if he had been Fanny's lover, he would have been saved. "I should have had her when I was in good health and I should have remained well", he wrote to Brown on November 1, 1820.²⁹ And in the very last days of his life, just before peace had descended upon him at the near approach of his death, Severn bears witness that "he found many causes of illness in the exciting and thwarting of his passions, but I persuaded him to feel otherwise on this delicate point."³⁰ There is no reason, however, to believe that Keats ever did feel otherwise.

Keats was very definitely mistaken when he thought

28 Keats, "To Fanny", Poems, 215.

29 Ibid., Letter to Charles Brown, 447.

30 Lowell, John Keats, II, 466.

that he was in good health when he first fell in love with Fanny. Tuberculosis had its holds on him well before that, even though he was unaware of it, or had at most a dim foreboding. Nevertheless, the continuous frustration of his desire for love did much to weaken his resistance. "One has the sense", says Murry, "that he was indeed burned up by his passion."³¹ But this fire that was in his soul gave to the world some of its best poetry.

The price Keats paid for being "a miserable and mighty poet of the human heart" is fearful to contemplate. I dread the compulsion that drives me on to read and reread the letters of his last years.

' Once again the fierce dispute
Betwixt hell-torment and impassioned clay
Must I burn through.'

And I long that the consummation of his love should have been granted to him, and the consolation of the knowledge that Fanny had not withheld nor dreamed of withholding an atom's atom of herself.³²

An interesting indication that Keats did not feel that his love for Fanny could ever be satisfied is in his revision of the very poem we are considering in this thesis, "The Eve of St. Agnes". That poem, in the beginning, was a celebration of

³¹ J. Middleton Murry, The Mystery of Keats, New York, 1949, 47-48.

³² Ibid.

their acknowledgement of their mutual love. Just before Keats went to London on September 10, 1819 he had revised the poem; and thus in a sense experienced a vicarious fruition of his love. Keats read the revised poem to Woodhouse in London on September 12. Woodhouse promptly replied to Taylor:

As the poem was originally written, we innocent ones (ladies and myself) might very well have supposed that Porphyro, when acquainted with Madeline's love for him, and when he arose Ethereal flushed etc., etc. (turn to it) set himself at once to persuade her to off with him and went over the 'Dartmoor black' (now changed for some other place) to be married in right honest chaste and sober wise. But, as it now is altered, as soon as Madeline has declared her love, Porphyro winds by degrees his arms around her, presses breast to breast, and acts all the acts of a bona fide husband, while she fancies she is only playing the part of a wife in a dream. This alteration is of about 3 stanzas; and tho' there are no improper expressions and all is left to inference, and tho' profanely speaking, the interest on the reader's imagination is greatly heightened, yet, indeed I do apprehend it will render the poem unfit for ladies and scarcely to be mentioned to them as among the 'things that are'. He says he does not want ladies to read his poem: that he writes for men--and that if in the former poem there was an opening for a doubt of what took place, it was his fault for not writing clearly and comprehensibly--that he should despise a man who would be such a eunuch in sentiment as to leave a maid, with that character about her, in such a situation.³³

33 Ibid., 39-40.

The explanation of this would seem to be that when Keats began to realize how hopeless it was for him to expect Fanny to marry him in his present physical and financial condition, he decided to experience the fruition of his love vicariously in "The Eve of St. Agnes". Once Keats, in the character of Porphyro, satisfied his passions, he cared little what might happen to him. Consequently, in "The Eve of St. Agnes" he has Madeline and Porphyro, as soon as possible after the deed, flee away into the night.

It would not at all be far-fetched for a poet, madly in love with a girl whom he never feels he will be able to marry, and yet extremely jealous of her, and, at the same time suffering from an illness which of its very nature causes morbidity and melancholy, would express, in some way, his intense suffering and his fear for the unhappy outcome of his love. And this seems to be what was done in "The Eve of St. Agnes".

CHAPTER IV

TRAGIC OVERTONES REFLECTED IN NATURE

Against the interpretative background of the preceding chapter the atmosphere and mood that seem to permeate the entire poem should be examined to see whether or not it may be considered the atmosphere of tragedy.

When in the second chapter we defined our terms, we classified the atmospheric factors as coming under the sixth tragic element of Aristotle, "spectacle". Anything that contributes to the proper setting, stage, or sound effects is part of "spectacle". Certainly the atmospheric factors would contribute to the proper setting of the poem. Would not an emphasis of the intensity of the cold and a howling storm, together with frequent mention of mystery and eeriness be considered a contributing factor toward a serious or sorrowful character. The first two stanzas of "The Eve of St. Agnes" reveal that at the very beginning of the poem Keats makes an evident effort to depict the intensity of cold.

St. Agnes' Eve--Ah, bitter chill it
was!
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;

The hare limp'd trembling through the
 frozen grass,
 And silent was the flock in woolly fold:¹

This coldness is felt not only out of doors, but even within the
 castle itself:

Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while
 he told
 His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
 Like pious incense from a censer old,
 Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without
 a death,
 Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his
 prayer he saith.²

And as this holy man rises from his knees, his prayers finished,
 we see how thin and emaciated he is. His feet are bare. How
 they must ache as he trudges slowly down the icy chapel aisle.
 Lamp in hand, he passes by the "sculptured dead" which line
 either side of the aisle. They seem to him frozen to the spot.

