

Paper assignment #2

Write a 4-page paper on Keats's "Ode to Psyche"

Background information:

Keats's ode does not follow but does owe a debt to the traditional story of Cupid and Psyche. This story, a source for various writers, can be traced back to the Golden Ass of Apuleius, of which it is the allegorical centerpiece. That version itself shows an indebtedness to a Hellenistic original, while blending in elements of fable and folk-tale.

In summary:

The beautiful Psyche, daughter of a king, is beloved by Cupid, the god of love. He visits her nightly, but remains invisible, forbidding her to attempt to see him. One night she takes a lamp and looks at him as he sleeps, and, agitated by his beauty, she lets fall a drop of oil on his shoulder. He leaves in wrath, leaving her solitary and remorseful. Psyche regains Cupid and his love only after painful wanderings and trials.

You may focus on whatever most interests you in the poem. Below are questions to get you started in your thinking. Remember, the questions are only to help you get going; you needn't address them all in your paper.

Points to Ponder:

"Psyche" is both a mythological character and a name for what? What are some possible reasons a poet might address an ode to "Psyche" or "the psyche"? How does the speaker's relationship to Psyche and Cupid change over the course of the poem, and what do you make of that change? How would compare the bower of the first stanza to that of the last stanza?

How might you relate Psyche's situation, as it is described in lines 36-42, with Keats's own situation? This is the first of Keats's great odes. How might the speaker's claims and intentions, as they are described from line 43 on, reflect Keats's own intentions as a poet?

What themes do "Ode to Psyche" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn" have in common?

How would you compare "Ode to Psyche" to other poems we've read? For instance, how would you compare its subject matter, narrative trajectory, poetic form, and diction with that of poems like Wordsworth's "Solitary Reaper" or "Tintern Abbey," or a poem like Coleridge's "Lime-Tree Bower"? How would you compare its representation of nature or the speaker's relationship to nature to that of any of those other poems? You might find it useful, by the way, to look at Keats's letters to Reynolds and Woodhouse, pages 1016-19 in the Wu anthology.