

Death as a major preoccupation: Art and themes in Keats poetry.

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The dust of the vulgar and brutal controversy over the merits of Keats as a poet having settled down and practically disappeared with his death, it is now possible for us to view the greatness of the unfortunate poet calmly, to view it and lose ourselves in the sheer beauty of his works. He often talked of his approaching death, with the resignation of one who contemplated its certainty without anxiety, and seemed to wish to 'steal from the world' into silence and repose. His poems possess sufficient attraction to interest every class of readers, and they will still be read when the sneers of ephemeral critics shall have long expired on the gross lips which impudently arrayed themselves against acknowledged truth, and the whole suffrage of the literary world. If his greatest poems are characterized by their stillness and poise, his letters are masterpieces of motion. They read like mountain rivers: ragged, rough, full of raw energy, dangerous. They are alive with improvisational wit and verbal gusto, revealing an agile mind happily willing to dwell in contradiction or, as he says, "remain content with half knowledge"

Keywords: Death, resignation, repose, stillness, improvisational wit.

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Died at Rome, on the 23rd of February last, John Keats, well known for his poetical productions, left England for the benefit of his health, having exhibited marks of a consumptive disorder, which appeared to be rapidly increasing. A cold, caught on his journey to Italy, hurried him still faster to the tomb; and though for a short time after his arrival there he seemed to revive, it was only to confirm the fallacy of a hope too often indulged in similar disorders; for he soon languished into an untimely grave.

He often talked of his approaching death, with the resignation of one who contemplated its certainty without anxiety, and seemed to wish to 'steal from the world' into silence and repose.

*That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:*

*Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,*

*The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;*

*Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,*

*Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;*

*Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,* (Ode to Nightingale)

From a contemporary writer we learn, that when a friend was sitting by his bed, and talking of an inscription to his memory, he desired there might be no notice taken of him, 'or if any,' to be '*Here lies the body of one whose name was writ in water!*' The temperament and feeling of the poet, which is always 'much nearer allied to melancholy than to jollity or mirth,' seem to have been the heritage of Keats: the deep susceptibility to external beauty, the intense vividness of mental impressions, and the rich coloring of thought, which are seen in genius, were all his.

Though young, and his taste leaning towards an extravagance which mature years would no doubt have corrected, his poetry displays throughout those breathing thoughts which so peculiarly identify the presence of the poetical spirit. He was an original writer, his productions were his own; and no pen of the present age can lay claim to the epithet of poetical, on the ground of a powerful fancy, freshness of coloring, and force of expression, if Keats be not allowed a claim far from humble, on those distinguishing characteristics of the sons of song. A name richer in promise England did not possess, and the mind insensible to the sweetness of his productions must indeed be a miserable one—the very climax of heartlessness.

His poems possess sufficient attraction to interest every class of readers, and they will still be read when the sneers of ephemeral critics shall have long expired on the gross lips which impudently arrayed themselves against acknowledged truth, and the whole suffrage of the literary world. The base attack made with the hope of crushing the rising genius of young Keats, can never be forgotten: it was made against a youthful, friendless, virtuous, highly gifted character, by a pen, equally reckless of veracity and justice, from the mean

motive of a dislike to his political tenets. It appears that Keats had a presentiment he should never return to England, and that he communicated it to more than one person. He is said to have wished to drink ‘of the warm South,’ and ‘leave the world unseen;’ and his wish was accordingly fulfilled.

*O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,*

*That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:*

There is something very impressive about the death of genius, and particularly of youthful genius. Poets, perhaps, have shared most of this feeling from mankind; indeed, their labors which survive themselves are forever creating it. Not only By fairy hands *their* knell is rung, By forms unseen *their* dirge is sung, but the beautiful, the tender, and the wise, are perpetual sorrowers over their obsequies.

John Keats has enjoyed a fluctuating reputation and a fluctuating notoriety. The notoriety of a man is the degree to which he is talked of in the world. The reputation of a man is something better— it is the character that the world gives him. Much, as being the friend of Shelley and Leigh Hunt, and more, as being the supposed victim of the *Quarterly Review*, has John Keats been, both by those who judge for themselves, and by those who are swayed by others, talked of and criticized, sneered at and panegyricized. He stood first before the public when the obnoxious Reviewers were at work on him. He stood again before the public when, under the title of *Adonais*, Shelley wrote over his ashes the finest elegy that poet ever sung over poet, or friend over friend. Beyond this, he has shared the fate of immature talent harshly put down, and of originality mistaken for affectation....

if Keats was a man of genius, he was not to be killed by a review; and that if he *was* killed by a review, he was not a man of genius....

I hope I have not in too late a day touched the beautiful mythology of Greece. —This is an extract from the Preface to the *Endymion*, dated April 10, 1818. It cannot be too plainly laid down, that although the mythology of Greece may have first inspired Keats with poetry, —that although it may have furnished him with the subject-matter of his verses, —and that although it may have stood godfather to his poems, giving them the names of *Endymion* and *Hyperion*, it is in no degree the spirit of Greece, that the poetry of Keats represents. This is not said in the way of detraction. The beauties of the poems are not lessened by the circumstance of their not being of a Greek complexion. It is only the *criticism* of the bard that is demurred to.

Keats conceives the scene before him, and represents it as it appears. This is the excellence of dramatic poetry; but to feel its truth and power in any other, we must abandon our ordinary feeling and common consciousness, and identify ourselves with the scene. Few people can do this. In representation, which is the ultimate purpose of dramatic poetry, we should feel something of sympathy though we could merely observe the scene, or the gesticulation, and no sound could reach us; but to make an ordinary *reader* sensible of the excellence of a poem, he must be told what the poet felt; and he is affected by him and not by the scene. Our modern poets are the showmen of their own pictures, and point out its beauties.

Keats' very excellence, we fear, will tell against him. Each scene bears so actually the immediate impress of truth and nature, that it may be said to be local and peculiar, and to require some extrinsic feeling for its full enjoyment: — perhaps we are not clear in what we say. Every man then, according to his particular habit of mind, not only gives a correspondent coloring to all that surrounds him, but seeks to surround himself with corresponding objects, in which he has more than other people's enjoyment. In everything then that art or nature may present to man, though gratifying to all, each man's gratification and sympathy will be regulated by the disposition and bent of his mind.

When he writes of passion, it seems to have possessed him. This, however, is what Shakespeare did, and if *Endymion* bears any general resemblance to any other poem in the language, it is to *Venus and Adonis* on this very account. In the necessarily abrupt breaking off of this scene of intense passion, however, we think he has exceeded even his ordinary power. It is scarcely possible to conceive anything more poetically imaginative; and though it may be brought in rather abruptly, we cannot refuse ourselves the pleasure of immediately extracting it.

The double progression through the day and the season point to a theme that recurs in many of Keats's poems, the theme of transience. In "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "Ode to a Nightingale," this theme is treated with anguish and rebellion; in "To Autumn," the theme is treated with serenity and acceptance.

The first stanza in 'Ode to Autumn' tries to prolong summer, yet the sun is qualified by the adjective "maturing," hinting that he matures the harvest as well as grows old himself. The second stanza pictures autumn as a reaper, a harvester of the now-ripened crops; the image of the reaper also calls up death itself. Death, however, is momentarily suspended, found sleeping in a "half-reaped furrow.

In the last stanza, the notion of death, the natural completion of the process begun in the first stanza, gathers strength as gnats are mourning, the sun is setting, and the swallows gather to escape the coming of winter.

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