This essay takes as its basis four odes by John Keats and treats them as a sequence of poems in which he develops, discusses and elaborates the themes of permanence and transience, both at the level of an individual human life and in a larger, transgenerational, cosmic view of time. Underlying the four poems – “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, “Ode on Melancholy”, “To Autumn” and “Ode to a Nightingale” – is the idea of fullness or satisfaction, an intense climax of experience preceding the melancholia that inevitably attends the decline from such a heightened moment of experience. The pattern, I suggest, is founded on the sexual experience: increasing excitement and stimulation leading to a climax followed by a post-coital decline which Keats describes in various guises in each of the poems. In addition to this appearance of the orgasm in their structure, sexual imagery is prevalent throughout the odes.

While the deployment of devices and images in poetry may be a deliberate choice on the poet’s part, analysis of a collection of works by an author reveals underlying structural features that recur throughout the work. The orgasm is one such feature prominent in Keats’ imagination. Individual sexual images may be intentional, but the structure of the odes points to a less overt occurrence of these sexual structures. Keats wrote the four odes I will be considering during 1818, the year after he met Fanny Brawne, with whom he immediately fell in love. Moreover, some critics have suggested it was during this time that Keats became aware that he was suffering from tuberculosis and that he would not live very much longer.1 Biographical interpretation of these poems does not, in itself, offer much insight into them, but Keats’ emotional life and his experience of illness must have influenced his psyche and may have produced the fascination with questions of presence and absence.

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permanence and transience, which are so often raised in his poetry, and for which the orgasm, as a transient event, is an apt metaphor.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud wrote that the instinct to pursue sexual pleasure is counterbalanced by the “instinctual repression upon which is based all that is most precious in human civilization”. The Freudian analysis draws the orgasm on to a broader field where sexual tension can be seen as a constant and decisive element in the unconscious mind. The “Pleasure Principle”, a component of this essential human impulse, is inevitably present in art because it is part of unconscious life. Indeed, it is in art that civilized perfection and the expression of a naked instinct for carnality are forced into an uncomfortable cohabitation. The tension between a high level of stylistic control and the inescapable sexual element in these odes illustrates the point. The transient physicality of the sexual experiences is in conflict with a larger view of time and the eternal existence of art both as an abstract concept and as a collection of individual artistic events.

The overt themes of permanence and transience are explored in critical studies that draw comparisons between Keats’ poetry and his philosophy. They suggest that Keats held a single, coherent view of the world. Such conclusions are, in many cases, highly plausible, and the famous aphorism that concludes “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’ – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”, is an illustration of Keats’ interest in aesthetics and larger philosophy. But the couplet is couched in ambiguous language, since “beauty” could denote either the abstract beauty of art or the more fundamental beauty of sexual tension and climax, experienced both internally in the images depicted on the urn and externally in the poet’s imaginative participation in them. A discussion of sexual imagery in the poems does not preclude the application of more elaborate philosophical patterning, but suggests that far from writing a treatise in these odes, Keats was giving expression to a tension between a primal sexual drive and a competing instinct to control this drive.

The general mood of uncertainty and dissatisfaction in Keats’ poetry results from this tension. In the sonnet “Bright Star”, for example, he