

Beauty is Truth: John Keats' Odes and Navigating the World through Beauty.

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Abstract

This essay serves to contemplate Keats' relationship with beauty in his Odes, and how he navigates the world and different emotions when concerning beauty. My first chapter considers the aesthetics of Beauty and how they change with time paying particular attention to the Romantic experience of beauty in art and beauty in nature. My second chapter is about the Romantic imagination and its vividness when looking at Romantic literature. It also contemplates Keats' imagination as an escape and how he finds disappointment in his reality when comparing it to the vastness of his imagination. Finally, my third chapter explores death and the beauty within it, and how Keats uses the idea of death as an escape to quietness, but also the complex facets of death and the emotions that come with it. I also consider how Keats' death effected his own and subsequent writers' literature, and the Romantic understanding of poetry as the true form of exploration. Understanding the link beauty with has with all of these concepts is essential to understanding Keats writing.

Introduction

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

As written in the enigmatic, closing lines 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', Keats' intensive obsession with aesthetics and beauty within his life carries through into his works – that Keats finds inspiration both through writing his poetry and within the world, and the two amalgamate into the fascinating construction that are his Odes. These lines have been toyed with throughout the critical reception of Keats' poetry, their meaning unclear. What it could mean when contemplating Keats' entire life and portfolio, is that beauty is at the core of existence as humans can understand it. This means that complicated concepts we do not understand can simply be contemplated by finding the beauty within it – it is all we 'on earth' 'need' to know, all we *can* know based upon the limits of humanity and mortal life. This philosophy that carries throughout Keats' entire collection bases the pleasures and pains in relation to life with beauty, and this carries through to his philosophies on the human condition and the world around him. Even throughout this Ode, the coexistence of pleasure and pain from stanza to stanza comforts, shocks, excites and intrigues its readers in an interesting blend of imagery, emotion and sensuous appeal. The final moral of this Ode prioritises the recognition, appreciation, and immortality of beauty specifically referring to the philosophical benefits upon humankind echoes throughout his short career, his passion for this poetic art remaining with him up until his premature death: all which Keats finds beauty within. Beauty being within everything torments and drives Keats' – he is appreciative of its existence yet made miserable when it dies. He finds it in his imagination to escape reality, yet when he returns to reality it is found there as well. It is the essence of life and death, and the essence of being human. Beauty is completely integral to Keats' work, because even the imagery of the simplest landscape to the wildest imagined mythological plane is part of Keats' appreciation, envy and coexistence with the world, and thus it dictates how he engages with it.

Beauty itself is a complex idea that has subjective implications throughout all eras. As Kant argues in *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, if he finds something displeasing no amount of rationalization arguing for its case could change his mind, as his judgement is based upon his own grounds of proof and not upon objective reason (Kant, 1790). However, when considering art forms such as poetry, J. Shelley argues that the complexity of said poetry requires some cognitive work involving the drawing of influences and contextual information, as well as analysis of themes and narrative. (Shelley, 2022). When we consider these two perspectives in

context to beauty, the concept itself also being argued as both objective and subjective, we must consider the effect of beauty upon the perceiver. Scruton, for example, argues that cultural inhibitions of beauty lead us to believe that it is a way of affirming ourselves (Scruton, 2018, p. 9-16) – our cultures, our feelings, our thoughts. This implies that the consensus on beauty is that it revolves around selfhood and humanity – a rather narrow perspective generally as it only considers the individual. The exploration of beauty within Keats' poetry is multifaceted – yes, he explores beauty as an appeal to the senses, but he also considers beauty in concepts that are beyond humanity, in death, myth, mysteries of the universe and reality, and the boundaries of the human mind. In this, we are exposed to beauty outside of it being a positive experience, with horrific imagery reminiscent of the negative aspects of daily life. Considering beauty outside of the human perspective means that Keats inherently denies himself – yes, he indulges in the vastness of nature and complexities in art, but he also considers aesthetics that are distant from humanhood. Also consider the reception of Keats' art as beautiful, as he had no real confirmation that he was successful throughout his short life, however the picture of his death, and the posthumous exploration of his portfolio indicates enjoyable or interesting aspects that *do* appeal to its readers – the opposite of how it was received whilst he was alive. The idea of beauty itself being both subjective and objective, this essay serves to analyse the use of beauty in both positive and negative instances and relate them to Keats' philosophies, experiences, and how his views are both representative and separate from ideals of the time.

Keats' life fell into the second generation of Romanticism, a tumultuous and unstable time in terms of political history and writing in the era was affected by its politics, it's ever-changing environment underneath the Industrial Revolution, and by the first generation of Romantic writers (Wordsworth). The rigidity of the Industrial era frustrated Romantics, especially philosophically, Furst stating that Industrialists favoured a view that the universe can be 'rationally comprehended' (Furst, 1968, p. 116). These philosophical values carried over from sciences into the arts, poets like Wordsworth being more interested in the simpler pleasures that he felt the lower class could better appreciate, as he mentions in the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth, as one of the most prominent figures in Romanticism (although he is not a founder, he is arguably the most renowned author, especially in his later life when he became Poet Laureate, however his earlier works are more relevant to consider in relation to second generation Romantics like Keats.) built upon the ideology that simpler pleasures found in nature were key to self-understanding and contemplation. Of course, this ideology was countered at the time by contemporary politics, the idea of sense vs sensibility being a prominent feature of the French Revolution. To define both concepts briefly, sense is as it sounds: reason, logic, and

resolving issues with these. Sensibility was more of a politically weaponised term, originally a gendered medical term referring to the elasticity of nerves – this then referring to complicating issues with emotions caused by having too much feeling in the nerves. When we move to second-generation Romanticism, we consider the Napoleonic Wars and their effect on poet's contemporary to Keats. Šiška writes:

The Wars lasted for more than twenty years. Nations, beliefs and ideals were disrupted all around Europe during this period. Even though Britain was not exposed to an invasion, it was the only country which remained in the state of war with France throughout the entire conflict apart from the short-lived Peace of Amiens. Many important and influential events took place during the years of the Napoleonic wars, such as famous battles, unexpected invasions or changes of government. On the other hand, death, famine, pain and sadness became the parts of everyday life. A person who lived during the Napoleonic wars and witnessed the changes in the world had to be influenced in some way. (Šiška, 2017, p. 5)

As the Napoleonic wars had direct influence on Wordsworth, who was staying in France whilst the war was happening. These wars, like the revolution, had an impact on French patriotism and British patriotism, considering the involvement of the British during these wars. Like other wars, the resulting death and famine painted a sympathetic picture of nations living in wartimes and the changes of the world, particularly the sympathies in Europe as multiple different nations were involved, had a direct effect on politics. Keats is possibly an outlier in this circumstance, as his poetry does reflect the death and despair that Šiška mentions, however his works focus more inwardly on the self. It is still important to consider the effects of these wars upon his contemporaries and sympathies of the time, as they fall under the category of Romanticism and Keats is truly a Romantic poet due to the emotional nature of his writing.

