



Romanticism, John Keats & His Poetry

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The Romantic movement was an artistic, literary, musical, and intellectual movement that originated in Europe towards the end of the 18th century, this movement emphasized intense emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic experience, placing new emphasis on such emotions as fear, horror, terror and awe — especially that experienced in confronting the new aesthetic categories of the sublime and beauty of nature

Romanticism, attitude or orientation characterized many works of Art and literature, in Western civilization over a period from the late 18th to the mid-19th century. Romanticism can be seen as a rejection of the precepts of order, calm, balance, idealization, and rationality that typified in general and late 18th-century in particular. It was also to some extent a reaction against Neo- classical and physical materialism in general. Romanticism emphasized the individual, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the personal, the spontaneous, the emotional, the visionary, and the transcendental.

John Keats, who is a renowned poet of the Romantic era, lived just a quarter century and four months (1795-1821), yet his poetic accomplishment is unprecedented. His writing career lasted somewhat more than five years (1814-1820), and three of his incredible odes - "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and "Ode on Melancholy"- - were written in one month. The greater part of his significant sonnets was composed between his twenty-third and twenty-fourth years, and every one of his ballads were composed by his twenty-fifth year. In this concise period, he delivered sonnets that rank him as one of the greatest English poets. He likewise composed letters which T.S. Eliot calls it "the most notable and the most important ever written by any English poet."

His genius was not commonly seen during his lifetime or following his passing. Keats, dying, anticipated that his Poetry would be forgotten, as the epitaph he composed for his gravestone designates: "Here lies one whose name was written in water." But nineteenth century Critics and readers came to welcome him, however, generally, they had just an incomplete comprehension of his work. They considered Keats as a sensual poet; they concentrated on his distinctive, solid symbolism; on his depiction of the physical and the energetic; and on his drenching in the present time and place. One nineteenth century critic ventured to such an extreme as to declare not only that Keats had "a constitutionally inapt for abstract thinking" however that he "had no mind." Keats' greatly cited clamor, "O for a life of sensation rather than of thoughts!" (letter, November 22, 1817) has been cited to help this view.

With the twentieth century, the impression of Keats' Poetry extended; he was and is applauded for his earnestness and thoughtfulness, for his dealing with difficult human conflicts and aesthetic issues, and for his energetic mental quest for truth. Keats advocated living "the ripest, fullest experience that one is capable of "; he accepted that what determines truth is experience ("axioms are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses"). The publication of Keats' letters, with their sharp intellectual addressing and concern with moral and artistic issues, added to this reassignment. His letters illuminate his own beautiful practices and give knowledge into writing in general.

Keats and Romanticism

Keats had a place with a literary movement called Romanticism. Romantic poets, in light of their philosophies of Literature and life, were attracted to Lyric poetry; they even developed another type of tribute, regularly called the sentimental reflective tribute.

The literary critic Jack Stillinger portrays the typical development of the romantic ode: The poet, discontent with this present reality, escapes or endeavors to escape into the perfect. Disillusioned in his mental flight, he returns to this present reality. Generally, he returns since individuals can't live in the ideal or because he has not discovered what he was looking for. In any case, the experience changes his understanding of his situation, of the world, and

so on.; his perspectives/sentiments toward the end of the Poem vary altogether from those he held toward the start of the Poem.

Themes in Keats's Major Poems

Douglas Bush noticed that "Keats' significant Poems are identified with, or grew legitimately out of...inner conflicts." For instance, agony and delight are entwined in "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn"; love is interwoven with torment, and joy is interlaced with death in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," "The Eve of St. Agnes," and "Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil."

Cleanth Brooks characterizes the paradox that is the topic of "Ode to a Nightingale" to some degree of difference: "the world of imagination offers a release from the painful world of actuality, yet at the same time it renders the world of actuality more painful by contrast."

Other conflicts show up in Keats' poetry:

- transient sensation or passion / enduring art
- dream or vision / reality
- joy / melancholy
- the ideal / the real
- mortal / immortal
- life / death
- separation / connection
- being immersed in passion / desiring to escape passion

Keats often associated love and pain both in his life and in his poetry. He wrote of a young woman he found attractive, "When she comes into a room she makes an impression the same as the Beauty of a Leopardess.... I should like her to ruin me..." Love and death are intertwined in "Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil," "Bright Star," "The Eve of St. Agnes," and "La Belle Dame sans Merci." The Fatal Woman (the woman whom it is destructive to love, like Salome, Lilith, and Cleopatra) appears in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and "Lamia."

Identity is an issue in his view of the poet and for the dreamers in his odes (e.g., "Ode to a Nightingale ") and narrative poems. Of the poetic character, he says, "... it is not itself--it has no self--it is everything and nothing--it has no character--it enjoys light and shade--it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, right or poor, mean or elevated..." He calls the poet "chameleon."