His prayer he saith, this patient, holy
 man;
 Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his
 knees,
 And back returneth, meagre, barefoot,
 wan,
 Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees:
 The sculptured dead, on each side, seem
 to freeze,
 Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails:
 Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat'ries,
 He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails
 To think how they may ache in icy hoods
 and mails.³

1 Keats, "The Eve of St. Agnes", Poems, 127 ll. 1-6.

2 Ibid., ll. 7-14.

3 Ibid., 15-28.

Such is the mood that Keats creates in the first two stanzas of a not too lengthy poem, and we shall see as the poem unfolds that this atmosphere loses none of its potency.

In the third and fourth stanzas there is still further description of the cold. Miss Lowell describes these stanzas:

The cold night is made non the less bitter by the draughty gusts of loud music which sweeps along the corridors, and this mettalic music, this piercing sound of "silver, snarling, trumpets gains an added touch of magnificence and chill from its juxtaposition to the sculptured arch from which

"The carved angels ever eager-eyed,
Star'd where upon their heads the
cornice rests,
With hair blown back, and wings put cross wise
on their breasts."⁴

Madeline is introduced for the first time in the fifth stanza:

.....These let us wish away,
And turn sole-thoughted, to one Lady
there,
Whose heart had brooded, all that wintry
day,
On love, and wing'd St. Agnes' saintly
care,
As she had heard old dames full many times
declare."⁵

Here there is mention of a wintry day, apparently gloomy and glum, for Madeline spent it in brooding and pondering

⁴ Lowell, John Keats, 170.

⁵ Keats, "The Eve of St. Agnes", Poems, 128, ll. 66-75,

the great event that she hoped would take place on this night as she slept and dreamed of her lover. It was probably the kind of day that was good for nothing but brooding, not that her thoughts would necessarily have to be gloomy. She was thinking of the wonderful legend of St. Agnes Eve which claimed that a maiden might win sight of her future husband in a dream by going to bed supperless, silent, and without looking behind her, and sleeping on her back with her hands on the pillow above her head. It was just that the darkness and coldness of the day gave her no ambition to do anything but to sit and day-dream. Such a day as this, prescindng from Madeline's thoughts, which were not unhappy, does lead to the atmosphere of gloom and cold.

It is not until the thirteenth stanza that we find again direct mention of the cold, but it must not be thought that in the intervening stanzas there are no suggestions of tragic atmosphere. On the contrary there are, but these suggestions evoke rather the idea of death, which will be treated in the following chapter. Here attention is paid only to the over-all impression of tragedy which is depicted in the bitter cold, the storm and the frequent mention of eerie peril.

Keats continues the narrative:

He followed through a lowly arched way,
 Brushing the cobwebs with his lofty
 plume;
 And as she mutter'd 'Well-a--well-a-
 day!'

He found him in a little moonlight room,
 Pale, latticed, chill, and silent as a tomb.
 'Now tell me where is Madeline,' said
 he,
 'O tell me, Angela, by the holy loom
 'Which none but secret sisterhood may
 see,
 When they St. Agnes' wool are weaving
 piously.⁶

Thus in the thirteenth stanza the room to which Angela, the old retainer, has led Porphyro, is "pale", latticed, chill, and silent as a tomb". It is not difficult to imagine what kind of a room this must have been. Earlier in the stanza there is mention of Porphyro's "lofty plume" brushing the cobwebs as he passed through a lowly arched way leading to the room. This would indicate that the room was in little use, and certainly Angela, afraid of the lords of the castle who were mortal enemies of Porphyro, would naturally lead him to a remote room where they could talk with little fear of being found by others. How chilly the room must have been, lacking the warmth and the light of a fire and so far away from the sound of human voices that it was "silent as a tomb". The atmosphere that the picture creates is assuredly not one of cheer and happy warmth that you would expect to find in a light romance.

6 Ibid., 129, ll. 186-199.

The word "cold" is next mentioned in the fifteenth stanza:

Feebly she laugheth in the languid moon,
 While Porphyro upon her face doth look,
 Like puzzled urchin on an aged crone
 Who keepeth closed a wond'rous riddle-
 book,
 As spectacled she sits in chimney nook.
 But soon his eyes grew brilliant, when she
 told
 His lady's purpose; and he scarce could
 brook
 Tears, at the thought of those enchantments
 cold,
 And Madeline asleep in lap of legends old.⁷

Here Keats speaks "of those enchantments cold" which would come upon Madeline in the midst of her sleep as she dreams of the happiness that will soon be hers on this particular Eve of St. Agnes. The obvious interpretation of this line is the word "cold" refers to the unreality of her dreams, and Porphyro devises a way in which he can make them realities. But, "cold" could refer to the hopelessness of those dreams. They are beautiful and sweet, but will never be realized, that is in the fullest sense. It is true that Keats intended Madeline and Porphyro to enjoy the momentary pleasure of physical union between man and woman. But there was not to be the lasting and blessed happiness of matrimony; at least this is beyond the scope of the poem. Also,

⁷ Ibid., 129, ll. 214-226.

the word "enchantment" brings in the element of magic and mystery. Madeline is enchanted by the images she envisions in her sleep. She is charmed by some sort of magic, but this is merely a dream, and a dream that will never come true.