It is important to consider the background of Keats as he began to write poetry. Keats began his life humbly as the eldest son of four, and in his youth lived a rather modest life, made difficult with the death of his father at approximately age nine to ten. The affect of this death financially impacted Keats' and his remaining family, his mother then dying (when Keats was fourteen) of tuberculosis – a disease that then ended his two brothers lives, and then eventually his own. Keats also abandoned his career as a surgeon after discovering his passion for poetry. The ongoing relationship with Fanny Brawne is also a prominent influence on many poems by Keats, but it is important to note that they never married as Keats died aged twenty-five, and Brawne eventually married someone else twelve years following his death, noting that she grieved

Keats' death for two years. All these details, as well as drafts for many of his famous poems are recorded in letters, the epistolary form serving as a companion for many of Keats' ideologies and sentiments, thus this essay frequently references Keats' letters as an insight to Keats' mind and poetic imagination, as well as to garner how he felt about significant events throughout his life that then occur in his poems. It also outlines some of the theories Keats applies to his poems such as the Mansion of Many Apartments. Considering Keats' personal life is integral to his poetry as we can then consider his relationship with the real and the imagined realm and consider poetry as an escape from reality, or even a way to comprehend reality. These readings show the complexity of the imagination, Romantics utilising it as their guide and as an instrument of exalted power. This idea also relates to the sublime and how it relates to the concept of beauty, but more boundless and limitless. When we consider these aspects of imagination, understanding why it is a constant thematic device throughout Keats' portfolio is essential to contemplating his obsession and fixation upon beauty.

The forthcoming chapter serves to analyse the aesthetics of beauty in different aspects of popular culture and the natural world. The focus of the argument is Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, an ekphrastic and Hellenistic poem that shifts between the aesthetics of Grecian society depicted as ancient art, and the natural imagery and its associations with religious and death imagery, and Keats' *To Autumn*, the last Ode in Keats' collection and sometimes referred to as Keats' last poem. Particularly important because of the deeper context hidden behind the celebration of nature, as late summer shifts to autumn, and autumn dies into winter. This first chapter is key to establishing Keats' relationship with beauty through nature, both poems using the idea of beauty significantly. The argument is outlined by poet's contemporary to Keats (such as Wordsworth) philosophers that predate Keats (such as Kant), and modern critics that can outline historical and contextual clues that drive us to the centre of the argument (Scruton, Furst). This chapter serves to dissect the aesthetics of beauty as they change through time, how Keats' would have been affected by these changes, and most importantly how Keats' depicts different types of beauty.

The following chapter is an analysis of Romantic imagination and sublimity, both complicated concepts with different historical and political interpretations. The argument is once again outlined by figures important to understanding Keats, such as Shelley, whom I reference her relationship with the sublime when writing *Frankenstein*, and Wordsworth, whom I reference to outline his sentiments upon the sublime, and how this influenced Keats. I also reference Burke, a political figure who writes on the experience of the sublime and argued against its use, reminiscent of political sentiments of the time. Moreover, I use Blumenberg to briefly preface

the use of imagination throughout history, and one of Keats' theories the Mansion of Many Apartments to outline the objective Keats tried to reach yet failed due to the limitations on the human mind. Already, the argument on imagination is dualistic, as many Romantics reasoned for the effectiveness the imagination guiding, but also the limits and dangers of imagination were prominent in Keats theology and within political sentiments at the time. The chapter analyses the relationship of imagination with beauty in *Ode to a Nightingale*, a bittersweet poem with imagined landscapes within a vision or dream. This chapter dissects the relationship of imagination with real or constructed beauty, and elements of the real within imagination – thus the question of beauty being an escape or a meditation on reality.

The ultimate chapter then analyses the theme of death, throughout Keats' poetry, the aestheticism of death to the Romantics, the appeal of images such as Thomas Chatterton and Keats who both died young and in ways that were significant to the content of their works, and the concept of dying art forms and beauty. Throughout Keats' poetry the theme of death is significant as it symbolises a quietness and stillness that was free from the stresses of everyday living for Keats. Contemplating how death surrounded Keats especially with Tuberculosis (or Consumption), and how his death was viewed contemporarily, and decades thereafter is interesting to the argument that beauty is within death and this sentiment being shared even after Keats died. The argument is illuminated the study of the symptoms of tuberculosis (Saleem & Azher), how these symptoms appealed to beauty (Black), how Keats inspired poets and therefore his poetic career being fully realised only after he died (Wilde and Doleschal) and finally the rivalry of visual art and poetry as the former became more popularised as sensuous experience, and therefore how Keats replicates this experience in *Ode on Melancholy* – a meditation on grief and sadness. This chapter dissects the aesthetics of death and the beauty within such a dark concept, and death in all Keats writes as even the art form was seemingly slowly 'dying' as it was overshadowed by contemporary visual arts.

Each of these chapters highlight the concept of beauty in different ways as it is a multifaceted concept. Beauty itself is an everchanging concept even today as the world shifts and beauty is constructed differently. What remains true throughout this dissertation is that beauty is held in high regard by Keats, being a way to navigate, escape, contemplate and meditate upon the world around him – as difficult and painful as this might have been for him. Keats believed in a coexistence of pleasure and pain, meaning that beauty must be contemplated with both of these emotions in mind.

Chapter 1: Beauty is Truth: The Aesthetics of Beauty Within Nature and Art

1.1: Romanticism and Beauty.

Beauty is a concept dear to mankind, everchanging with our values, and ever appreciated by all. The act of simply looking at a bushel of flowers, perhaps animals seldom existing amongst trees or shrubbery is a reminder of things simpler. Perhaps for some, the same can be said about art – perhaps its depiction of the natural, the surreal or the scary evokes the same feeling of the sublime. These environments rarely exist naturally to be appreciated, and therefore understanding how they have been altered to suit interests or aesthetics is crucial to understanding their depictions and interpretations throughout the ages. Keats, for example, was borderline obsessed with ancient Greece and its mythology, aesthetics and interpretation of beauty. He also thoroughly enjoyed Shakespeare's poetry. Early 19th century poets in general were also inspired by great European philosophers, political happenings, and thus formed as a countermovement to Enlightenment. The aesthetics' of beauty and how Keats' portrays them are complex, wrought with the aspects of his modern life, longing for the intricate simplicity of how he views ancient Greece, and the bringing about of philosophical questions. The spaces throughout the Odes, constructed or not, depict different aesthetics associated with the concept of beauty.

During the French Revolution, the order of the world was shaken up accordingly with the values held dearly by politicians, philosophers, and writers of the time. Concepts that previously appealed exclusively to aristocratic society were dismantled by revolutionists and romantics alike for a more equal enjoyment and appreciation of concepts beyond humanities reasonable understanding. An example of this would be how the appreciation of beauty shifted from being an upper-class delicacy, found within complex art or required higher education (being inaccessible to the masses of working-class people) to comprehend the language, shifted under contemporary poets in the first generation of romantic writers. Wordsworth, as one of the great romantic poets often cited as one of the key figures, writes about such discourse and his solutions in the preface to his lyrical ballads, of such celebrate the 'rustic pleasures' in a language that could be comprehended by all, thus changing the direction of art and literature within that era:

“Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated (...) The language, too, of these men has been adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions” (Wordsworth, 1800)

This appreciation of rustic life and simple pleasures pioneers the appreciation for nature in romanticism. The simplification of the language not only makes the poetry more accessible to the masses, but also simplifies the pleasure experienced, as Wordsworth says the pleasure, we derive from perceiving beauty is a simple feeling, and the language must replicate this to ensure proper ‘communication’. Of course, Keats is a second-generation poet, therefore whilst this ideology does carry over, Keats himself was more concerned about an exploration of the feelings rather than a simplification of them. This is evident throughout the vast flowing language in his poetry, with the extensive detail, and a paradoxical experience between pleasure and pain as he compares the pleasure of beauty with the pains of moral life, such as disease, death and heartbreak. However, it can be argued that due to Wordsworth’s legacy and influence that Keats’ poetry is so widely renowned today, as he was a lower-class poet who essentially lived in poverty. Perhaps his works more ‘flowery’ language can be attributed to scrutinization of his publications, and fear of such by critics:

“It is Keats who feels scrutinized; it is Keats who knows that his every published word will be assessed by reviewers not by its worth but according to what they consider to be his lower-middle-class birth and arriviste social status. It is Keats who fears that he will be reviled and crucified by the reviewers.” (Hoeveler, 1994)

This class anxiety and inferiority that was the bane of Keats’ passions and works affected his health, and therefore some of the Odes focus on more ‘refined’ subjects such as Grecian art and mythology. This phenomenon is called Romantic Hellenism, and it derives from the interest of the time in ancient Grecian society, turning to it for its model of ‘ideal beauty, transcendent

philosophy, (and) democratic politics' (De, 2018). Wordsworth is identified as a Romantic Hellenic, as he embraces mythology as a religious symbol (2018) and Keats himself is thought to be the poet 'most inspired by' Wordsworth, hence Grecian imagery in Keats' Odes is commonplace. His passions for ancient poetry and his inspiration from such poets as Homer could have derived from this anxiety but also indulge another important philosophical topic of the time, which being beauty and its difference or similarity in sensation through viewing art and/or nature.

1.2: Aesthetics of Beauty in Nature and Art and Challenging the Subjectivity of Beauty.

To then further this research into the concepts of beauty within nature and art, addressing the inspiration of the Romantics through Western European philosophy is key. Kant, a German philosopher famous for 'Critique of Judgement', which was published a year after the French Revolution broke out (Fettner, 2004, p. 1-15). Because both Romanticism and Kant were influenced by the political values both being instated and challenged at the time, the perception of beauty and aesthetic in different context was debated by Kant as he questioned why nature is pleasing to the senses, just as art is:

"Nature is beautiful because it looks like Art; and Art can only be called beautiful if we are conscious of it as Art while yet it looks like Nature." (Kant, 1790.)

This theory has several implications both for art and beauty; firstly, it implies that art is only enjoyed through a conscious lens of cultural or contextual enjoyment, meaning that art cannot be enjoyed when someone looks at it a certain way, and thus limits their perspective of it. Secondly, this implies the opposite for nature - nature when viewed always evokes a sense of pleasure and through looking at it you experience pleasure without having the knowledge of culture or concept. Thirdly, even though they are separate, they are similar in their pleasing qualities. Kant, however, also argued that true sublimity is experienced when viewing the non-biological world, as the form and magnitude are determined by a human purpose (Kant). Indeed, Keats' laments over the preservation of ancient art, capturing moments lived by humans immortally, and the cascade of differing emotions with them. When applying the human purpose to works of art, particularly art that come from generations preceding the current, Keats' is faced with the barraging questions of mourning the mortality, customs and culture of these people, whilst also celebrating the joy and wonder upon the piece, which coincide with the emotions a person has when creating or viewing art. It is beautiful, not only because it mimics a simplistic pleasure or sublimity, but because it is our existence.

Beauty itself is defined upon its appeal to aesthetic senses, and therefore it is assumed that this sensation of beauty is subject to the perceiver. However, if beauty is built upon a shared idea – such as Romanticism – or upon a shared value of certain shapes, a certain cultural object or desire, then beauty can be perceived similarly by entire communities, cultures, or neighbours. In these assumptions we can assume that beauty is an idea that can be taught and learnt by oneself. Beauty around the world presently can maintain its appeal between countries but can differ completely between people. In this sense, beauty as an idea is both shared and private and can create a feeling of community and individual, thus the idea has always been integral to the identity in a shared or personal sense.

“Maybe we see beauty as subjective only because we have given the wrong place to aesthetic judgement in our lives—seeing it as a way of affirming ourselves, instead of a way of denying ourselves” (Scruton, 2018, p. 9-16)

From this, you can grant that Beauty is neither subjective nor objective, but also that beauty is not completely a way of looking at things to be ‘pleased’ - to affirm a value or trait you observe within yourself or community. The concept of ‘denying yourself’ is also important, as it can mean to stop following your own directions and individuality to submit and gain knowledge from a higher entity. While this may imply a submission to a god or a religious entity, Keats himself was disinterested in religion and instead focuses on ideas that are ‘real’ to him, as he says in his 1817 letter addressed to Benjamin Bailey: “I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart’s affections and the truth of the Imagination” (Everett, 2000). In addition, a shared ideology of Romantic poets would be the dissolution of the self, but also a drive for individualism. In this sense, Keats’ submission to the wills of imagination and emotion are clear throughout the six great Odes.

1.3: *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and *To Autumn* and depictions of Beauty.

To return to *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, this passage comes to mind:

“What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?” (Keats, 1819, l. 8-10).

This Ode is a poem plagued with misunderstandings, quietness, stillness, and questioning. The poetic voice is disjointed, interrupted metrically with missed beats and physically with suspended questions, thoughts, and contemplation (Oswald, 2019). The poem itself is paradoxical as stanza to stanza, the poem almost gives the reader whiplash with the

simultaneous enjoyment and mourning of the still figures upon the urn, questioning their desires and dreams whilst admiring the joyous scene. The end of the first stanza is wrought with rhetorical questions asked by Keats, to which the art answers in silence. Note the language Keats uses, as it is intertwined with aspects classically enjoyed throughout ages: cacophonous ‘pipes’ and ‘timbrels’, aural imagery placed between chaotic questions, and ‘wild ecstasy’ -joy that comes across as maddening. There is a ‘sublimity’ within these lines, though it is unconventional and, as the poem goes on, it is clear that the association between beauty and sublimity is at question with philosophical questions, such as religious questioning (“what men or gods are these?”) and a struggle perhaps with mortality (“struggle to escape”). At once, Keats is associating even unpleasant emotions with sublimity. Even the placement of the lines is disjointed, yet at the conclusion of the mystery, confusion and misunderstandings of the world, comes the final, famous lines:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. (Keats, 1819, 49-50)

The concluding lines of the poem establish a feeling of calm and feel like a conclusive answer to Keats’ woes throughout the poem. These lines almost feel like a peaceful surrender after an epiphany, and these lines are said outside of Keats’ poetic voice, giving an otherworldly or truly wise sense to them. This stillness is reflected within the literal stillness of the art, unmoving and indeed never to move, as the figures upon the urn are frozen forever, in a scene both active in its implicit movement and natural imagery, frozen in time. There are times within the poem that seem like uninterrupted joy, but are perhaps instead reflective of the “mad ecstasy” he wrote about before:

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed

Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;

And, happy melodist, unwearied,

For ever piping songs for ever new;

More happy love! more happy, happy love! (l. 21-25)

The repetition of ‘happy’ here exaggerates a contentment with the scene, immortally preserved. ‘For ever’ piping songs, ‘nor ever’ parting spring goodbye, a season associated with happiness, new life and a renewed world. The aural imagery is more pleasant because the ‘melodist’ is ‘happy’, and the melodies are ‘new’, ‘unwearied’, and associated with ‘happy love’ opposed to

