

# On First Looking into Chapman's Homer



## POEM TEXT

- 1 Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
- 2 And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
- 3 Round many western islands have I been
- 4 Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
- 5 Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
- 6 That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
- 7 Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
- 8 Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
- 9 Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
- 10 When a new planet swims into his ken;
- 11 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
- 12 He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men
- 13 Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
- 14 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

which Homer sang. This has a powerful effect on the speaker, which in turn makes the speaker sing the praises of literature itself. Literature, argues the poem, occupies an important role in society and, furthermore, facilitates a kind of imaginative travel through time and space.

The poem is set up as an [extended metaphor](#) that characterizes the speaker—who has been reading Chapman's Homer—as an explorer (“like stout Cortez”), bravely discovering new imaginative worlds through the power of literature. Through Homer's writing—via Chapman's translation—the speaker is allowed to visit a different time, culture, and location that otherwise would be inaccessible. Through the example of the speaker, the poem suggests that all readers can use literature to travel in a similar way.

The extended metaphor hasn't been selected at random. It specifically relates to the kind of things Homer sang about in his poetry: travel, exploration, discovery, and so on. Just as Odysseus, for example, sailed around the Greek islands in Homer's [The Odyssey](#), the speaker explores these worlds through Homer's writing. Literature, then, brings its characters' experiences alive in the minds of readers, so much so that readers *themselves* feel that they're having those very experiences.

Of course, this exploration is only possible because Homer was so good at bringing this world to life. His skill as a poet does no less than ensure that something of the classical Greek world survives for posterity. In other words, Keats's poem demonstrates the importance of poetry itself, even beyond readers' experiences—it argues that poetry records culture and, indeed, keeps it alive.

That said, it's only through George Chapman's English translation of Homer that the speaker is able to “breathe” the “pure serene” of Homer's world. Before then, the speaker had only been “told” about Homer's “demesne.” The word demesne refers to Homer's kingdom, meaning both the geographical locations in which his work is set *and* the more immediate “kingdom” of the book itself. That is, the speaker had heard about the magical power of Homer's literature—but until the speaker had read Chapman's translation, that power had remained dormant, trapped within the inaccessible Greek that the speaker couldn't read. So the poem is also making the point that literature is not a static, unchangeable object. It, too, is alive and requires upkeep through care and attention. Chapman's efforts at translation have opened up Homer's literary realm for others to explore, particularly those who would have struggled to read it in the original language. In other words, literature's power is not a given—it depends on the imaginative work of people themselves.



## SUMMARY

The speaker has traveled through lands full of treasure and visited numerous countries and kingdoms. The speaker has sailed to islands in the west, where poets are loyal to Greek god Apollo.

The speaker had heard a lot about the imaginative world presided over by the genius Greek poet, Homer. But this world was never truly brought to life until the speaker read the translations of George Chapman, which seemed to speak to him loudly and proudly.

Reading Chapman's translation of Homer's work, the speaker felt like an astronomer witnessing a new planet slide into view. This experience was also like the kind of awe felt by the explorer Cortez when he looked out at the Pacific Ocean, when he and the men under his command fell silent, standing on a mountain peak in the Darien region of Panama.



## THEMES



### THE POWER OF LITERATURE

John Keats's “On First Looking into Chapman's Homer” is a [sonnet](#) that argues for the transportive power of literature. Through reading George Chapman's translation of the classical Greek poet, Homer, the speaker travels via his or her imagination through the Greek world of

By the end of the poem, then, the speaker is completely in awe of the power of literature. That's why the speaker feels like an explorer who is struck "silent" by the sight before them—Chapman's Homer seems to be a living, breathing world, not just words on a page.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-4

*Much have I travell'd 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.*

From its title, the poem makes clear that its subject is literature. Indeed, the title, which references looking into a book (Chapman's translation of Homer), suggests that the poem will specifically deal with an individual's experience of reading literature. This means that, though the first line doesn't explicitly state that it is [metaphorical](#), there is already a sense from the title alone that the "realms of gold" through which the speaker has traveled relate to literature rather than actual places.

The first four lines are, in essence, the speaker's account of their literary reading to date. The speaker has experienced a range of literature's treasures ("gold"). Indeed, line 4's mention of "bards" loyal to the classical Greek god Apollo indicates that the speaker has experience of specifically *classical* literature, the category that Homer's works fall into. The point of these lines, then, is to set the speaker up not as a literary novice, but as someone who has read widely. This allows the speaker to then demonstrate just how powerful this particular translation of Homer is (this turn comes in line 7). So, the first four lines work to establish the speaker's literary credentials.