The element of mystery is, perhaps, best exemplified in the nineteenth stanza:

Which was, to lead him, in close secrecy,
 Even to Madeline's chamber, and there
 hide
 Him in a closet, of such privacy
 That he might see her beauty unespied,
 And win perhaps that night a peerless
 bride,
 While legion'd faeries paced the coverlet,
 And pale enchantment held her sleepy-
 eyed.
 Never on such a night have lovers met,
 Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous
 debt.⁸

The reference to "legion'd faeries" pacing the coverlet and the "pale enchantment" holding her sleepy-eyed gives the impression of wonder and mystery. Just how are these faeries effecting Madeline, and why is the enchantment described as "pale"? But the last two lines in particular, give the reason for suspecting that all is not well; that there is something evil or calamitous about to fall:

8 Ibid., 130, ll. 271- 283.

Never on such a night have lovers met,
 Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt.

The exact form of the legend used here by Keats has not been found, but the story is that Merlin was the offspring of an evil spirit and a mortal mother. He paid the "monstrous debt" when he yielded up his life, imprisoned by the enchantment wrought by Nimue. It is difficult to see how these two lines, with the story of Merlin used as an interpretation, can be the part of a poem which has as its ending the happiness of the lovers. As a matter of fact, it seems that this is Keats way of hinting at the real fate of the lovers.

Herbert G. Wright has this to say regarding the two lines quoted above:

That mysterious beings are lurking abroad has already been indicated by the lines:

"Never on such a night have lovers met,
 Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt."

Indeed for all the religious mood evoked by the title and the picture of the pious Beadsman in the act of prayers, the poem has a sinister aspect which becomes more and more clearly visible in the course of the narrative.⁹

Surprisingly enough, the vision scene, in spite of all its warmth and sweetness, is the next place where we again find

⁹ Wright, "Has Keats's 'Eve of St. Agnes' a Tragic Ending/?", 90-91.

mention of the cold.

Soon, trembling in her soft and chilly
 nest,
 In sort of wakeful swoon, perplex'd she
 lay,
 Until the poppi'd warmth of sleep oppress'd
 Her soothed limbs, and soul fatigued
 away;
 Flown, like a thought, until the morrow-
 day;
 Blissfully, haven'd both from joy and
 pain;
 Clasp'd like a missal where swart Paynims pray;
 Blinded alike from sunshine and from
 rain,
 As though a rose should shut , and be a bud
 again.¹⁰

"Soon, trembling, in her soft and chilly nest", is the first line of this, the twenty-seventh stanza. So once more, even amid all color and imagery of the scene, there is a reminder of the atmosphere of cold. Sometimes, this atmosphere of cold, dark, and mystery is explained as a means of heightening the contrast with the warmth of the castle. But, as a matter of fact, this feeling of warmth is restricted to very narrow limits. We are made aware of it only in the vision scene; and even here, as already mentioned, there is a reference to the chillness of Madeline's bed. There is however, a vital contrast between the warmth of Madeline and the chill about her. Nevertheless, this passage should be read in relation to the whole poem.

402. 10 Keats, "The Eve of St. Agnes", Poems, 131, ll. 385-

Keats probably aimed at more than a mere artistic effect and did not want the magnificence and splendor of the vision-scene to blind us to the persistent impression of bitter cold.

In the thirty-first stanza there is still another reminder of the cold:

These delicates he heap'd with glowing
 hand
 On golden dishes and baskets bright
 Of wreathed silver: sumptuous they
 stand
 In the retired quiet of the night,
 Filling the chilly room with perfume
 light.--
 'And now, my love, my seraph fair,
 awake!
 Thou art my heaven, and I thine ere-
 mite:
 Open thine eyes, for meek St. Agnes'
 sake,
 Or I shall drowse beside thee, so my soul
 doth ache.¹¹

Here Madeline's room is described as chilly: "filling the chilly room with perfume light"--and we are still in the midst of the vision-scene.

The next stanza introduces a new note of mystery:

Thus whispering, his warm, unnerved
 arm
 Sank in her pillow. Shaded was her
 dream

¹¹ Ibid., 132, ll. 446-461.

By the dusk curtains:--'t was a mid-
 night charm
 Impossible to melt as iced stream;
 The lustrous salvers in the moonlight
 gleam;
 Broad golden fringe upon the carpet
 lies;
 It seem'd he never, never could redeem
 From such a steadfast spell his lady's
 eyes;
 So mused awhile, entoil'd in woofed phan-
 tasies.¹²

Porphyro, in his endeavors to arouse Madeline from her dream, is not immediately successful; for as Keats describes it; "Twas a midnight charm impossible to melt as iced stream". The air of mystery that the word "charm" connotes, and the coldness of the "iced stream" are merely another contribution to the pervading atmosphere of the entire poem. The fact that Keats compares Madeline's dream with "iced stream" might lead one to believe that her dream, too, contains something ominous. Perhaps, the dream will be proved false, or that the happiness she will find in her lover will be short-lived; for, indeed, when she finally does awake from her dream later on in the thirty-fifth stanza, she seems to find Porphyro quite different from the lover of her dreams.

