

Topics for discussion:

1. There is a significant ambiguity about the striking phrase “the feel of not to feel it” in *In Drear-Nighted December*. It could refer to the existence of the tree and brook or the anguish of the boy and girl. To which do you think it refers and why? The line is reminiscent of the line ascribed to the soul in Marvell’s *Dialogue*: “I feel, that cannot feel, the pain.” Both engage paradox. How do they differ and why?

2. In *Ode to a Nightingale*, what is the meaning of “numbness pains my sense”? Can numbness be painful? What figure of speech is “drowsy numbness”? Is the numbness sleepy? Envy, we know, is a bad thing, but why is its alternative “too much happiness” and what is it too much for? What is the progression of thought in the stanzas? What is the force of the exclamation “Already with thee!” Is the poet with the bird or does it just mark excitement at the possibility, recalling the exclamation point in Donne’s *Elegy XIX*, “Full nakedness!”, where the mistress is not yet naked. Why is the bird “Immortal”? Surely, Nightingales die. How do you interpret the feeling inspired by the bird’s song, “Now more than ever seems it rich to die . . .”? In the bible Ruth did not stand in tears amid the alien corn but chose and bravely endured to forsake her idolatrous people. Why has Keats invoked her, only to change the story? Why is “alien corn” [corn = grain in British English] a better choice than, say, “alien land” (leaving considerations of rhyme out of account).

3. From something offered by a creature of nature, the poet turns in *Ode on a Grecian Urn* to a work of human artifice. Is he after the same thing as before? Why is the urn likened to an “unravished” bride? Are brides ravished? Who or what will eventually ravish the urn? Not silence or slow time; the urn has been adopted by them. What the urn depicts is not allied to slow time; it is removed from time altogether. How important is this in the development of the poem? In what sense is the urn a sylvan historian? Why can a work of visual art tell a tale more sweetly than a work of verbal art? The figures on the urn escape time, slow or rapid, by escaping life and warmth altogether; are they to be envied for avoiding disappointments and having no need to grieve? The town is not on the urn but surmised by the poet. It is “desolate”, even as the magic casements surmised by the poet in response to the nightingale’s song were “forlorn”. Do the two poems share a pattern of development, then? What is the force of “peaceful citadel” and “cold pastoral”—akin to the nightingale’s “plaintive anthem”, each an oxymoron? The poem introduces its conclusion with the notion that eternity “teases us out of thought as does eternity”. It is a good thing to be teased out of thought or not? Is the famous motto, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” teasing us? The quotation marks in some editions extend only around the motto; in other editions, on equally good authority, they extend to the end of the poem. Where would you place them and why?

4. *To Autumn* relies predominantly on visual images in the first two stanzas and upon auditory images in the last. Why do you think the shift occurs? Is the ambiguity of the phrase “the maturing sun” (it may be maturing, it may be maturing other things) of value to the poem? The bees have been deluded in the last lines of stanza one; are they the better for their delusion? The harvest in stanza two does not simply destroy what is ripe; it creates a “store”, even as mankind creates a store, and carelessly “spares” the life of flowers. Are these images just or are we meant to share the bee’s illusion? The gathering swallows of the last line are in preparation to fly away, abandoning the cold for southern warmth. What comment does this imply upon the value of Autumn’s music?