The other important function of the first four lines is to set up the extended metaphor that enables the poem to make its point about Chapman's Homer in an exciting and visual way. The speaker claims to be a traveler not because of having taken actual trips around the world, but because literature itself is a way of imaginative travel—through both time and space. The poem takes this metaphorical exploration and runs with it throughout, [alluding](#) to common knowledge about actual explorations of the so-called "New World" (the Americas and Oceania seen from the point of view of Western Europeans).

These four lines all share a common [consonantal](#) sound, the /l/:

Much have I travell'd 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.

This soft repeating sound has a luxurious quality, reflecting the idea that treasure that is important to the poem. Of course, this treasure is not literal "gold" but is rather intellectual and emotional, the mental rewards of engaging literature with the imagination.

If lines 1 and 2 deal with the benefits of literature for the individual—the rewards of "gold" and experiencing "goodly states and kingdoms"—lines 3 and 4 gesture more towards the role of literature throughout human civilization. In Homer's time, of course, literature was a primarily spoken/sung activity—not written. Poetry and music occupied a central role in Ancient Greek society; they were important to communal ceremonies, cultural understanding, and collective memory. The "bards" of Ancient Greece are loyal to Apollo because Apollo is the Greek God of art. Though these lines are by and large positive about the speaker's experiences with literature to date, the idea that the speaker has been going "round" these "western islands" suggests that the speaker has not quite *landed* on these islands so far. That is, the speaker has looked at them from afar, but no translation has yet truly brought them to life. That, of course, is where Chapman's Homer comes in.

There is some debate about why Keats referred to these metaphorical islands as "western." The islands that Homer sang about are, in fact, to the east of Greece. It's unlikely to be a mistake, so it could be an [allusion](#) to the canon of specifically western literature, of which Homer is considered a kind of founding father. Or Keats might have made the choice in order to aid the poem's extended metaphor, which specifically rests on the westwards travels of explorers from Europe to the Americas and conjures the [archetype](#) of the mysterious west.

### LINES 5-6

*Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;*

Lines 5 and 6 expand on the first four lines. While the opening of the poem describes the speaker's general experiences with literature *as a reader*, lines 5 and 6 hone in on the speaker's experiences with reading Homer's works specifically. Here, the speaker relates having been often "told" of Homer's "demesne." The latter word refers to both the geographical location of Homer's stories—Greece and the surrounding islands—and the sense of Homer's literary output constituting a kind of kingdom as well. Each book of Homer's writing (which was spoken or sung originally) is like its own little world, waiting for readers to come and explore. The speaker characterizes this body of work as "one wide expanse," which refers both to the seas through Homer's characters sail *and* the extent of Homer's literary achievements.

Line 5 can be interpreted in two ways. Either the speaker has

been told by other people about Homer's literature, but has yet to experience it, or the speaker has read Homer before without the work truly coming to life. That is, perhaps the speaker has read other translations before Chapman's, and these failed to move from "telling" the speaker about Homer's world to making the world seem real. This distinction even anticipates one of the clichés taught in contemporary creative writing classes—that writers should "show" and not "tell."

Line 6 characterizes Homer as "deep-brow'd." This description is about Homer's depth and strength of intellect, depicting the poet concentrating in the creative act. It suggests the kind of effort required to produce literature that comes to life. The [alliteration](#) between "deep-brow'd" and "demesne" links Homer's kingdom specifically to his intellectual activity. That is, the world that Homer "ruled" is the one that he constructed in his imagination—which others, like the speaker, may now experience.

## LINES 7-10

*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;*

Unusually for a Petrarchan [sonnet](#), line 7 marks the beginning of the poem's turn, two lines earlier than is typical of the form. Here, the poem marks a dividing line between the speaker's reading experiences before and after encountering Chapman's Homer. Whereas the speaker had a read widely and been "told" about Homer—either by fellow readers or other translations—it wasn't until Chapman's translation that the speaker was able to breathe the "pure serene" of Homer's writing. This translation, the speaker says, specifically manages to bring Homer's world to imaginative life.

The [assonance](#) and [consonance](#) in line 7 bring this idea of immersion and serenity alive, the long /e/ and /r/ sounds making the line read slowly, mimicking the way that a reader might get pulled into a particularly effective piece of literature:

Yet did I never breathe its pure serene

Contrasting with other translations, perhaps, Chapman's Homer speaks "loud and bold." The assonance is deliberately obvious here, turning up the poem's "volume." The [enjambment](#) from line 7 to 8 also sets up a momentary tension that makes this phrase seem all the more prominent.