The thirty-fifth stanza is an odd mixture of foreboding and fear:

12 Ibid., 132, 11. 462- 477.

'Ah, Porphyro!' said she, 'but even now
 Thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine
 ear,
 Made tuneable with every sweetest vow;
 And those sad eyes were spiritual and
 clear:
 How changed thou art! how pallid, chill,
 and drear!
 Give me that voice again, my Porphyro,
 Those looks immortal, those complain-
 ings dear!
 Oh leave me not in this eternal woe,
 For if t'hou diest, my love, I know not
 where to go.'¹³

This stanza seems to be filled with words that connote fear of evil, calamity, or mystery. Words such as "tremble", "spiritual", "pallid", "chill", "drear", "immortal", "complaining", and "eternal woe", would hardly have been inserted into this stanza unless they had some particular significance. Perhaps, especially in view of the mysterious ending of the poem, they are a prediction of the unhappy ending of one or both of the lovers.

From now until the end of the poem the influence of the cold, the storm, and the suggestion of mystery and eeriness grows. In the thirty-sixth stanza we have the beginning of the climax, both in the atmosphere as well as in the plot.

Beyond a mortal man impassion'd far
 At these voluptuous accents, he arose,
 Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing
 star
 Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep re-

13 Ibid., 133, ll. 509-522.

pose;
 Into her dream he melted, as the rose
 Blendeth its odour with the violet,--
 Solution sweet: meantime the frost-wind
 blows
 Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp
 sleet
 Against the window-panes; St. Agnes' moon
 hath set.¹⁴

In the opening of this stanza there seems to be an indication of preternatural entering in, for Porphyro is described as "beyond mortal", "ethereal flushed", and "like a throbbing star seen amid the sapphire heaven's deep repose". And, then, suddenly, from this comparative calm we turn to a description of the elements raging without.

Keats gives a very dreary picture of the night with the cutting wind battering the sharp sleet against the window panes. He refers to this as "Love's alarum", as if all the mood he is creating through the description of the elements is a warning to the lovers of some impending doom.

Keats goes on to increase this feeling of uneasiness and gloom in the following stanza:

'Tis dark: quick pattereth the flaw-
 blown sleet:
 'This is no dream, my bride, my Madeline!
 'T is dark: the iced gusts still rave and
 beat:

¹⁴ Ibid., 133, ll. 523-536.

'No dream, alas! alas! and woe is mine!
 Porphyro will leave me here to fade and
 pine.--
 Cruel! what traitor could thee hither
 bring?
 I curse not, for my heart is lost in thine,
 Though thou forsakest a deceived
 thing;--
 A dove forlorn and lost with sick unpruned
 wing.'¹⁵

The picture evoked by the first two lines is assuredly one of gloom and fear. The moon has set, the night is dark, and the rapid beat of the sleet as it spatters against the window panes is quite audible. The lovers, too, are not unaware of the ominous atmosphere that seems to be enveloping them.

What impression is Keats trying to cause, if it is not one of fear or anxiety. Madeline doubts their future happiness, and this fear continues to the very end of the poem. For there is no mention of her being freed from this attitude.

In the next stanza Porphyro makes an ardent protestation of his love for Madeline, and refers to himself as her vassal:

'My Madeline! sweet dreamer! lovely
 bride!
 Say, may I be for aye thy vassal blest?
 Thy beauty's shield, heart-shaped and
 vermeil dyed?

15 Ibid., 133, ll. 537-552.

Ah, silver shrine, here will I take my
 rest
 After so many hours of toli and quest,
 A famis'd pilgrim,--saved by miracle.
 Though I have found, I will not rob thy
 nest
 Saving of thy sweet self; if thou think'st
 well
 To trust, fair Madeline, to no rude infidel.¹⁶

"Vassal" was the exact word that Keats used in writing to Fanny Brawne:

His own account of the matter to Fanny Brawne was that he had written himself her vassal within a week of their first meeting.¹⁷

This is just another indication that the Madeline in the poem is, in reality, Fanny Brawne; and indeed, Leigh Hunt says as much when he speaks of the writer of "The Eve of St. Agnes" being as much in love with the heroine as is the hero.

Porphyro, after declaring his love and his admiration for her beauty, tells Madeline that his love and his admiration for her is not of the selfish kind; for he does not intend to force her to go with him. He will not take her unless she chooses to go.

This could quite possibly be a manifestation of Keats's

16 Ibid., 133, ll. 553-566.

17 Colvin, John Keats, 332.

jealousy of Fanny. He fears lest, perhaps, Fanny does not see in him all that she would expect of her lover. She would not "trust herself to a rude infidel". There may have been other men whom she met at dances and parties who appealed to her more than Keats. If this be so, he declares in martyr fashion that he will not hold her to her contract but will bow gracefully out of the picture.

In the next stanza the mood suddenly changes from this comparative mood of quiet and sweetness into the sudden fear of danger and calamity:

'Hark! 'T is an elfin storm from faery
land,
Of haggard seeming, but a boon indeed:
Arise--arise! the morning is at hand:-
The bloated wassailers will never heed:-
Let us away, my love, with happy speed;
There are no ears to hear, or eyes to
see,--
Drown'd all in Rhenish and the sleepy
mead:
Awake! arise! my love, and fearless be,
For o'er the southern moors I have a home
for thee'.¹⁸

Again, we have Keats reinforcing, as it were, this suggestion of eerie peril, by having Porphyro describe the storm as an "elfin storm from faery land", that is, one that has been conjured up

¹⁸ Keats, "The Eve of St. Agnes", Poems, 133-134, 11. 567-580.

by supernatural power. In this stanza we see Porphyro himself aware of the danger surrounding them, but courageously endeavoring to reassure Madeline that all will go well. It is true the house is filled with mortal enemies; but after all, reminds Porphyro, they have been drinking all night, and are surely by this time quite intoxicated. The storm, though very severe, will enable them to make their escape that more easily. Again he urges Madeline to get up and prepare to leave the castle. No one is awake to hear them, all are drunk with wine. There is every reason to believe, encourages Porphyro, that they can escape without notice.

