

Sample Poem

Here is a sample of what the site has to offer. First, a famous poem, “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” by the English poet John Keats. Then some commentary by me, with the aim of helping you understand and enjoy the poem better. The commentary is brief and to the point. It’s meant to be that way, because it’s up to *you*, not me, to “get” the spirit of the poem.

On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer (1816)

John Keats (English, 1795-1821)

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 Cortez 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.

NOTES:

“Chapman’s Homer”: George Chapman (ca. 1559-1634) was an Elizabethan poet and playwright. He is best remembered for his translations into English of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

It was Balboa, not Cortez, who discovered the Pacific Ocean. Is Keats taking advantage of poetic license here? Or is it a faulty grasp of history? Who knows? But *does it matter to the poem?* Balboa and his

men first saw the Pacific Ocean from a mountain in Darien (a region in Panama). Keats did get Darien right.

This is an excellent example of a sonnet: written in rhyme and in iambic pentameter (i.e., having five diH-DAH beats in each line, with some variations). It has an eight-verse introduction (rhyme scheme ABBAABBA in this sonnet) and a six-verse conclusion (CDCDCD).

“bards”: poets, especially ancient poets.

“western islands”: to the ancient Greek mind the earthly paradise was considered to lie on islands far to the west of the Greek homeland.

Keats is speaking figuratively, of course.

“Apollo”: (pronounced uh-PAH-lō) the ancient Greek god of (among other things) poetry,

“demesne”: (pronounced dē-MĒN) domain.

“serene”: poetic serenity. Although “serene” is an adjective, in archaic usage it can also be a noun meaning “a serene state or condition.”