Line 9 marks the poem's "official" turn, according to the usual form of a Petrarchan sonnet; though there is no stanza break, the rhyme scheme makes it clear that the poem is divided into octave and [sestet](#). Here, the speaker describes the feeling that reading Chapman's Homer created. It is an emotional response of wonderment, compared through [simile](#) to looking out on the night sky and discovering a new planet. There is a sense of

rewarded effort, the astronomer's patience being made worth it by the appearance of the planet—which "swims" in order to keep with the water-based references earlier in the poem, which relate specifically to Homer's work. This moment is also probably an [allusion](#) the discovery of the planet Uranus by William Herschel in 1781.

It's also interesting to think about which is the active element in the relationship described in these lines. Though the [extended metaphor](#) that runs throughout the poem describes the reader as a kind of explorer, the verb that ushers in the discovery here belongs to the planet, not to the reader/speaker. That is, the metaphorical discoverer of the planet doesn't take credit for what they've found—the planet is fully-formed, majestic, and, by chance or by its own choice, happens to come into the "watcher's" "ken" (view). So, following the metaphor, the world of Homer is a kind of beautiful presence that exists independently of this particular reader—but the reader is overjoyed to be in that presence, through the brilliance of Chapman's translation. In this sense, then, Keats slightly departs from the idea of the explorer-as-conqueror that was so integral to the colonial expansion of the European empires, and instead emphasizes the joy of discovery for its own sake. It's enough to see the beauty of the planet—the speaker doesn't need to rule it.

## LINES 11-14

*Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men  
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—  
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.*

Lines 11 to 14 use another [simile](#), this time more in keeping with the poem's [extended metaphor](#) of reading as a form of exploration.

Here, the poem [alludes](#) to the Spanish explorer Hernan Cortez, whose so-called exploration of the Americas ushered in the destruction of the Aztecs. However, this reference was a mistake on Keats's part—Vasco Nunez de Balboa was actually the first "explorer" to see the Pacific from the "New World." Charles Clarke, Keats's friend with whom the poet had been reading Chapman's Homer, pointed out the mistake—but it was left in to better fit the meter.

In these final lines, the speaker compares the experience of reading Chapman's Homer with a moment of discovery and astonishment. Whatever people might now think of colonialist exploration and expansion, there is no doubt that western explorers landing on the "New World" would have been amazed at the environment they found. Here, Cortez and his men are rendered speechless by what they see—the sudden expanse of the Pacific revealing itself as they reach a peak in the Darien mountain range (in the Panama region). The speaker is similarly astonished to suddenly witness an entire world unfold, one that is majestic and awe-inspiring: Homer's writing. The

way in which nature here makes people stop in their tracks also ties in with the Romantic idea of the sublime. The sublime is an experience of awe, but it doesn't shut out feelings of fear and terror. Essentially, it's a feeling that comes when people are in environments that suggest something far greater than themselves—the geological forces that create mountain ranges, for example. That's exactly what the reader/speaker of this poem wants from literature—for it to feel alive, immense, and full of the range of experience.

The mention of Cortez's "eagle eyes" emphasizes the importance of the eyes in the act of reading; indeed, line 7 gestures to the slow breathing that comes with reading and line 14 expresses the silence of a reader immersed in a book. The (arguable) [alliteration](#) of "eagle eyes" also suggests precision and visual concentration. The [caesura](#) in line 12 (one of only two in the entire poem) also contributes to this sense of astonishment, the disrupted line suggesting the mind-blowing experience of looking out at the Pacific—and reading and understanding Homer's literature.

In a beautiful shift in the poem's sound, the last line itself seems to fall silent, mirroring the awe that the speaker feels in the presence of Chapman's Homer. The [consonance](#) of /l/ sounds in line 14 is gentle, combining with the subtle /n/ sounds to bring the poem to a quiet close that fits with a feeling of awe. The metrical shift in the first foot helps establish a sense of conclusion too, the [trochee](#) disrupting the [iambic pentameter](#) that has flowed throughout most of the poem:

Silent, | upon | a peak | in Dar- | -ien.



## SYMBOLS



### GOLD

The poem mentions "realms of gold" in the first line. In a literal sense, this is a reference to the activities of Western European explorers during the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries. These explorers, often sent by their monarchs, were not just "discovering" new lands, but trying to find new treasure too. Gold was, and of course still is, a precious commodity.

But in this poem, gold has little to do with the plunder and pillage of European expansionists. This is a different kind of treasure, one which takes place in the mind and is discovered through literature. Gold here symbolizes a kind of intellectual and emotional richness that comes with reading, and it speaks to the way that books can provide readers with knowledge and experience outside of their everyday lives.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "gold"



### PLANET

The appearance of the planet in line 10 symbolizes the awed reaction that Chapman's Homer has provoked in the speaker of the poem. Planets are, in and of themselves, awesome (in the true meaning of the word) things. That is, they represent barely knowable worlds and foreground the limits of humankind's understanding; put simply, they inspire awe.