In the remaining three stanzas, Keats makes one final effort to impress upon his readers the nearness of danger, and the approach of some tremendous calamity. He speaks of Madeline fearing for the future; "She hurried at his words beset with fears". He then goes on to picture the scene that met the eyes of poor Madeline and Porphyro:

For there were sleeping dragons all
 around,
 At glaring watch, perhaps, with ready
 spears--
 Down the wide stairs a darkling way they
 found.--
 In all the house was heard no human
 sound.
 A chain-droop'd lamp was flickering by
 each door;
 The arras, rich with horseman, hawk,
 and hound,
 Flutter'd in the besieging wind'd up-

roar;
And the long carpets rose along the gusty
floor.¹⁹

How terrified Madeline must have been amid so many and such varied suggestions of dire tragedy. She knew what bitter enemies were her father and his household toward Porphyro; all through the house were stationed her father's men. Although they were probably drunk with wine, Madeline could not help but imagine them awaiting Porphyro with drawn swords, anxious to the one to slay Porphyro, their enemy. How stealthily the lovers steal down the stairs, start suddenly with terror at the least little creak, hoping to reach the out-of-doors before any of the household becomes aware of Madeline's disappearance. Perhaps, the most terrifying thing of all was that all was the perfect silence, not a sound could be heard. If, indeed, they were able to hear the sound of a footfall, they could at least be on their guard for the enemy. But nothing was heard save their own breathing and palpitation of heart.

Surely such a description tends naturally to instill fear and terror into the hearts of the reader for the happy outcome of their adventure. So earnestly does Keats strive to create this atmosphere that indeed one wonders how any but a tragic end can evolve from such eerie foreboding.

19 Ibid., 134, ll. 581-598.

But the dramatic tension even increases:

They glide like phantoms, into the wide
hall;
Like phantoms to the iron porch they
glide,
Where lay the Porter, in uneasy sprawl,
With a huge empty flagon by his side:
The wakeful bloodhound rose, and shook
his hide,
But his sagacious eye an inmate owns:
By one, and one, the bolts full easy
slide:--
The chains lie silent on the footworn
stones;--
The key turns, and the door upon the hinges
groans.²⁰

Madeline and Porphyro are described as gliding "like phantoms" into the wide hall. Did Keats intend this as a premonition of the death of the two lovers? Whether he did or not, at least Keats leaves us a very eerie picture of the pair as they pass noiselessly like spirits. And when they do safely reach the door, do we feel that their happiness is at last secured? Keats merely tells us they are "fled away into the storm". He says nothing of their living happily thereafter, but closes in a haunting strain:

And they are gone; aye, ages long ago
These lovers fled away into the storm.
That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,
And all his warrior-guests, with shade
and form
Of witch, and demon, and large coffin-
worm,

20 Ibid., 134, ll. 599-613.

Were long be-nightmared. Angela the
 old
 Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face
 deform;
 The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,
 For aye unsought-for slept among his ashes
 cold.²¹

In the course of the night both the Beadsman and Angela die. It does not seem at all improbable that Keats, by recording the deaths of these two retainers, indirectly intended the readers perhaps to infer a tragic end for the two lovers. In the next chapter this will be more freely discussed. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that Keats's last stanza certainly closes on a peculiarly haunting note which leaves some awe and fear at the future of Madeline and Porphyro.

21 Ibid., 134, ll. 614-628.

CHAPTER V

THE FREQUENT MENTION OF DEATH AND

ITS TRAGIC MEANING

The preceding chapter indicated how an atmosphere of cold and darkness, and the frequent suggestion of eerie peril pervade the entire poem, and lend to it the impression of impending doom. If such a mood of impending doom contributes to the "spectacle" of tragedy, much more does the presentation of death. It remains to be shown, then, that in "The Eve of St. Agnes" there is the frequent mention and reference to death throughout the poem. This can be proved first by pointing out in the poem the frequent references to death and the fear of death on the part of the two lovers, Madeline and Porphyro; and secondly, by comparing "The Eve of St. Agnes" to three other poems, "The Dream After Reading Dante's Episode of Paolo and Francesca", "Lamia", and "Isabella". All three of these poems were written by Keats about the same time that "The Eve of St. Agnes" was written, and all have similar themes.

As already mentioned, Keats in the very beginning of

the poem, created a peculiar mood and atmosphere which will help one to understand the meaning of the poem more easily. Distinctly discernible in the first three stanzas of the poem is, of course, the bitterness of the cold, but death also makes itself felt once in each of the three stanzas. The word "death", as used in the first stanza, has no direct reference to Madeline and Porphyro. Keats uses the word to describe the uninterrupted flight of the smoke from a censer to add to the mood of coldness a more somber idea of death.

The word "dead" is used in the second stanza in reference to the carved figures on the walls of the chapel.