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Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling summarize Keats's world view succinctly: Beyond the uncompromising sense that we are completely physical in a physical world, and the allied realization that we are compelled to imagine more than we can know or understand, there is a third quality in Keats more clearly present than in any other poet since Shakespeare. This is the gift of tragic acceptance, which persuades us that Keats was the least solipsistic of poets, the one most able to grasp the individuality and reality of selves totally distinct from his own, and of an outward world that would survive his perception of it.

They believe that Keats came to accept this world, the here and now, as the ultimate value.

Keats's Odes

All written in May 1819, "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and "Ode on Melancholy" grew out of a persistent kind of experience which dominated Keats's feelings, attitudes, and thoughts during that time. Each of them is a unique experience, but each of them is also, as it were, a facet of a larger experience. This larger experience is an intense awareness of both the joy and pain, the happiness and the sorrow, of human life. This awareness is feeling and becomes also thought, a kind of brooding as the poet sees them in others and feels them in himself. This awareness is not only feeling; it becomes also thought, a kind of brooding contemplation of the lot of human beings, who must satisfy their desire for happiness in a world where joy and pain are inevitably and inextricably tied together. This union of joy and pain is the fundamental fact of human experience that Keats has observed and accepted as true.

Wright Thomas and Stuart Gerry Brown

In "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Keats tries to free himself from the world of change by identifying with the nightingale, representing nature, or the urn, representing art. These odes, as well as "The Ode to Psyche" and the "Ode to Melancholy," present the poet as dreamer; the question in these odes, as well as in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and "The Eve of St. Agnes," is how Keats characterizes the dream or vision. Is it a positive experience which enriches the dreamer? or is it a negative experience which has the potential to cut off the dreamer from the real world and destroy him? What

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happens to the dreamers who do not awaken from the dream or do not awaken soon enough?

Keats's Imagery

Keats's imagery ranges among all our physical sensations: sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell, temperature, weight, pressure, hunger, thirst, sexuality, and movement. Keats repeatedly combines different senses in one image, that is, he attributes the trait(s) of one sense to another, a practice called synaesthesia. His synaesthetic imagery performs two major functions in his poems: it is part of their sensual effect, and the combining of senses normally experienced as separate suggests an underlying unity of dissimilar happenings, the oneness of all forms of life. Richard H. Fogle calls these images the product of his "unrivaled ability to absorb, sympathize with, and humanize natural objects."

Examples of Synesthetic Images

"Ode to a Nightingale"

- In some MELODIOUS plot / Of BEECHEN GREEN (stanza I)
Combines sound ("melodious") and sight ("beechen green")
- TASTING of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker of the warm South, (stanza II)
Here the poet TASTES the visual ("Flora and the country green"), activity ("Dance"), sound ("Provencal song"), and mood or pleasure ("mirth"); also the visual ("sunburnt") is combined with a pleasurable emotional state ("mirth").
With the beaker there is finally something to taste, but what is being tasted is temperature ("warm") and a location ("South").
- But here here is no LIGHT,
Save what from heaven is with the BREEZES BLOWN (stanza IV)
Combines sight ("light") with touch/movement ("breezes blown"). This image describes light filtering through leaves moved by the wind.
- Nor what SOFT INCENSE HANGS upon the boughs (stanza V)
Combines touch ("soft"), weight ("hangs"), and smell ("incense").

"Eve of St. Agnes"

- The SILVER, SNARLING trumpets 'Gan to chide
Combines vision ("silver," the color of the trumpets) and sound (trumpets produce a "silver" sound).

"Isabella; or, The Pot of Gold"

- And TASTE the MUSIC of that VISION pale. (stanza XLIX)
Now it's your turn. What three sensory experiences are combined in this line?

Paintings and Illustrations of Keats's Poems

Keats's poems have appealed to artists and illustrators, particularly from the 1840's through the 1930s. Three poems have received the most attention--Endymion, Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil, and The Eve of St. Agnes. According to Richard Altick, at least twenty paintings and illustrations have been made of each of these poems. Keats's appeal for painters and illustrators is a tribute to how vivid and sensual his imagery is and how his poems stimulate the imagination of his readers. There are other reasons why painters and illustrators were drawn to him: he wrote about art and artists and was friendly with many artists; also the publication of his collected works in 1840 and of a biography in 1848 aroused a general interest in Keats and helped to establish his position as one of England's greatest poets.

As a Web project, Renzo Roblodowski illustrated three of Keats's poems, drew Keats listening to a nightingale in the garden of his friend Brown, and also made a drawing of Ophelia. They are mounted as thumbnails in an art gallery on this Website. To view his illustrations full size, click on the thumbnail or on the filename underneath the thumbnail in Renzo's Art Gallery.

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