To discover a planet, as the "watcher of the skies" does here, is a remarkable thing. But the image of an astronomer waiting for one to appear into his "ken" (his vision) also evokes the patience and perseverance that are needed to get the most meaning out of reading. Through the symbol of the planet, the poem seems to argue that through concentrated reading, people can experience entirely new worlds, and travel far beyond the limits of their own space and time.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "new planet"



## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) occurs only sparingly in "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." One important instance is in line 6, where the /d/ of "deep-brow'd" chimes with "demesne." Here, the poem is constructing its [extended metaphor](#), which is that reading is a kind of exploration. It is characterizing Homer not just as a poet, but as a kind of ruler of a literary kingdom. Such was his power as a poet that the worlds he built still exist, and they are still under his command. The term "deep-brow'd" portrays Homer as an intellectual thinker, plumbing the depths of the imagination for poetic material. The /d/ then links this creative effort with Homer's "demesne" (his kingdom). His poetic powers, then, create an entire new world that still exists long after Homer is gone.

Another example of sort of slant alliteration is in line 12 with "eagle eyes." Here, the speaker is likening the experience of reading Chapman's Homer to being an explorer chancing upon a new land. Cortez's "eagle eyes" suggest the motion of eyes focusing on what's before them—which in this [simile](#) is the Pacific Ocean seen from the awe-inspiring vantage point of the Darien mountain range. The two similar /e/ sounds, while not exactly the same, suggest focus and precision, which also gently hints at the way in which a reader's eyes hone in on the letters on a page.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "g"

- **Line 2:** "g," "s," "s"
- **Line 3:** "b"
- **Line 4:** "b"
- **Line 5:** "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 6:** "d," "d"
- **Line 11:** "e," "e"
- **Line 12:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 13:** "w," "w"
- **Line 14:** "p," "p"

## ALLUSION

For such a short poem, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" is packed full of [allusions](#). Of course, the whole poem from the title onward is itself tied a text outside of itself: the translation of works by the classical Greek poet Homer by Elizabethan writer George Chapman. Keats had probably read the translations of Homer by Alexander Pope, but it was Chapman—whose translations took more liberty with the original text in order to try and create a more immersive and entertaining literary world—that really brought Homer to life for the young poet.

Line 4 is an allusion to the greek god Apollo. Apollo is a key deity in classical mythology, and he is the god of poetry and art (among many other things!). The poets of old—the "bards"—were loyal to Apollo because they believed that he would aid them with their poetry, imbuing it with the divinity required to make it come alive (which is similar to the effect the speaker claims that Chapman's Homer has).

Lines 9 and 10, which mark a brief dip into astronomy, are most likely an allusion to the discovery of Uranus by William Herschel. Astronomy is characterized as a kind of exploration, akin to a reader's exploration of a book.

Though line 11 seems to allude to Hernan Cortez, the actual explorer that the lins refers to is Vasco Nunez de Balboa; Balboa was actually the one who "discovered" the Pacific Ocean by glimpsing it from a mountain in the Darien region. Keats knew about the mistake, but decided to opt for the preferable sound and meter of "Cortez" rather than greater factual accuracy. Either way, the allusion makes the extended metaphor of reading-as-exploring even more explicitly clear.

### Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Apollo"
- **Line 6:** "Homer"
- **Line 8:** "Chapman"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Then felt I like some watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken;"
- **Line 11:** "Cortez"

## ASSONANCE

"On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" uses [assonance](#) a bit more often than [alliteration](#). For example, in line 4, the /o/ sounds in "Apollo" and "hold" indicate a link between the "bards" (poets of classical Greece) and the Greek god of poetry, Apollo. The shared /o/ sounds suggest loyalty and interchange, perhaps speaking to acts of sacrifice by poets in order to receive the gift of poetry. This connection also speaks to the idea that Apollo would grant poets' work vitality and liveliness—exactly the qualities that draw the speaker to Chapman's translation of Homer.

In line 7, long vowels to slow the pace of the poem. While lines 1 to 6 described the speaker's previous reading experiences, line 7 signals that the speaker is now focusing in on the specific text in question—Chapman's Homer. Accordingly, the stretching /e/ sounds in the line help to indicate the process of concentration as a reader delves into a book and becomes immersed in its world.