The culptured dead, on each side, seem to
freeze,
Emprison'd in black purgatorial rails:¹

Why bring out the fact that these are replicas of the dead, unless the poet intended rather somber overtones.

The poor Beadsman is described in the third stanza as one whose "death-bell" had already rung.

But no-already had his death-bell rung;
The joys of all his life were said and
sung:²

1 Keats, "The Eve of St. Agnes", Poems, 127, ll. 22-24.

2 Ibid., 127, ll. 35-37.

Again the word "death" is not used in direct connection with either of the two lovers, and yet, one certainly cannot help but feel that the mention of death at least three times in the opening stanzas must somehow be pertinent to the narrative. For, in the opening stanzas, Keats is preparing us and putting us in the mood for the remainder of the poem. It would seem that, if he had intended merely to write a light romance, he might, at the very beginning of the poem, prepare the way by creating a mood that would be more suitable to a light theme.

Again, in the eighth stanza the word "amort" is used to describe Madeline's insensibility to all around her:

...she
 sighs
 Amid the timbrels, and the throng'd
 resort
 Of whisperers in anger, or in sport;
 'Mid looks of love, defiance, hate, and
 scorn,
 Hoodwink'd with faery fancy; all amort,
 Save to St. Agnes and her lambs un-
 shorn,³

Her attention was centered on the legend of "The Eve of St. Agnes" and all the dancing and music passed completely unnoticed. Was Keats forced to use this word "amort", meaning "lifeless"? Would no other word fit his rhyme scheme? Perhaps, but it seems far more likely, especially in view of his use of similar words

3 Ibid., 128, ll. 110-118.

throughout the poem, that he consciously chose the word "amort" in preference to any other.

In the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth stanzas the proximate danger of Porphyro's death is made very real. This is the first time in the poem that death or the proximity of death is mentioned in regard to one of the lovers. And, surely, no one can say that the picture painted in these lines is not one of fear for the life of Porphyro, who, at any moment, is liable to be butchered by his mortal enemies, the inmates of the castle. Especially the last line of the twelfth stanza forcibly declares that the enmity of Hildebrand and Lord Maurice and their cohorts would result in Porphyro's death:

'Follow me, child, or else these stones will
be thy bier,'⁴

In the thirteenth stanza, Angela leads Porphyro to the little room as "pale, latticed, chill, and quiet as a tomb".⁵ Here again we have mention of a word connected with death, "tomb"! Perhaps it has nothing at all to do with Porphyro's death, and yet, why should Keats continually keep reminding us of death.

Indeed, in the next stanza, Angela warns Porphyro that holy feast days do not prevent evil men from murdering:

⁴ Ibid., 129, ll. 179-180.

⁵ Ibid., 129, ll. 187.

'St. Agnes Eve'. Ah it is St. Agnes' Eve--
 Yet men will murder upon holy days:

Thou must hold water in a witch's sieve,
 And be liege-lord of all the Elves and
 Fays,

To venture so: it fills me with amaze
 To see thee, Porphyro-- St. Agnes Eve!
 God's help! my lady fair the conjuror
 plays

This very night: good angels her de-
 ceive!

But let me laugh awhile, I've mickle time
 to grieve.⁶

Angela seems to feel that the supernatural is the only power strong enough to save Porphyro from some dire disaster.

Fear is introduced in the sixteenth stanza. Porphyro outlines to Angela: "A stratagem, that makes the beldame start!"⁷ Angela trembles as she gazes on the face of Porphyro, for she cannot help but feel that nothing but evil will come from a meeting of Porphyro and Madeline. Perhaps she feels that the lord of the house, discovering these two young lovers together will vent his wrath not only upon Porphyro, but on Madeline as well. Angela wishes harm to no one, but especially not to young Madeline, so sweet and lovely in her innocence. But, in the following stanza, Porphyro swears by the saints that no harm will come to her:

Quoth Porphyro: 'O may I ne'er find
 grace

6 Ibid., 129, ll. 194-208.

7 Ibid., 130, ll. 227-228.

When my weak voice shall whisper its
 last prayer,
 If one of her soft ringlets I displace,
 Or look with ruffian passion in her face:⁸

In the eighteenth stanza Angela speaks of her own death
 as very near:

'Ah! wilt thou affright a feeble
 soul?
 A poor, weak, palsy-stricken, church yard
 thing,
 Whose passing-bell may ere the midnight
 toll;
 Whose prayers for thee, each morn and evening,
 Were never missed.'⁹

It is true that the death of Angela would not seem to have any
 direct connection with the fate of either of the two lovers, but
 this reference does seem to increase the atmosphere of tragedy.
 Angela again makes mention of her own death in the last line of
 the twentieth stanza, "Ah! thou must needs the lady wed, or may
 I never leave my grave among the dead."¹⁰

The word "die" occurs twice in the twenty-third stanza:

Out went the taper as she hurried in;
 Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine
 died:¹¹

8 Ibid., 130, ll. 239-244.

9 Ibid., 130, ll. 251-259.

10 Ibid., 130, ll. 295-296.

11 Ibid., 131, ll. 322-324.

But to her heart, her heart was voluble,
 Paining with eloquence her balmy side;
 As though a tongueless nightingale
 should swell
 Her throat in vain, and die, heart-stifled in
 her dell.¹²