‘struggle’ and ‘mad pursuit’. And yet, these figures ‘struggle to escape’ the ever-frozen world. This delight, then discontentment, then delight again is a constant theme throughout Keats’ entire portfolio, but it is particularly interesting here. Considering Keats’ interest in the ancient Grecian world, he perhaps fails to find the same beauty – be it in the art or nature depicted in this poem – in the world that he lives in. Havens writes:

The poetry of Keats, from the earliest to the latest, is shot through as by bright and sombre threads with two contrasting thoughts: delight in beauty and disappointment with reality. The first of these is so apparent even to the casual reader as to need no illustration, but the second is often overlooked. Yet the two are closely connected, for Keats's disappointment arose from his failure to find in the world of men the beauty that he craved. (Havens, 1950, p. 206-213)

A disappointment in his reality is a disappointment with what happened whilst he was alive; enlightenment and an importance upon progression of science, the ongoing industrial revolution that outlived him. All of which to Keats are a failure to see the world as it once was – nature being pushed aside in favour, perhaps, of more factories being built. Along with Kant's theory of art and nature being interlinked in their beauty, Keats is observing a world within ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ particularly that is frozen, beautiful, yet that moment does not exist anymore, though captured through art. His delight in lines 21-25, as well as his disappointment in lines 8-10 could represent this dichotomy of beauty and reality. The melodies represented in the poem from the urn are imagined and separate from reality, and so are the actions the figures are committing, though implied. Indeed, a lot of the beauty that Keats’ retrieves from the urn, that is the beauty of human life, has been orchestrated within Keats’ imagination, which exaggerates his dissatisfaction with the fact that it isn’t a real moment he can experience, but instead is forced to experience it through art. Furthering this theory, Kant writes, “By right we ought only to describe as Art, production through freedom, i.e. through a will that places reason at the basis of its actions” (Kant, 1790). In this sense, the art being Keats’ writing, through which he expresses freedom, and the will pushing this freedom is his desperate escape to avoid disappointment – that is reality – which indeed is based in some form of reason. As Romanticism is a countermovement to Enlightenment, an era based upon progression and consequently, the destruction of many rural landscapes for the urban; factories, large complexes, Keats’ distaste could be linked to a distaste in mankind, as he wrote in one of his many letters, this time addressed to his family (brothers, sister-in-law):

Look at the Poles and at the Sands of Africa, Whirlpools and volcanoes, let men exterminate them and I will say that they may arrive at earthly Happiness”(...) “they are as native to the world as itself no more can man be happy in spite, the world[l]y elements will prey upon his nature (...) Upon the whole I dislike Mankind (Keats, February – May 1819, ed. Colvin, 2011)

Havens elaborates:

But, despite Keats's interest in the world of men, it was for him an unlovely world of poverty, pain, disease, death, and thwarted desires. Accordingly, it was not a fit subject for poetry, since to him poetry meant beauty and, as we have seen, his conception of beauty was narrow and immature. The belief, which has considerable currency today, - that vital literature deals with the inhibited, the mal-adjusted and frustrated, the ignorant, the futile, and the vicious, with the dreary lives of petty if not contemptible persons, he would not have understood. He turned repeatedly to ancient Greece where life had the serene, ideal beauty and the eternal youth of the figures in the Elgin marbles (Havens, 1950, p.206-213).

Keats' predetermined values are clear particularly throughout 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', his appreciation of Grecian art and nature is a symptom of his present disappointment in the now, and the now is a world being unappreciated, destroyed and discarded. The aestheticism of his poetry reflects this particularly throughout this ode, as the aesthetics of nature and art are combined with an uncertainty, an unwillingness to separate himself from the sublime, a disappointment in the real. To revisit Wordsworth, Keats' was influenced by his works but during this poem it can be argued that the values do not directly carry over. To revisit: “they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions” (Wordsworth, 1800). Whilst yes, the simplicity of the final line of *Ode on a Grecian Urn* rings true to this ideology, and the appreciation of basic pleasures such as love, music, and similar rustic affairs enjoyed throughout generations are presented, the ideas are complicated and layered with other implications. For example, the semantic fields in the fourth stanza:

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?

To what green altar, O mysterious priest,

Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,

And all her silken flanks with garlands drest? (...)

And, little town, thy streets for evermore

Will silent be; and not a soul to tell

Why thou art desolate, can e'er return. (l. 31-40)

There is a clear implication of death, a ceremony or a holy ritual which occurs after a death; and the poem's stillness in this stanza reflects this – yet there is a certain beauty in this stanza: “green altar”, depicting a natural, perhaps overgrown, place in which to rest the dead and to make sacrifice. “Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies” – a picture of a calf, dressed in “garlands”, its flanks soft, “silken”. And the stanza ends with quiet, “not a soul to tell” “evermore (...) silent), “desolate”. It is almost a fetishised view of death, portrayed as a holy ceremony decorated and serene, with the undertones of secrecy. It is portrayed beautifully, as Keats adds another layer of implication that death – albeit, with religious imagery – is beautiful.

Whilst *Ode on a Grecian Urn* depicts a less ‘rustic’ appreciation of the nature captured within the art of the Urn and speaks about the beauty of death within a religious ritual, the last Ode he wrote towards the end of his short life just before he began suffering with tuberculosis, in his last words naming the death an ‘easy’ one (Wanted in Rome, 2001) was *To Autumn*. In this ode we return to the rustic pleasures that Wordsworth referred to in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, as Keats reminisces on experiencing the fruitfulness of Autumn in this, one of his final years (November 1819). It is unclear whether Keats was fully aware of his condition (tuberculosis), however he notes he has become fully aware in his letter to Fanny Brawne a few months later (February 1820), and it would have been fully apparent to Keats’ that most of his family had died of the disease, so it is possible that he expected and anticipated the same fate following his brother’s death in late 1818. Leading up to this poem, Keats wrote to his friend John Reynolds, enamoured by the nature surrounding him upon the habit he had taken up, taking walks for an hour around the cathedral which he was staying. He writes:

How beautiful the season is now. How fine the air – a temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking, chaste weather – Dian skies. I never liked stubble-fields so much as now – aye, better than the chilly green of the Spring. Somehow, a stubble-field looks warm, in the same way that some pictures look warm. This struck me so much in my Sunday’s walk that I composed upon it. (Keats, September 1819, ed. Colvin, 2011)

Haven’s writes:

In (...) “To Autumn,” for example, one of his latest and most perfect pieces, he turns to the familiar English countryside, the unidealized beauty which nearly everyone sees and

feels: apples, moss'd cottage-trees, gourds, hazel-nuts, the granary floor, the gleaner with a sheaf on his head, the cyder-press, stubble-plains, gnats, hedge-cricket, robins, and twittering swallows (Havens, 1950, p. 206-213)

Whilst there is still an element of escapism at play as Keats still alludes to 'Dian skies', he is much more focussed upon the real elements of the season – the nature, the fruits, vegetables and nuts that grow seasonally for the harvest, the landscapes of plains, fields, and different birds. This is reminiscent of the pleasures Wordsworth alluded to, and indeed the beauty of nature here feels much more simplistic and less complex than *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. The beauty he refers to is almost un-imagined and real, as he writes:

With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;

To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,

And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;

To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells

With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,

And still more, later flowers for the bees,

Until they think warm days will never cease,

For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells. (Keats, 1819, l 4-11)

Autumn, as a season associated with harvest and fruitfulness, is referenced by Keats often throughout these lines; 'fill', 'swell', 'o'er-brimm'd', 'never cease' – a season of which beauty lies in its plentifulness and providing to nature and mankind before the cold season of winter swiftly follows. The plentifulness depicted here is almost a pure sublimity, enlightening but not overwhelming. A possible allusion to this enlightenment could be within the 'clammy shells', the only negative adjective throughout this stanza. The pure beauty of nature on a landscape lacking the destruction of nature that Keats previously claimed to detest, as well as a distaste for mankind in general for their cause in the destruction of these landscapes is completely different to the representation in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, as this is a more simplistic appreciation of the features of nature he can directly interact with, as opposed to nature under a barrier of art or a barrier of time distant to Keats. *To Autumn* in comparison feels more like a celebration of Keats' time and experiences whilst he's presently living.