This is followed soon after by the obvious assonance of line 8. "Out loud and bold" has a forceful, almost brash kind of sound. The power of the /o/ sounds reflects the profound effect that Chapman's translation had on the speaker of the poem, as though Homer's writing suddenly burst into life. The final moment of assonance comes in lines 13 and 14 with the long /i/ of "wild," "surmise," and "silent," drawing the poem to a close with a hint of literary intensity to reflect the awe being described.

### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "A," "a," "y," "y," "a"
- **Line 4:** "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 5:** "i," "i"
- **Line 6:** "e"
- **Line 7:** "e," "e," "e," "a," "e," "e"
- **Line 8:** "ea," "o," "u," "o," "u," "o"
- **Line 9:** "e," "e," "i," "i," "ie"
- **Line 10:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 13:** "i," "i"
- **Line 14:** "i"

## CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) is an especially prominent device through which the meaning of this poem builds. First, there is consonance at work across lines 1 through 4, all of which riff on an /l/ sound that evokes luxury and riches (the "realms of gold"):

Much have I travell'd 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.

These riches, of course, are not physical treasures; they are the

emotional and intellectual rewards of reading.

In line 3 there is also a strong presence of /n/ sounds. As the line is describing a journey via water around different islands, the sound of the line itself runs up against and navigates around the repeated /n/ sound.

Line 10 picks up on this idea, with the "new planet" also being tied to the /n/ sound. The consistent sound helps make the "planet" feel inevitable; it "swims" into the astronomer's sight both smoothly and forcefully. Ultimately, this sense has its conclusion in the last line, which makes use of the natural quietness of the /n/ sound (think about way the tongue has to close against the roof of the mouth to produce it) to emphasize the silent awe and reverence felt by Cortez's men and, more importantly, the reader of Chapman's Homer.

#### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ll," "l," "g," "l," "d"
- **Line 2:** "g," "d," "l," "s," "s"
- **Line 3:** "n," "n," "n," "l," "n," "b," "n"
- **Line 4:** "b," "l," "ll," "l"
- **Line 5:** "d," "d"
- **Line 6:** "d," "d," "d," "d"
- **Line 7:** "d," "d," "r," "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 8:** "l," "d," "d," "ld"
- **Line 10:** "n," "n," "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 11:** "w," "w"
- **Line 12:** "s," "c"
- **Line 13:** "w," "w," "s," "s"
- **Line 14:** "s," "n," "p," "n," "p," "n," "n"

## ENJAMBMENT

[Enjambment](#) occurs at the ends of several lines. Line 3's enjambment is not especially significant apart from perhaps suggesting the idea of travel, by making the reader's eye continue immediately forward to the start of line 4.

Line 6's enjambment sets up more of an anticipation, which becomes even more pronounced at the end of line 7. Here, the line is suspended grammatically, with the reader waiting to see if there is an example of a time when the speaker did "breathe" the "pure serene" of Homer's "demesne." That is, the enjambment sets up the question—has any translation brought Homer truly to life? Or has the speaker simply *never* fully appreciated it? Of course, line 8 answers emphatically that Chapman's Homer fulfills the promise of line 7.

The enjambment at the end of line 9 also creates suspense, with the reader acting like a "watcher of the sky;" the "watcher" waits for the "planet" to arrive in the sky, while the reader waits for it to arrive in the following line of the poem.

Lines 11 and 12 use enjambment a little differently, with the lack of punctuation suggesting fixation, as though the lines are looking at only one thing (as the speaker says that Cortez and

his men are doing).

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "been"
- **Line 4:** "Which"
- **Line 5:** "told"
- **Line 6:** "That"
- **Line 7:** "serene"
- **Line 8:** "Till"
- **Line 9:** "skies"
- **Line 10:** "When"
- **Line 11:** "eyes"
- **Line 12:** "He," "men"
- **Line 13:** "Look'd"

## CAESURA

[Caesura](#) happens twice in "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." The first caesura is in line 12, when the image of Cortez staring at the Pacific is interrupted to establish that "all his men" are awe-struck too. The pause of the caesura embodies the way that Cortez and his men are themselves paused, almost unable to believe the sight in front of their eyes. The caesura forces the reader to stop for a moment and contemplate how awe-inspiring the Pacific must have been. This reading experience, in turn, mirrors the way that the speaker felt overcome with wonder upon encountering Chapman's translation of Homer.

The effect of the caesura in line 14 is similar to the effect of the one in line 12. While line 12's caesura helped portray Cortez and his men as fixated in terms of what they are looking at, line 14's caesura foregrounds the sense of awe that they feel. They have fallen silent, preoccupied by the majesty of the natural environment. This silence brings to mind the silence of someone engrossed in a book. What's more, the comma creates a small moment of literal silence, demanding that anyone reading the poem aloud pause briefly and, in turn, recreate the reaction of Cortez and his men.

#### Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "—"
- **Line 14:** " ,"

## EXTENDED METAPHOR

From the very first line to the poem's end, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" makes use of [extended metaphor](#). Essentially, the metaphor maps the act of reading on to ideas of exploration and adventure. That is, the reader is characterized as a kind of sea-faring explorer, fearlessly traversing the globe in search of new lands. (Of course, the actual behavior of western explorers caused immeasurable pain and suffering to indigenous peoples around the world, but the poem doesn't

delve into these complications.) The reader is a traveler, sailing a ship that is constructed equally out of the text at hand and their own imagination.

The speaker is accustomed to this transportive effect of literature, having already traveled around "realms of gold" and "goodly states and kingdoms." The suggestion of riches refers to the acquisition of treasures by colonial explorers, but in the context of the metaphor, it describes instead a kind of intellectual and emotional treasure.

The extended metaphor is also useful in relation to the specific text that the poem concerns. Homer's works are full of exploration and bravery, such as Odysseus's travels in [The Odyssey](#). The exploration of new worlds and cultures has obvious overlap with the purpose of books—people read to learn about and to experience things beyond their immediate day-to-day lives.

The metaphor allows for the poem to set up a kind of challenge that is then fulfilled by Chapman's Homer. Essentially, the speaker is talking about whether any translation has ever really brought Homer to life—and, of course, Chapman's has. This is the point (lines 7 and 8) in which the speaker shares in the feeling of awe that the speaker imagines was felt by explorers landing in new places. It's important to remember that it wasn't that long ago that parts of the world had not been touched by the cultures of western Europe, and that accordingly the prospect of discovering new lands was truly exciting and captivating. The extended metaphor, then, gives the speaker a vivid and lively way to capture the genuine excitement of reading Chapman's Homer.

#### Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "travell'd"
- **Line 3:** "Round many western islands"
- **Lines 11-14:** "Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes / He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men / Look'd at each other with a wild surmise— / Silent, upon a peak in Darien."

## SIMILE

While the first eight lines use [extended metaphor](#) to establish the poem's proposition that reading is a form of exploration, line nine onwards turns to [simile](#) to expand the metaphor even further. Though there is a difference, of course, between metaphor and simile, they are not isolated or fundamentally different elements of this poem; it's actually almost as if the speaker is nesting the two similes inside the extended metaphor that characterizes the poem as a whole. Both devices develop the idea of reading and exploration, and neither is a discussion of literal experience—both are a figurative attempt by the poet to demonstrate the power of literature.

However, the introduction of simile does mark a significant

shift in the poem. From line 9 onwards, the speaker talks specifically about Chapman's Homer and the way it made the speaker feel while reading it. The poem is no longer about a general experience with literature, and the inclusion of simile draws attention to this narrowing of the poem's topic. The simile draws a strong link between a powerful reading experience and the awe felt by explorers finding unfamiliar lands. Both readers and explorers are moved deeply by their experiences, and both fall silent in the face of awe-inspiring discoveries.

#### Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "felt I / some watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken;"
- **Line 9:** "like"
- **Lines 11-14:** "Or / stout Cortez when with eagle eyes / He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men / Look'd at each other with a wild surmise— / Silent, upon a peak in Darien."
- **Line 11:** "like"



## VOCABULARY

**Travell'd** (Line 1) - This is just an abbreviation of "traveled," which at the time of the poem's writing could still be pronounced with three syllables, hence the abbreviation.

**Goodly** (Line 2) - This is an archaic word that means excellent or admirable. It is perhaps deliberately archaic on Keats's part, in order to borrow language from Chapman's own era.

**Bards** (Line 4) - Bards are poets, particularly poets of older era like classical Greece.

**Fealty** (Line 4) - Fealty means loyalty, particularly that of a tenant to a lord.

**Apollo** (Line 4) - Apollo is the Greek God of, among many other things, art, poetry and music.

**Oft** (Line 5) - A shortened form of "often."

**Expanse** (Line 5) - A large continuous area or piece of land.

**Deep-brow'd** (Line 6) - This refers to being intellectual or imaginative; think of the way that someone looks when they are deep in thought.

**Homer** (Line 6) - An ancient Greek poet and one of the forefathers of modern literature. He wrote [The Odyssey](#) and [The Iliad](#), though he sang them rather than writing them down (as was typical for his era).

**Demesne** (Line 6) - A demesne is an area of land owned or ruled by an individual. Here it means something close to "kingdom."