Madeline awaking from her dream in the thirty-fifth stanza looks on Porphyro and is frightened:

'Ah, Porphyro! said she, 'but even now
 Thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear,
 Made tuneable with every sweetest vow;
 And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear:
 How changed thou art! how pallid, chill,
 and drear!
 Give me that voice again, my Porphyro,
 Those looks immortal, those complainings dear!
 Oh leave me not in this eternal woe,
 For if thou diest, my love, I know not where
 to go.'¹³

Here we find Madeline amazed, even terrified at Porphyro's face. What is it that has caused him to change so? "Give me those looks immortal", she says--that do not remind her of death, of things that have an end to their being. "For if thou diest", she says, "I know not where to go". Again, why should Keats have Madeline experience this fear of Porphyro's death? Surely, if this constant and continual reference to death or the fear of death had no particular purpose, the whole poem would be somewhat lacking in intrinsic unity. No one, however, has ever criticized Keats's unity in "The Eve of St. Agnes". Therefore the mention

12 Ibid., 131, ll. 328-333.

13 Ibid., 133, 507-520.

of death may have been intended to help create a certain air of tragedy.

The next few stanzas have no explicit mention of death or of words connoting death; but, ~~as pointed out in the preceding chapter,~~ the description of the storm, the fear of Madeline, and the air of mystery enveloping the whole scene, certainly tend to give us reasons to suspect that all this may be a preparation for tragedy.

The last stanza brings a final reference and even explicit description of death:

And they are gone: aye, ages long ago
 These lovers fled away into the storm.
 That night the Baron dreamt of many a
 woe,
 And all his warrior-guests, with shade
 and form
 Of witch, and demon, and large coffin-
 worm,
 Were long be-nightmared. Angela the
 old
 Died palsy-twitched, with meagre face
 deform;
 The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,
 For aye unsought-for slept among his ashes
 cold.¹⁴

Keats does not say Porphyro or Madeline died but cloaks their passing with the mysterious:

And they are gone: aye ages long ago
 These lovers fled away into the storm.

¹⁴ Ibid., 134, ll. 615-629.

But the death of Angela and the Beadsman is set down in detail.

This last stanza would seem to be a strange way to end a poem intended to terminate in happiness for the two lovers. Unless Keats was hinting at a tragic ending, what other reason would he have for telling us of the deaths' of the two servants, Angela and the Beadsman? There is surely nothing so extraordinary about their passing. They were both very old, and were expected to die at any time. Can it be presumption to suggest that Keats is merely hinting at the fate of the two lovers, Madeline and Porphyro?

Herbert G. Wright has an interesting comment on this last stanza:

The closing stanza relates that in the course of the night both Angela and the Beadsman have passed away. So swiftly has what has been hinted at become reality. Is it not probable then that Keats, working upon his readers indirectly, intended them to understand that death overtook the lovers also? It is surely not fanciful to interpret the woe-filled dream of the Baron and the nightmare visions

"Of witch, and demon, and large
coffin worm"

that haunted his warrior-guests as the unrest occasioned by the fate of Porphyro and Madeline. The macabre grimness of words used here, closely akin in tone to the original first stanza to the "Ode on Melancholy", is startling, and the mention of witch and demon may be taken to imply that some baneful force is in motion, the dangerous and malignant force already alluded to by Porphyro. Obviously we are meant to realize

that some dire calamity must have occurred to beget such nightmares. They can certainly not have been inspired by the loss of two aged retainers whose decease was to be looked for at any moment. Yet insignificant as these dependents are, one would not expect them to be treated with the neglect that is the lot at any rate of the Beadsman who

"For aye unsought-for slept among
his ashes cold."

Such indifference might be held to savour of callousness, but would be more comprehensible if the death of the beadsman were lost sight of in the major tragedy of the lovers.¹⁵

But, quite aside from what can be learned from the poem itself the study of other poems which Keats wrote during the same period gives force to the view that "The Eve of St. Agnes" ends tragically. ^{"On a Dull Day"} "The Dream, After Reading Dante's Episode of Paolo and Francesca", composed only a few weeks after "The Eve of St. Agnes", bears examination.

In Dante's "Inferno" Keats had read how the lovers were incessantly whirled and buffeted by the wind; but nothing is said of cold and hailstones accompanying the storm. In Keats's ^{"On a Dull Day"} "Dream, After Reading Dante's Episode of Paolo and Francesca" there are detailed descriptions of exquisite sensations united with a feeling of warmth amid the enveloping cold and darkness. None of this is in the original of Dante. The "Dream", therefore, seems to be a manifest prolongation of the mood of the vision scene in "The

ing?" 91-15 Wright, "Has Keats's 'Eve of St. Agnes' a Tragic End-

"Eve of St. Agnes". The storm-motive in the "Dream" is entwined with that of love, the short-lived bliss of Paolo and Francesca which ended in death and the agony and torment of hell. Love is abruptly terminated just when happiness is unfolding in "Lamia" and "Isabella", too.² In Burton's "Anatomy of Melancholy", the source of "Lamia", Lamia is banished due to hostility of Apollonius, but Lycius survives the catastrophe.³ In Keat's poem, however, Lycius dies. In "Isabella" or "The Pot of Basil", Lorenzo is murdered by the malice of the brothers, and Isabella dies a broken heart. It seems, then, that the death of Porphyro and Madeline, when their love burnt most brightly, would very nicely harmonize with the trend of Keats's thought as we find it in his contemporary poems. However, it may be objected that Keats would probably be more explicit about the disaster that overtook the lovers, as he was in "Lamia" and "Isabella". This is not at all necessary. He may very well have decided to proceed by way of suggestion rather than definite statement, as he did in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci".