To return to the theoretical framework of Kant and Scruton's theory of beauty and the different aesthetics associated with it, and Wordsworth's simplistic, rustic pleasures, the overall conclusion is that Keats both affirms and separates himself from these theories. Keats affirms Kant in his willingness to associate art and nature, as they are closely interlinked within *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. However, Keats' depiction of beauty as almost nonconventional, at times cacophonous, overwhelming, and an overtaking power changes the entire idea of beauty that Kant outlines, as it becomes an amalgamation of philosophical desires, humanistic problems, and paradoxical questions. This is also reminiscent of fears at the time from political philosopher Edmund Burke, who was afraid that beauty overwhelming the senses like Keats' depicted would then turn into Sublimity, an emotion he stated 'suspends' the soul and ceases all movement in a state of astonishment (Burke, 2005). Scruton adds that beauty is viewed as a way of 'affirming' oneself – cultural or perhaps personal beliefs – but also argues that it should be seen as a way of 'denying' oneself also. Keats' changes between affirming and denying his own moral beliefs, yet the final famous lines of the Ode are said outside of poetic voice, being interpreted as a higher power (deity, or God – Grecian or not). Perhaps this is affirming – but the content of the line also denies his struggle throughout the poem somewhat. Beauty *being* Truth being all 'ye on earth' (referring to humanity) 'need to know' is indicative that there is more to understand or contemplate, but these will be forever out of our reach due to the limitations of the mortal being – despite this, the line feels reassuring and accepting despite it being out of poetic voice, Keats himself finally accepting this truth as the poem comes to its abrupt end, the significance of the final two lines being a statement of finality.

The aesthetics of Beauty are everchanging and inconsistent with time – for Keats, there is beauty in all, and the exploration of concepts such as religious imagery and death in the same poem as celebrating the ethereal natural beauty, contained within the constraints of a Grecian Urn brings a multifaceted, Hellenistic, Environmental and Artistic perspective into the multiple different appearances or personas of beauty. Beauty being in everything and thus using it as an exploration of the self and selfhood and appreciating it in its most simplistic forms was consequential of Keats everchanging relationship with human life and the reality of his contemporary society. As Keats comes to terms with concepts like 'death', associated with negative emotions and effects, he finds the beauty within it. Thus, the aestheticism of Keats' beautiful poetic world remains important to understanding how he and other Romantic poets like him navigated the world.

Chapter 2: Beauty Cannot Keep: Beauty, Imagination, and Reality in 'Ode to a Nightingale'.

2.1: Imagination and Sublime: Defining and Reading Contemporary Opinions

Imagination is a difficult concept to comprehend and define. The idea itself has been contemplated by many historians, philosophers, and artists alike, as the relation imagination has with our cultures, beliefs, and creative spirit. If “to imagine is to represent without aiming at things as they actually, presently, and subjectively are.” (Laoi & Gendler, 2011), then imagination could perhaps be viewed as idealist escapism, or wild irrational thinking far from reality.

Imagination itself is therefore not purely rational - with original critiques on imagination dating back to Ancient Greece whilst reflecting on Greek Mythology, imagination was thought to be ‘unproductive thought’ as imagination existed outside of the bounds of reasoning, being just ‘ramblings’ of ‘demented dreamers’ (Blumenberg, 1985, trans. Wallace.). However, the creative elements in such mythology allowed humans to rebel against the powers they believed they originated from, concerning their relationship with the gods. Take the Prometheus myth, which dates to the 8th century BC, which is a myth in which Prometheus steals fire from the gods and gifts it to the humans, which allows them to build the world around them. Prometheus is punished by the other gods, and famously is tortured in the bowels of the earth as his liver is pecked by birds. This mythology is purely imagined, and yet it is more than ‘unproductive thought’ by ‘demented dreamers’ as around it, civilisations have been built upon the ideology that mankind can indeed rebel against divine order. This is poetic imagination, which is thought that does not follow rationality, but instead the flow of the imagination, be it erratic or sometimes non-sensical to those following it.

The imagination’s relationship with beauty and the sublime is complex. Whilst Romantic poets associated with the beautiful with simpler, smaller and painless pleasure, the sublime was with boundlessness, obscurity, and most importantly, imagination stretching grandeur. Unlike beauty, the sublime is rooted in fear and astonishment (Burke, 2005). The sublime itself is a category of the beautiful, however when speaking of poetic imagination, the sublime is what causes philosophical questioning in Keats’ writing; death, divinity, yearning – the pleasure in painful experiences. Smith writes:

When these definitions are applied to the relationship between "beautiful" and "sublime," they can be boiled down to the following: being pleasing to the senses in some way (beautiful), and evoking an overwhelming loftiness or vastness, either in ideas, art, nature or experience (sublime). (Smith, 2004)

Because of the imagination's relationship with the rational and the real mixed in with experiences of the beautiful, this creates the sublimity depicted throughout romantic literature: vast environments that are beautiful, yet so scarily vast or large it's difficult to discern whether the writer is truly pleased by the environments. In Keats, the sublime is the beautiful but mixed with the shock and terror the sublime evokes: there is pain, questioning and yearning beyond his rational understanding. Keats' laments throughout his poetry about the unreal – the unobtainable or the long-gone, and the perhaps completely imagined.

The imagination has guided several of the second-generation poet's contemporary to Keats. Dreaming, a concept that Keats' explores in many of his poems, opened the minds of several romantics as reality and imagination combined into visions and images. Dreams having the capability of evoking a variety of emotions within the dreamer. A prime example would be Mary Shelley, who famously wrote *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). She was asked whilst on holiday in Geneva (of which was the year without summer caused by volcanic ash. Shelley stayed indoors for essentially the entire duration of this holiday) by Lord Byron for each of their group to write a ghost-story. This is how *Frankenstein* was born, a novel which would incorporate elements of her own trauma (such as miscarrying and death). In the introduction to the novel, she states:

When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie (Shelley, 1831).