**Serene** (Line 7) - Serene is used as a noun here to denote an

area of clear sky or calm sea.

**Chapman** (Line 8) - George Chapman was an Elizabethan poet. He translated Homer into English in a version that clearly appealed to John Keats.

**Ken** (Line 10) - Field of vision.

**Cortez** (Line 11) - Cortez was a Spanish "conquistador," a so-called explorer who ravaged the Aztec empire. The "discovery" that Keats describes here was actually made by a different explorer called Balboa.

**Eagle eyes** (Line 11) - Clear or precise vision.

**Surmise** (Line 13) - Surmise here means a state of disbelieving.

**Darien** (Line 14) - A mountainous province of Panama (in Central America).



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" is a Petrarchan [sonnet](#), following the typical structure of an eight-line octave followed by a six-line sestet. These two parts typically form a kind of problem and solution, with the octave setting out the main theme or problem and the sestet explaining the poem's/poet's new take on that theme or solution to the problem. So here, the "problem" is that, despite having done lots of wide-ranging reading, the speaker has never truly gotten to know Homer's literary landscape. The solution is, of course, George Chapman's enlivening translation.

Interestingly, the turn of the poem—the transition from octave to [sestet](#) that is also known as the *volta*—arguably comes early in this poem (though the rhyme scheme definitely sticks to the divisions outlined above). It's in lines 7 and 8 that the speaker introduces the solution, in the form of Chapman's Homer—with line 9 onwards (where the traditional turn would be) dealing specifically with the way that this book made the speaker feel.

### METER

"On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" is written in [iambic pentameter](#), which is typical for [sonnets](#) of Keats's time. Most lines fall into this metrical scheme, which is also what Chapman used for some of his translations of Homer—though it's not clear if it's those works that the speaker refers to here.

The iambic pentameter is generally steady throughout the poem, though there are some notable exceptions. The first foot of Line 11 could be read as an [anapest](#) (two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed syllable) that emphasizes the stoutness (strength) of Cortez. The rest of the line would then scan as an iamb, another anapest, and a second iamb:

Or like **stout** | Cortez | when with **eag-** | -le eyes

The most significant variation is in the last line. Here, the first foot is inverted from an iamb to a [trochee](#):

Silent, | upon | a **peak** | in Dar- | -ien.

This change in meter makes the silence sudden, and, combined with the [caesura](#) that follows immediately after the word "silent," creates a real sense of dramatic pause in the poem. This embodies the way in which Cortez and his men were rendered awestruck—which is a [simile](#) for how the speaker felt reading Chapman's Homer.

### RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme in "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" is:

ABBAABBACDCDCD

In other words, the rhymes throughout the poem conform perfectly to the Petrarchan [sonnet](#) scheme. By doing so, the poem places itself at the crossroads between different literary traditions—the classical world of Homer, the Italian Renaissance of Petrarch, Chapman's Elizabethan era in Britain, and Keats's own time. This unique combination makes sense, because the poem is making the case for the enduring power and importance of poetry across time and space.

The rhymes all ring loud and clear, perhaps borrowing some of the "loudness" and "boldness" that the speaker experienced in reading Chapman's translation of Homer (as mentioned in line 8).



## SPEAKER

The speaker in the poem is not specified, but is generally taken to be John Keats himself. Keats read Chapman's Homer one evening with his friend Charles Clarke and was reportedly excited and enthused by the way in which the translation brought Homer's world to life.

Regardless of whether or not the speaker is Keats himself, the speaker is certainly someone who is well-read but has an insatiable desire for more literature. From the poem's imaginative descriptions of the effects of good literature on the reader, it's clear that this speaker/reader is someone who engages deeply with books. Indeed, the speaker sees reading as a kind of transportive mental travel, which, under the right conditions, can make the reader traverse time and space through the collaborative power of literature and the imagination.



## SETTING

Though on the surface the poem seems to be set in a world of voyages and discovery, the reference to Homer in line 6, as well

as the lines that follow, make it clear that, in reality, this poem is set in the speaker's imagination. Or, more specifically, it is set within the interaction of the speaker's imagination and the text of Chapman's Homer. The power of the translation, coupled with the speaker's commitment to reading, creates Homer's world anew and turns it into the setting of this poem.