There is yet another consideration that ought not to be disregarded. There is a parallel between "The Eve of St. Agnes" and Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet". According to Mr. Wright, "Romeo and Juliet" was one Keats's favorite plays¹⁶.⁴ If this

¹⁶ Ibid., 93.

were true, an examination of the parallel might prove worthwhile. First, there is a general similarity in the situations confronting the lovers. Just as in "Romeo and Juliet" there is a fierce enmity between rival houses, so, too, in "The Eve of St. Agnes" there is that same rivalry between houses. This fierce enmity of rival houses forms the background, and as Romeo ventured to the Capulet ball, so Porphyro enters the Baron's castle, just as the revelry and dancing are at their height. In addition, though the circumstances may differ somewhat, the foreboding of Madeline may be compared with the "ill-divining soul" of Juliet when she looks down at Romeo in the garden. It is quite possible, then, that Keats may have carried the parallel further. If "The Eve of St. Agnes" ends with the death of the lovers, as the poem itself and the treatment of similar themes elsewhere in Keats's works justify, fate, in the shape of the storm, blasts the joy of these young people, even as it destroys that of Romeo and Juliet.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present thesis was to show the presence of some tragic elements in John Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes" and to show the relation of these tragic elements to Keats's life and outlook. First, the definition of tragedy according to Aristotle was presented, and then broken down into those six elements which are considered by Aristotle as indispensable to tragedy. In order of their importance the six elements are: first, plot; second, moral bent or character; third, thought; fourth, diction; fifth, music; and sixth, spectacle. The first four of these elements were explained very carefully and shown to be found, at least in part, in "The Eve of St. Agnes". The fifth element, "music," was dismissed entirely since "The Eve of St. Agnes" contains no music other than the music of poetry. However, more extensive treatment was given to the last of the six elements, "spectacle". It is with this sixth element that tragedy chiefly differs from narrative poetry. Anything that contributes to the setting or mood of the story, or to the stage or sound effects comes under the heading of "spectacle".

The tragic influences of Keats's life had some bearing on his writing, especially with regard to "The Eve of St. Agnes". These influences were brought on by his own illness, the death of his brother Tom, the departure of his brother George and his sister-in-law to America, and, especially, his great love for Fanny Brawne.

The tragedy in Keats's life seemed to have manifested itself in "The Eve of St. Agnes" first, by the frequent mention of the cold, the raging storm without, the mystery, the eeriness, etc.; second, by the frequent mention of death or the fear of death, and sometimes in connection to Madeline and Porphyro. All this contributes to the setting of tragedy.

Aside from "The Eve of St. Agnes" itself, other poems written by Keats at the same period in which he wrote "The Eve of St. Agnes" are still more indicative of Keats's tragic mood. These poems do, in fact, end in the tragic death of one or other of the two lovers. In makeup they resemble very much "The Eve of St. Agnes".

Perhaps no completely decisive answer can be given to the problem under discussion. But certainly it does seem that some tragic elements are present in the poem in a noticeable degree. Indeed, it does seem quite possible that "The Eve of St. Agnes", like "Lamia", "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", "The Eve of St. Mark", and Coleridge's "Christobel" is rooted in the strange

fascination of sinister magic and superstition. Now, if it be agreed that this magic brings "The Eve of St. Agnes" to a tragic close, this interpretation lends to the poem a deeper significance and emphasizes its coherence, structural unity and sense of design. Keats shows admirable skill when he drops hints of the danger that threatens the lovers from mortal hands, but even more skillful is the art with which he uses the forces of nature not only as portents, but, in connection with the magic of hostile supernatural powers, as the agents of disaster. The opening on a moonlit winter is peaceful, though not without a sense of foreboding. The tension increases when Porphyro steals into the castle. For a while the danger is forgotten after he enters Madeline's room. And yet even here we do have uneasy reminders, and before long the feeling of menace returns with even greater intensity. The hero grows pale and cold and simultaneously the moon wanes. Its setting is the signal for a terrible storm with all the powers of darkness and the violence of the elements. From now on danger threatens and grows continually. Breathlessly we follow the progress of the lovers down the stairs and out the door. They escape from the inmates of the castle, but only to be engulfed in a storm. The climax is past, and we know that Porphyro and Madeline are gone forever. Then the emotion relaxes and the fate of Angela and the Beadsman, connected closely by the tale with the lovers in life and death, brings the poem to a

close as quiet as its beginning. The tragedy of Porphyro and Madeline, so dramatic in its suspense is over, and a quiet calm descends. Death, the all powerful, has come to young and old, and the "weariness, the fever, and the fret", are ended. Thus "The Eve of St. Agnes" is outstanding for the firmness with which the story is controlled from start to finish, and in the verse tale as well as in the ode Keats has achieved that mastery of form which is the hall mark of mature poetry.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by **Paul J. Clifford, S.J.** has been read and approved by three members of the Department of **English**

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Aug. 26, 1952
Date

John B. Conrath, S.J.
Signature of Adviser