As *Frankenstein* is an early example science-fiction story, perhaps bordering on the genres of horror or psychological horror, perhaps her imagination here is gripped with fear – anxiety, unpleasantness. She uses words here like 'possessed', as if supernatural powers had forced her mind into these places. Burke's *Critique of Reason* delves into the depths of the imagination in which the sublime is studied:

“The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force” (Burke, 2005)

This describes a similar ‘paralysis’ in which Shelley depicts, an inability to stop the imagination, nor a desire to. Burke argues that reason is not concerned by the imagination, nor is it a ‘consequence’ upon it, and therefore this evokes a feeling of the sublime. Here imagination is not a production of our reasoning, but instead a stream of erratic thoughts that are more linked to senses and feelings. Fear here has robbed Shelley of her ability to reason, and therefore her possessive imagination has taken control of her senses and ‘gifted’ her visions which led to the birth of *Frankenstein*. It is interesting to find that Wordsworth views imagination differently to Burke. Wordsworth himself saw imagination as an ‘absolute power’ and argued that reason is in ‘her most exalted mood’, and granting ‘clearest insight’ (Wordsworth, 1850, l. 167-170). These arguments are not in parallel from each other, but as a Romantic poet it is expected that imagination is seen as a tool to these writers to remake the world, and thus their relationship with the imagination is that it is almost otherworldly. Shelley herself was in awe of the power of her imagination in this excerpt, and this sentiment carries over to Keats. Keats relationship with the imagination is not dissimilar to Shelley’s: he responds to stimuli like Shelley, for example his personal traumas and relationships have a direct impact on his writings and relationships with mortality as previously covered. Keats also states in one of his letters that “What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not—for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty” (Keats, to Benjamin Bailey, November 1817, ed. Colvin, 2011). With this we can see that Keats’ almost did view imagination similarly to Wordsworth, as what it seizes as ‘beauty’ must be ‘truth’ (reminiscent of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, and therefore reminiscent of the imagination being a gateway into higher knowledge or understanding). Both Shelley and Keats are letting their imaginations ‘control’ their visions and sentiments, and the sublime is their guide. When considering nature in this argument as it is integral to both poets, it is different from the relationship with the imagination and art as art is a ‘created’ and therefore a more ‘real’ stimuli, however nature is not ‘created’ in the same way. When considering this we see that nature within the imagination is often more untouched or unaltered in the way that art is – flowers, trees, most natural imagery is consistent with how it is.

2.2: Keats: Imagination, Sublime, and Human Limitations.

Keats’ poetry contains themes that are already detached from his reality, being mythology or vast imagined landscapes. Reality was a concept Keats was wrestled with - he was disappointed with the state of the world specifically environmentally and thought the world to be full of injustice and pain, therefore it can be argued this beauty he is obsessed with is a form

of escapism. The beauty, though based on real landscapes Keats' had walked upon or travelled to within his short career, feels like an illusion to the readers, Mahoney writes:

Throughout Keats's writing, the imagination bears a conflicted relation to the real, whether understood as the natural world or the human world of pain and agony. While oftentimes responsive to that which exists in this world, the essential beauty (or truth) that the imagination creates just as often appears to be the product of a dream, of the abandonment of the real for the ideal. Put another way, one of the central tensions informing the Keatsian imagination is that between reality and illusion (Mahoney, 2017, p.168-177).

Keats' disappointment with reality and delight in the sublime is thematic throughout his poetry, and the Keatsian imagination being 'between' these opposites creates an environment within his poetry which feels almost dream-like, or as if we are witnessing Keats' imagination as he writes it onto the paper. In which case, the 'illusion' of Keats' poetry is that it is between what is real and unreal, bending the definitions of the two. We see this particularly in the great Odes,

I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon me - The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think - We remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second Chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten to it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by awakening of the thinking principle - within us - we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight: However among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the nature and heart of Man — of convincing one's nerves that the World is full of misery and Heartbreak, Pain, sickness and oppression — whereby This Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open - but all dark - all leading to dark passages — We see not the balance of good and evil. We are in a Mist - We are now in that state — We feel the burden of the Mystery (Keats, May 1818, ed. Colvin, 2011)

This theory elaborates on the enlightenment that poetry bestows upon Keats. He compares human life to a 'large mansion', one chamber of which he names the 'thoughtless chamber', where most people remain for as long as they 'do not think'. He elaborates that journeying

through the chambers will intoxicate you with delights, however this also awakens you to these oppressions in the world. Keats' believed at the time he journeyed into the second apartment and thus became aware at the time of him writing this letter, and it is clear within his poetry that Keats depicts such oppression and misery, but also the overwhelming, intoxicating light he depicts in his descriptions of nature and mythology: soaring landscapes, references to deities and sacred fountains, mountains, alters. The poetic imagination was his gateway through the 'thoughtless chamber' into the 'chamber of maiden-thought'. Considering that Keats' believes that thought and imagination is the way to true enlightenment, to experience the world in its full sublimity and it's pain, and to see the beauty of the world as a painful and pleasurable consequence of existence, the imagination plays a massive part in Keats' paradoxical view of the world.

2.3: *Ode to a Nightingale*: Imagination, Illusion and Reality, and their Relationship with Beauty

The great Odes were written after this theory/realisation, and in such we can truly see the depths of the imagination: real elements are mixed with dream-like imagery, and the poetic voice is conflicted – much like Keats – on just how to perceive the world. These themes are most prevalent in *Ode to a Nightingale*, an escapist piece lamenting about dreaming, imagination and death, Keats details his imagination in vivid detail, questioning if he had a 'vision or a waking dream?' and in the final line 'to wake or sleep?'. Note the title addresses the Nightingale, a figure Keats calls to and details its appearance, yet both Keats and the reader do not hear its call, nor know its destination – yet both follow through the eight stanzas. *Ode to a Nightingale* is a poem of restlessness, elation, depression and the beauty of the imagination: his final question if indeed what he experienced was a symptom of a dream, in which the imagination would play a large role in, or a vivid vision, which would have been given to him by otherworldly powers, plays upon the ideas of the sublime and the beautiful and the effect they have upon the mind and the poetic imagination. In the very first stanza, Keats laments:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains

My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,

Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains

One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk: (Keats, 1819, l 1-4)

Keats begins the poem in a state of despair, noting he feels as if he is slipping into a drowsy, slumber like state which feels exactly as if he had consumed substances – though he has not. This illustrates the length of his slumber, but also contextualises the vivid dream-like sequence

he depicts in the following stanzas. He slips 'lethe-wards' into a slumber-like state. In this dreary state the reader is exposed to different kinds of sublime, which being the man-made world and the natural world, blending, contrasting, amalgamating into each stanza, with the theme of the nightingale Keats' follows and calls to, but its answer is nowhere to be found. The nightingales' call, Keats' refers to as a song he cannot appreciate properly as he is 'too happy in thine happiness', therefore he 'envies not' the nightingales happiness as it sings with 'full-throated ease' (l. 6-10), because he is too happy to fully appreciate it. Solidified by the fact the song is not described, and therefore the reader cannot comprehend it, this lack of auditory imagery represents a sort-of deafness to the world beyond our own thoughts as humans. In this sense, there is simplistic beauty that humanity miss every day, simply because they are caught up in their own thoughts. Keats' furthers this by indulging in very human pleasures, such as alcohol or other depressant substances in the next stanza:

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim: (l. 11-20)

Keats proclaims to the nightingale a desire to drink, that he might disappear with the nightingale and never be seen again. Considering the implication of the nightingale and it's pleasing song and the use of Greek mythology here is particularly distinct. Hippocrene is a fountain sacred to the muses on Mount Helicon, created for them by the winged horse, and it was believed to give the power of poetic inspiration to its drinkers (Oxford University Press, 2010). Keats is literally diluting his vision (or dream) into alcohol, asking that it grants him inspiration of myth, legend. This theme of consumption is carried over from the first stanza, at first being a cup of 'hemlock' (poison) or 'dull opiate' (a substance used for pain relief) (l.2-3), now a 'beaker full of the warm

south', with 'beaded bubbles winking' and 'purple-stained mouth'. Keats' could be implying that this is the same beaker and mouth as the vision and world shifts around Keats, giving the image of a drug-induced high that is quickly shifting the environment around the poetic voice as the poem jumps from stanza to stanza. This would substantiate the realms of the imagination, as nonsensical as the jumping environments are reminiscent of the speed and capacity of the human imagination. He is following the nightingale in first-person, airing out his woes and desires, yet drinking so he, like the nightingale, 'may leave the world unseen'. Inspiration, intoxication, and then death combine into an almost unreal world, almost overwhelmingly beautiful but with the undertone of darkness – which follows him throughout the poem. The following stanza enlightens the reader on what Keats' may be trying to escape:

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;

Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,

Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;

Where but to think is to be full of sorrow

And leaden-eyed despairs,

Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,

Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow. (l.21-30)

The nightingale remains blissfully unaware of the reality that Keats' faces, that being the pains of illness and death that remain upon Keats'. This stanza following on from the mythological imagery and lamenting upon escaping the world solidifies the weight of death and illness upon Keats, and therefore his will to escape from it through his mind, or in contrast, to escape from his mind to a higher plane and to open more doors within the Mansion of Many Apartments. Men sit and 'groan', hairs 'spectre-thin', and 'to think is to be full of sorrow', the slowness, and yet the 'fret' of the fever paining humanity and Keats. The final lines solidify the belief that beauty is impermanent in his world, and therefore so is love. The juxtaposition of these stanzas is the stark differences between reality and the imagined, Keats finding solace within his poetry and his imagination, as the mind grants him freedom from reality. Keats then writes:

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,

Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,

But on the viewless wings of Poesy,

Though the dull brain perplexes and retards: (l.31-34)

The dull brain 'perplexing' and 'retarding' signify Keats reaching the limits of the imagination as the poem becomes darker and the mind is unable to comprehend the vastness of what is beyond it. Bacchus, being the god of wine, who he disregards in favour of Poesy (or poetry).

Poetry and creative imagination are Keats' ultimate escape, as Nicholls writes:

"Keats repeatedly explores ways in which the hardships of humanity might be pleasurably eased by poetry, exploring how the creative imagination can allow both the poet and reader to 'Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget' the daily trials of existence. (...)For Keats, the mind contains an ability to abstract one from one's bodily sensations" (Nicholls, 2019).

Indeed, Keats' himself became ill shortly after he had written the six great odes, poetry being his medicine until his last days, where he became too ill to move. The following stanza illustrates the power of the imagination to see what he is blind to:

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,

Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,

But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet

Wherewith the seasonable month endows

The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;

White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;

Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;

And mid-May's eldest child,

The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,

The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves. (L.41-50)

The blindness in this stanza is combined with natural imagery, though he 'cannot see the flowers at his feet', his senses are enamoured with olfactory imagery of 'sweet' grass, fruits,

violets, and finally the musky scent of the wine. His blindness in this stanza is calling back to the Mansion of Many Apartments, referencing the darkness of the rooms in front of the chamber of maiden-thought. Though he cannot see the flowers, they still strongly represent this stanza with their beauty, which has largely been imagined by the blinded, yet still sensuous and enamoured poetic voice. However, he has completely imagined the beauty of the forest, trying to picture a beautiful world despite being in complete darkness. The darkness, again, could refer to his theory of the “mansion of many apartments”: “Thought becomes gradually darken'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open - but all dark - all leading to dark passages — We see not the balance of good and evil” (Keats, May 1816, ed. Colvin, 2011). Through this we can see Keats trying to reach enlightenment, still experiencing the beauty of the ‘chamber of maiden-thought’, though his thought is ‘darken’d’. Keats’ representing death two stanzas before this one are an attempt to ‘balance’ good and evil. When the poem ends, the visions Keats’ experienced fade away, but the despair he feels at the beginning of the poem contrasted with the end are different: there is a feeling of acceptance, almost as if Keats’ was grieving his human condition, and his inability to truly be as happy and free as the nightingale.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell

To toll me back from thee to my sole self!

Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well

As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.

Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades

Past the near meadows, over the still stream,

Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep

In the next valley-glades:

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?

Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep? (l. 71-80)

The exclamations here are a fond farewell, and Keats’ accepts his imagination cannot trick him into thinking he can fly away from reality: “the fancy cannot cheat so well”. The poem could therefore be seen as a journey of evolution for the intellectual self, as Sahoo writes:

The imaginative world of the nightingale does in fact provide no permanent substitute to the fever and fret of the actual world. Rather, the poet is found to evolve his intellectual self through a meaningful tug-of-war between the real and the idea (Sahoo, 2018).

As the nightingale fades away into the next valley, the acceptance of the final stanza juxtaposes the grief and heartache in the first, and the effect of the imagination and delving deeper into intellect and thought has left Keats' with the feeling of calm. The stanza also ends with a rhetorical question, symbolizing the acknowledgement of questions that cannot be answered for mortal beings. Unlike the nightingale, Keats' is saddled with queries of life that he will be unable to be rid of until death. Imagination is consistently linked with the pleasures of life; simplistic pleasures in nature, and the desire to live a simple life like the mockingbird, which once again echoes Wordsworth's' theory of rustic pleasures being the key to happiness. However, Keats' accepts a different theory, in which he can enjoy these pleasures, but he also appreciates the condition of being a human, inextricable from accepting pain and mortality. The entirety of the poem represents imagination is an escape from reality to beauty, but Keats ends the poem with the knowledge he cannot dream forever.

Chapter 3: Beauty That Must Die: Keats and Death: Illusioned, Beautiful, Melancholic.

3.3: The Beautiful Youthful Death of John Keats, its Affect and Appeal to Romantic Aesthetics. Even in death, Keats was and is remembered as a beautiful soul, who's beliefs were beautiful, and who died a beautiful death. Throughout his vast collection the theme of death appears more than any other theme, and indeed death surrounded Keats' throughout his life; from his mother dying when he was fourteen, to his brother following years later in arguably the most productive year of Keats' career (1819). All of which are a victim to the disease referred to as consumption. The disease name derives from the Greek word 'phthisis' meaning 'wasting away' or perishing. The disease made the victim look sickly, causing weight loss and fatigue (Saleem & Azher, 2013). Consumption, or tuberculosis, plagued his personal life, taking his family and eventually himself – and this burden leaks into his poetry. Keats' fascination with death, as a beautiful act or indeed, as a way out of life, is prominent in his entire portfolio. There is a lust for quietness, for stillness – something he had observed within nature and expressed his amazement for throughout his poetry – and this is an aspect he found also in death. Tuberculosis itself is an image associated with beauty – paleness, frailness and wasting away, and was a popular image throughout the Romantic era, Black writing "The disease was believed to enhance the beauty of its predestined victims, forming a discourse between illness and romanticism.", also noting that Tuberculosis directly contributed to the beauty standards of men and women living in the 18th century (Black, 2022). Keats' death itself inspired many preceding poets, Oscar Wilde penning *The Grave of John Keats*, which highlights the thoughts about his death even sixty years afterwards:

"Rid of the world's injustice, and his pain,

He rests at last beneath God's veil of blue:

Taken from life when life and love were new

The youngest of the martyrs here is lain,

Fair as Sebastian, and as early slain.