Of course, the poem also employs [extended metaphor](#) and [simile](#) to try and capture the feeling that reading Chapman's Homer brought about in the speaker. In a figurative sense, then, most of the poem is set in various real landscapes around the world. The first six lines might be said to have their setting as Greece and its surrounding islands (though the first two lines are perhaps more general)—particularly that part of the world in the ancient classical era. Lines 9 and 10 represent a brief journey into the night sky, while the remaining lines are set in the Americas. In particular, these concluding lines conjure up an atmosphere of the so-called Age of Discovery, when Western European explorers travelled to the Americas. Specifically, Darien is in Panama.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

John Keats is now one of the most renowned poets in the English language, and this one of his most celebrated poems. In his own lifetime, however, Keats struggled for recognition, overshadowed by more successful poets like William Wordsworth. This poem was written early on, when he was just 20 years old. The inspiration for the poem came—obviously enough—from Keats's reading of the Ancient Greek poet Homer, in translation by the Elizabethan playwright and poet George Chapman. With his translations, Chapman prioritized the reader's experience over precise loyalty to the original text, making innovative decisions about meter and elaborating on Homer's words. Keats and his friend, Charles Clarke, had been reading Chapman's Homer the night before this poem's composition. Clarke recalled the event as follows:

"A beautiful copy of the folio edition of Chapman's translation of Homer had been lent me ... and to work we went, turning to some of the "famous" passages, as we had scrappily known them in [Alexander] Pope's version ... Chapman supplied us with many an after-treat; but it was in the teeming wonderment of this his first introduction, that, when I came down to breakfast the next morning, I found upon my table a letter with no other enclosure than his famous sonnet, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." We had parted, as I have already said, at day-spring, yet he contrived that I should receive the poem from a distance of, may be, two miles by ten o'clock."

Looked at more broadly, the poem intersects with a number of literary worlds: Homer's Ancient Greece, Chapman's Elizabethan England, Petrarch's Renaissance Italy (the poem is

a Petrarchan [sonnet](#)) and Keats's own time. In this sense, the poem is about poetry itself, advocating for its enduring importance stretching from the past and into the future.

Keats is generally considered a key member of the Romantic poets, in particular of the second generation, which included writers like Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Romanticism doesn't mean the same thing as "romantic"—it is characterized, loosely speaking, by a deep-rooted belief in the power of the imagination (which is clearly at play in this poem), the prophetic role of poetry in society, the importance of nature, and need for political engagement. Keats's writing was not well received during his lifetime, and he was the victim of snobbery from those who considered him to be an intellectual and artistic imposter. However, his reputation quickly rose in the centuries after his death in 1821; he died from tuberculosis at the age of just 25.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Keats wrote this poem not too long after the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789, which facilitated Napoleon's rise to power. Overall, the early 19th century saw profound changes in popular thinking about the individual's relationship to society. The influential poet/critic William Wordsworth was particularly interested in the idea of civil liberties, though he became more conservative as he grew older.

This particular poem has a wide historical scope, drawing a link between Homer's time and Keats's own era. In essence, these links make a case for the power of literature as a cultural force. Line 4 gestures towards the everyday ceremonial importance of poetry in Ancient Greece, while by the poem's end, the focus is more on the individual relationship between reader and text.

What's more, the poem's [sestet](#) is rooted in yet another history: the so-called "Age of Discovery." This period is generally dated from the early 15th century to the early 17th century, and it denotes the exploration of the globe by Western Europeans via sea travel. While this is often characterized as a time of discovery in which bold Europeans chanced upon new lands, the truth is that many of these places were already populated by indigenous peoples. The darker side of the "Age of Discovery" tells a story of plunder, murder, and the annihilation of entire cultures. For example, the conquistador (Spanish for "conqueror") that Keats mentions—mistakenly—in line 11 was responsible for the fall of the Aztec Empire. The poem doesn't get into these complexities, but it nonetheless draws on the mythic image of this era as a time of wonder and astonishment, while also perhaps suggesting that the imaginative exercise of reading might actually be a better way to carry out this kind of exploration.



## MORE RESOURCES

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Keats's Letters](#) – An online resource containing all of Keats's correspondence. (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/35698/35698-h/35698-h.htm>)
- [A Review of Keats's Poetry](#) – A review from 1818 published in Blackwood's Magazine, showcasing some of the literary establishment's prejudices against Keats. (<http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu/TextRecord.php?textsid=36160>)
- [Chapman's Odyssey](#) – George Chapman's actual translation of one of Homer's works, The Odyssey. (<https://www.bartleby.com/111/>)
- [Keats's Character](#) – This a collection of descriptions of Keats by his contemporaries. (<https://englishhistory.net/keats/john-keats-contemporary-descriptions/#5>)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN KEATS POEMS

- [Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art](#)

- [La Belle Dame sans Merci](#)
- [Ode on a Grecian Urn](#)
- [Ode on Melancholy](#)
- [Ode to a Nightingale](#)
- [To Autumn](#)
- [When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be](#)



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