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ENGLISH

ON FIRST LOOKING INTO CHAPMAN'S HOMER



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‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’, by John Keats

‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’ was a sonnet written by John Keats after he stayed up all night enthralled by George Chapman’s translation of Homer’s *The Iliad* and *Odyssey*. It is about the (metaphorical) journey Keats went through reading these translations and the profound effect they had on him. It is thus a poem about the moving effects of art and literature, and how transformative events can happen internally and not just externally.

Important Background

John Keats was an English Romantic poet. Romanticism was a movement in the late 18th through to the 19th century that emphasised emotional experience and developed largely as a response to the scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment period. Romanticism opposed many conservative and traditional ideas, both in art and society. Whereas realism and classical notions of art tried to depict the world as concretely and as accurately as possible, romanticism emphasised the individual’s subjective consciousness and perception. This notion is evident in this poem, as rather than depicting some event or voyage Keats appropriates a number of historical and contemporary allusions as a metaphor for his own intense and emotional experience reading the translation.

On the other hand, *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* are the two most enduring works of Homer, a poet from Ancient Greece. These two epic poems narrated the journey of kings and men across islands and into battle with mythical creatures and raging voyages. Probably the most well-known and enduring legacy from these works is the Battle of Troy, described by Homer in *The Iliad*.

Analysis

The first thing to mention is the structure of the poem. Keats wrote it as a **Petrarchan sonnet**, which has the typical pattern of an octave and a sestet, whereby the sestet resolves or concludes a problem or setting introduced in the octave. In this poem, Keats tells us that he has often heard people speak of Homer’s works but despite being so well-read and having experienced so much else he had never **“breathe[d] its pure serene”**. However the sestet begins with **‘Then’**, signalling a shift after hearing **“Chapman speak out loud and bold”**. This shift is also referred to in poetry as a ‘volta’. While there are no shortage of devices in the poem that suggest discovery and change has been made, the *volta* is a particularly significant one as the poem is built around this very structure of a problem which gets resolved. It thus occupies a silent position in Keats’ work, and the thesis of the poem is the profound impact Chapman’s translation has on him.

The rhyming scheme is also common to a Petrarchan sonnet though it does not carry any profound significance as the *volta* does. However alongside Keats' use of alliteration (evident within the metonymical "**eagle eyes**", for example), it reinforces the aesthetic quality of the poem. Considering the poem is intended to reflect the emotional intensity of Keats' reading of Chapman, the alliteration and rhyme marry with the poem's intention to convey the beauty and "**pure serene**" of Homer's epic poetry. The same point can be made with reference to the pentameter Keats uses.

Beyond the structure though, there are a few different ways to approach discovery in this poem. The first is by drawing on the parallelism Keats makes between his experience reading Chapman's translations with the allusions to significant historical discoveries. This reinforces the significance of the discovery for Keats: for him, it is comparable (through simile) to being "**some watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken**" or "**like stout Cortes when with eagle eyes / He stared at the Pacific**". These refer to the discovery of Uranus and the Pacific Ocean, respectively. There is thus a three pronged parallelism happening in this poem: not only is Keats feeling like these explorers or astronomers, but the work which evokes these feelings within him is similarly about epic journeys and discoveries.

1. What sorts of effects can discoveries have on us? How do they change our attitude, perceptions and ideas? Are they always positive of the sort Keats finds here, or can they have adverse consequences as well?
2. The poem turns on the word 'Then', when Keats explores the shift in his thinking. Do discoveries always happen like this – suddenly and powerfully – or can they be slow and gradual?

But beyond Keats' actual discoveries in the poem there are a couple of other ways of observing discovery. For example, Keats writes "**like stout Cortes when with eagle eyes / He stared at the Pacific**". Historically however it was de Balboa who was the first European to sight the Pacific Ocean. Does such an error reflect on the process of discovery as fallible? This is particularly interesting when one considers the possibility that the error was pointed out *to* Keats, but decided against fixing it for the sake of preserving the ten syllables in the line.

