O soft embalmer of the still midnight,
   Shutting, with careful fingers and benign,
Our gloom-pleas'd eyes, embower'd from the light,
   Enshaded in forgetfulness divine:
O soothest Sleep! if so it please thee, close
   In midst of this thine hymn my willing eyes,
Or wait the "Amen," ere thy poppy throws
   Around my bed its lulling charities.
Then save me, or the passed day will shine
Upon my pillow, breeding many woes,—
   Save me from curious Conscience, that still lords
Its strength for darkness, burrowing like a mole;
   Turn the key deftly in the oiled wards,
And seal the hushed Casket of my Soul.
Explore the ways in which sleep is presented in “To Sleep” and one other poem.

You must discuss relevant contextual factors.

Keats’ sonnet “To Sleep” personifies sleep as both a lover providing a beautiful experience and a god to be prayed to. The emotional relief that sleep provides is explored in these gentle lines but there is also a darker connection to be made between sleep and death. Unsurprisingly, given the difficulties Keats was facing in the spring of 1819 when this poem was written, Keats craves sleep. The very act of writing the poem could be taken to suggest that he was finding it difficult to sleep at this time.

Essentially, the rhyme scheme suggests that this is a Shakespearean sonnet comprising an octet and a sestet. Traditionally, sonnets are love poems and are addressed to a particular, usually beautiful, person who is desired. Here Keats personifies sleep as the “soft embalmer” and desires a physical relationship with the “careful fingers”. The object of the sonnet is cast as gentle and delicate. The use of “embowered” also brings the notion of love to mind; Shakespeare’s love struck Titania commands her fairies to lead Bottom to her “bower”. The initial apostrophe “O” and the later imperatives “save, “turn” and “seal”, imply that the lover is being gently requested to comply with the desire expressed. Sleep, then is presented as a desirable object of devotion being entreated to satisfy the “willing eyes”.

We should note that the sonnet lacks the customary Shakespearean ending of a rhyming couplet. Indeed the sestet is oddly rhymed bcefef and there is no obvious change in direction at the volta “Then…”. This may well indicate that that the request for sleep has not been answered and that Keats is still awake at the end of the poem.

Perhaps more obviously, sleep is personified as a godlike figure. The semantic field of religion with phrases such as “divine”, “save me” and “soul” is called upon throughout. Moreover, Keats himself refers to the poem as a form of prayer, a “hymn” and its ending an “Amen”. Keats is asking to be
saved from the traditional enemies of Christianity, “darkness” and “woes”, by “forgetfulness divine”. Despite the fact that the Romantics, including Keats, disliked the notion of organised religion, we witness here an appeal to a mystical being who is addressed in the religious terms of prayer so familiar to a 19th century audience. Sleep, as god, cannot be commanded; this is borne out by the gentle use of imperatives and the qualifying “if so it please thee”.

Sleep is also portrayed as the provider of emotional relief. Something that in the spring of 1819 Keats was sorely in need of. His brother, Tom, had died at the end of the previous year and he, himself, was not physically robust and was prone to bouts of depression. He uses a simile to describe “curious Conscience” “burrowing like a mole” to suggest the animalistic and destructive nature often encountered in one’s own mind. He seeks “forgetfulness” here, so that he can escape the harsh realities of life. This is not an uncommon desire often expressed in literature; we might, for example, link this to Hamlet’s desire to avoid, by sleeping, “the heartache” and “the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to”.

Hamlet, of course, was referring to the sleep of death but Keats does not seem to be committed to this sort of ending just yet. Or is he? The “embalmer” and the “shutting” of eyes are both traditionally encountered post mortem and Keats does suggest that sleep might not arrive until the final “Amen”. Addressing sleep as the “embalmer” serves immediately to link sleep with death. Of course, the embalmer would be a familiar figure to Keats in his professional life as a surgeon. In fact, most of the inhabitants of the pre-antibiotic nineteenth century would have been in close proximity to death on many occasions. The embalmer’s key function was to prevent further decay; perhaps Keats is asking sleep to come to prevent further deterioration of his own physical health.

The voice in the poem speaks from what would seem to be a recumbent position with the mention of “bed” and “pillow”. Perhaps this is one of Keats less good days and he craves sleep as a respite from pain. As well as the more sinister connotations, the pre modifier “soft” before “embalmer” implies that sleep is a gentle process and the morpheme “balm” suggests medicinal, curative and pleasant ointments.

There is also mention of the “poppy”. We know that Keats sought to escape from physical and perhaps sometimes mental pain by using opium. In fact, a recent biographer has suggested that, like Coleridge and Shelley, he was an addict. Whether or not this is true, sleep is here associated with the “lulling charities” of the poppy, something to help “save” and “seal” the “Casket of my
soul”. To read “casket” as “coffin” is tempting but would be anachronistic, since this meaning emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century in America. However, a casket holds something of value and sleep is being invited to keep this something safe. We also know that inspiration is problematic for Keats at this time; he has just given up on his epic “Hyperion”. The “poppy” and the sleep that it induced were often seen by the Romantics as a way of connecting with the mystical to encourage creativity. Keats may be seeking sleep here as the saviour of his poetry to banish doubts and difficulties involved in writing.

Fittingly, this poem has a soft and gentle tone. There is significant sibilance throughout, for example, “O soothes Sleep! If so it please thee, close” and several examples of enjambement (lines 5, 7 and 9). This, combined with the absence of light inherent in the imagery of “gloom”, “embowered” and “enshaded” make it a soporific read. The very substance of the poem, the lines of almost entirely regular iambic feet and the alternate rhyme scheme appears to be “lulling” us to sleep.

Sleep here is clearly prized and respected as a lover a deity and perhaps even a doctor. The repeated prefix of “em” coupled with the “en” of “enshaded” give a sense that sleep can embrace its subject. It is a refuge from the trials of life and if it cannot be achieved, the writing of poetry will encourage sleep “In midst of this thine hymn” or take its place. We know, for instance that “On first looking into Chapman’s Homer” was written in the early hours. One hopes that Keats found rest and comfort and managed to write himself “To Sleep”.

Task

Include comments on:

“La Belle Dame sans Merci”

Use the note below to add points about LBDSM to the essay you have just read.

LBDSM is different in form - ballad - recounting a story involving sleep rather than addressing a personified sleep - often ballads warn against …
Knight’s experience of sleep is not positive - sleep not as comforter but bringer of nightmares

The effects of sleep leave knight pale, haggard and woe-begone - he “ails”

Sleep transports knight into a nightmare world where he now appears to exist - the opposite of the “soft embalmer”

Sleep has caused knight to be feverish and withering with a lily on his brow - possible dead or approaching death

Sleep associated with the female here but not soft and careful - instead like a spell from fairy-like and sinister being “and there she lulled me asleep”

The Elfin grot can be compared to the “embowered” “enshaded” imagery in “To Sleep”

Cyclical nature of poem - trapped in sleep?

Knight submits to and is controlled by LBD - note change in pronouns

Sleep initially seen as a pleasant thing but then turns sour

**Context points to consider:**

Romanticism’s interest in the medieval and the supernatural

Natural imagery associated with the writings of the Romantic poets

Gothic elements present

Sickness and symptoms of TB relate to Keats’ own life