

Isabella; or the Pot of Basil

by John Keats.

(From a story in *Boccaccio's Decameron*)

Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel!
Lorenzo, a young palmer in Love's eye!
They could not in the self-same mansion dwell
Without some stir of heart, some malady;
They could not sit at meals but feel how well
It soothed each to be the other by;
They could not, sure, beneath the same roof sleep
But to each other dream, and nightly weep.

With every morn their love grew tenderer,
With every eve deeper and tenderer still;
He might not in house, field, or garden stir,
But her full shape would all his seeing fill;
And his continual voice was pleasanter
To her, than noise of trees or hidden rill;
Her lute-string gave an echo of his name,
She spoilt her half-done broidery with the same.

He knew whose gentle hand was at the latch,
Before the door had given her to his eyes;
And from her chamber window he would catch
Her beauty farther than the falcon spies;
And constant as her vespers would he watch,
Because her face was turn'd to the same skies;
And with sick longing all the night outwear,
To hear her morning-step upon the stair.

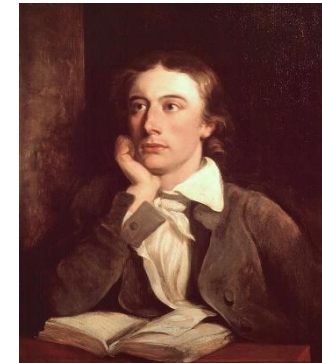
A whole long month of May in this sad plight
Made their cheeks paler by the break of June:
"Tomorrow will I bow to my delight

Tomorrow will I ask my lady's boon. "-
O may I never see another night,
Lorenzo, if they lips breathe not love's tune." -
So spake they to their pillows; but alas,
Honeyless days and days did he let pass;

Until sweet Isabella's untouch'd cheek
Fell sick within the rose's just domain,
Fell thin as a young mother's, who doth seek
By every lull to cool her infant's pain:
"How ill she is," said he, "I may not speak,
And yet I will, and tell my love all plain:
If looks speak love-laws, I will drink her tears,
And at the least 'twill startle off her cares."

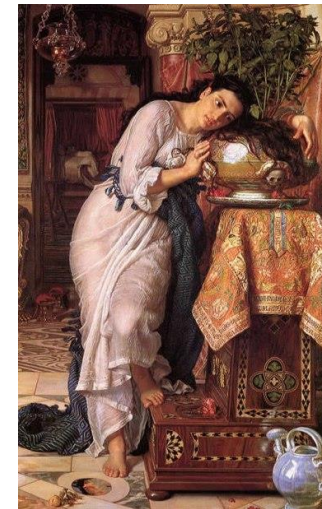
So said he one fair morning, and all day
His heart beat awfully against his side;
And to his heart he inwardly did pray
For power to speak; but still the ruddy tide
Stifled his voice, and puls'd resolve away -
Fever'd his high conceit of such a bride,
Yet brought him to the meekness of a child:
Alas" when passion is both meek and wild!

So once more he had wak'd and anguished
A dreary night of love and misery,
If Isabel's quick eye had not been wed
To every symbol on his forehead high;
She saw it waxing very pale and dead,
And straight all flush'd; so, lisped tenderly,
"Lorenzo!"—here she ceas'd her timid quest,
But in her tone and look he read the rest.



John Keats

(b. London 1795. D. Rome, 1821)
Painting by William Hilton (1786-1839)



Isabella and the Pot of Basil

William Holman Hunt, 1868,

Founder of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood
Laing Art Gallery: Newcastle Upon Tyne

Hunt began the painting whilst staying in Florence.