1. Can discoveries be *wrong*? If a discovery is wrong, is it a discovery at all or something else? Or is a discovery defined by the effect something has on a person when the person *thinks* it is a new piece of knowledge?
2. But scaling it back a little, how does this reflect the imperfection of discoveries? For example, a discovery might not be *wrong* but it might be incomplete or not convey all the information. This can often be just as damaging (think, for example, how problematic rumours can be when

you've got only one part of the story). Does it matter if discoveries are imperfect? Does it matter here? What about in general?

The other aspect of discovery you can discuss is the relationship between internal and external modes of discovery. This poem is themed around a large number of external discoveries and journeys: *Odyssey* and *The Iliad* are stories about monsters and voyages, and Keats himself not only uses a number of real-life discoveries but also a number of concrete symbols, such as “**the realms of gold**”. But these all describe non-physical things. The aforementioned ‘realms of gold’ (and following lines) are metaphors for Keats’ previous experiences and knowledge with literature, and this extended metaphor continues describing an expanse he has only been told of: Homer’s “**demesne**”. All of these are physical and concrete symbols for what are essentially Keats’ private sensations having read Chapman’s translation. This ties in however to the general Romantic notion of the supreme significance of the individual and the individual’s own aesthetic experience rather than trying to portray something objective or lifelike.

1. Which kinds of discoveries are more powerful or transformative? External ones that affect our world and the people or things in it, or ones that we perceive within ourselves?
2. Can it be suggested that all discoveries are internal? That even though external things might prompt them, nothing has any sort of actual significance until a conscious mind looks upon it and *gives* it significance? For example, the Pacific Ocean was discovered, not invented. That means it was already there. But until Cortes (or de Balboa) laid eyes on it, it didn’t have the effect Keats describes here. What does that tell you?

Discovery As Turning Point

We have come to expect that discovery can bring about a changed perception of the world. This is clearly illustrated by the sonnet form in the following poem by John Keats and also in the extract from *Pride and Prejudice* that appears below.

Text 1: *On first looking into Chapman's Homer*

In October, 1816, Keats was introduced to George Chapman's translation of Homer's *The Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Keats keenly read the translation late into the night and in the early hours of the morning composed this sonnet.

On First Looking into Chapman's Homer

*Much have I travelled in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortes when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific – and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise –
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.*

Read the poem through and then in pairs discuss the meaning of the title, the first quatrain, the second quatrain and then the sestet.

If there are any details/ words/ names that you don't understand then ask other class members or your teacher.

Read the poem again, this time so that the octet leads up to the turn "Then" (l.6)

Discuss with your partner why and how this poem can be seen as expressing the sense of wonder with discovery.

Text 1

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 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

The process of discovering

Discovery

The effect of discovery

The poem begins with a metaphor of extensive exploration of the arts and ideas.

The metaphor of exploration is sustained in the second quatrain and the significance of Homer's poems is conveyed by:

- the alliteration of the extended 'w' sound in 'one wide'
- the four heavily accented syllables in quick succession
- followed by the word 'expanse'.

The familiar, everyday diction of this line contrasts with the archaic and conventionally poetic phrases:

- bards in fealty to Apollo hold
- deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne.

Read each of the comments about some of the technical aspects of the poem and use these to draw conclusions about the nature of discovery and how we understand the idea. The first comment is done for you as an example.

The metaphor of travel through "realms of gold" suggests that discovery occurs in areas of fertile ground. New insights come when the mind is ready, when it has the knowledge and understanding to recognise what is special and different. The persona of the poem has read widely and is discerning enough to comprehend and appreciate that he has found something momentous.

or

Write a paragraph with the topic sentence: Keats' poem "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer captures the excitement of discovery".

The last word of the poem 'Darien' seems to enact descent into silence by its:

- half rhyme with 'men'.
- pitch falling through its vowels [a, i, ə] and through this fall, its
- contrast with the word peak suggesting the exhilaration of discovery.