No cypress shades his grave, no funeral yew,

But gentle violets weeping with the dew

Weave on his bones an ever-blossoming chain" (Wilde, 1881, l. 1-8)

Wilde names Keats the ‘youngest of the martyrs’, his form ‘fair as Sebastian’, Sebastian being Saint Sebastian, ordered to be killed for his faith. Wilde is viewing him here as a saintly figure, dying too soon due to his ‘faith’ (that being his view upon the world and his poetry). Keats being as revered as these legends gives him an elevated position as a Saint or great figure in history, his grave then being detailed as out of the shade, and ‘gentle violets’ wrapping themselves around his bones. Violets particularly had a significant meaning as their popularity exploded during the Victorian era, and they were prominent themes throughout famous writers’ texts. For example, Shakespeare using Violets in many of his plays (see *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Hamlet*, etc.) as a symbol for ‘thoughts being occupied (with) love’ and later, death and famously grieving (Doleschal, 2021) as they were popularised by Queen Victoria in the Victorian era (Keats dying just under twenty years before the start of her reign), who was grieving deeply for most of her reign. Keats’ mentions violets in *Ode to a Nightingale*, and while its peak popularity exceeded his death, the meaning of the flower carries over throughout several eras the precede it. Wilde is creating an image of love and death wrapping themselves around Keats’ bones – something he is remembered for and a beautiful yet bittersweet image that captures the essence of his life and death. He is remembered as a beautiful, saintly being who passed quietly, his beliefs being ahead of its time. These themes coincide beautifully with how Keats wanted to be remembered. Severn, Keats’ friend who witnessed his death also cements this vision of Keats as a saint, he wrote to Keats’ publisher, John Taylor, after his death “the mucus was boiling within him – it gurgled in his throat – this increased – but yet he seem’d without pain – his eyes look’d upon me with extreme sensibility but without pain – at 11 he died in my arms” (Joseph Severn to John Taylor, 27th February 1821). Whitcombe writes that Severn has made Keats the noble “hero” in a “staged scene”, dying an ideal death (Whitcombe, 2023). With these depictions of Keats’ death – though sanitised for the purpose of building a mythic, saintly image of Keats – we can dissolve the aesthetics Keats’ romanticised and view the reality of his situation as an unsuccessful career blossoming posthumously.

This image of a doomed genius, dying young and in a beautiful way is an image that haunts and drives Romantics. For Keats, his work establishes that death is a kind of escape, looking forward to his death in a way that feels both tragic and justified. He writes about death in his letters; “The world is too brutal for me—I am glad there is such a thing as the grave—I am sure I shall never have any rest till I get there” (Keats, August 1820 to Fanny Brawne, ed. Colvin, 2011), and additionally, his alleged last words to his friend Joseph Severn who nursed him in death were “Severn—I—lift me up—I am dying—I shall die easy—don’t be frightened—be firm, and thank God it has come!” (Patterson-Morgan, 2021). Keats’ almost welcoming death, and the reception of his

poetry and his persona posthumously is reminiscent of the image of Thomas Chatterton, Castleton writes:

“He’d be an archetype for all those with leanings towards the Romantic and gothic – Blake, Byron, Keats and Shelley praised him while the Pre-Raphaelites put him in their pictures. Chatterton was widely thought to have committed suicide, after ripping up his rejected and scorned manuscripts and hurling them across his garret. How could such a youth not become a symbol of the doomed artist, of the ignored genius, of precocious talent spurned by an increasingly mechanistic, materialistic and shallow civilisation?” (Castleton, 2021).

As Castleton mentions, this image was praised by Keats and his contemporaries and serves as a great example of the image of a mythical Romantic, immortalised in the sentiment that they died unsuccessful and were only fully realised in their accomplishments after death (not considering first-generation romantic Wordsworth or Blake, as this is an image that is specifically popularised by later Romantics such as Byron, Shelley and Keats.). When returning to the image of Keats, wasting away that was aesthetically pleasing at the time, but also appealing to the idea of Keats’ work being misunderstood, underappreciated and ignored, we are met with an image that was the culmination of the culture and identity of Romantics. They thought themselves as a revered group of doomed artists, who would meet their fame only through death. This was the image that many like Keats sought to obtain, because to them, it matched their idea of the beautiful: the immortal, beautiful image of someone understood only through their death.

3.2: Poetry as ‘Dying’ to Visual: Poetry and its Significance to Keats, and its Mimicry of Popular Entertainment

Poetry to Romantics was one of the only art forms that could contain this vision, as the culture at the time was moving to visual: mass-produced entertainment found in illustrations, and later photographs. Wood writes:

“Much less scholarly attention, however, has been devoted to the relation of Romantic literary culture to the emerging commercial *visual* culture I am describing here: from domestic collectibles such as prints, illustrated books, and, later, photographs, to the public sphere of theatres, art exhibitions, museums, popular entertainment. (...) Fundamental aesthetic categories of Romanticism – imagination, original genius, Hellenism, the gothic, picturesque landscape, and the sublime – (...) (the conflict is) between Romantic, expressive theories of artistic production emphasising original

genius and the idealizing imagination and a new visual-cultural industry of mass reproduction, spectacle and simulation” (Wood, 2001, p.7)

Here, Wood argues that the sensory experience that Romanticism emulated through poetry found itself in competition with visual arts, accelerating in production at the time due to the forthcoming Industrial Revolution and the invention of photography following just after Keats’ death in 1822. Poetry, of course, survives today, but sensuality experienced only in theatre and physical entertainment have always been popular, and this popularity accelerated with the inventions founded nearing the end of Keats’ era. Wood’s argument also implies that Romantics would affirm the use of poetry as a combatant for this physical experience that was popular at the time – and this is true for Keats, often speaking of ‘Poesy’, carrying Keat’s upon its wings and being his one consistent source for inspiration. This again is integral to Keats’ identity as if we view poetry as a dying art form, and his peers (namely, Shelley and Byron) dying whilst young and well before their prime intellectually, death is a theme that surrounds the elements of Romantic literature: their art, though creating visual imagery through words, lacked the public appeal of modern visual culture, and considering that second generation Romantics such as Keats found little to no success, this could be a symptom of their society ignoring the intellect or creativity behind the works because they lacked popularity. At least, this was apparent in Keats’ work, who was burdened with the fact his works had little commercial success and the fact that the critical reception while he was alive was thought of as ‘underdeveloped’ or ‘immature’. Wood names this phenomenon “shock” of modernity, and the effect this has on Keats is apparent throughout his personal letters as he laments upon the lack of success his career had, despite him abandoning his previous career to pursue poetry as it was the heart of his passion.

3.3: *Ode on Melancholy*: Grieving, Human Emotion, and the Delight and Beauty within Pain. Considering this contest between rival aesthetics, we then move to Keats’ poetry – all six of the great Odes were written after his brother Tom’s death, however in particular *Ode on Melancholy* meditates upon the feeling of grief, a complex emotion, which once again ignites Keats’ imagination. As the popular entertainment and art of the time was mainly centred around sensory experience, it is possible that Keats is trying to emulate this experience through *Melancholy*, a great emotion that he intends to tackle with reference to the senses – the oral imagery of eating and drinking, and the visual and tactile imagery of the drowsiness and human touch. The emotion itself is immersive in the senses, as O’Brian says in *Sean O’Brian on Ode on Melancholy (BBC)*: “Lament becomes a kind of affirmation. Melancholy is, as they say, an immersive experience. Keats favoured such immersion, it enabled him to explore his own vision

in this complex state, and to convert it into imaginative energy” (O’Brian, 2019). In this imagination, beauty once again becomes a poignant feature - the entire concept is what Keats’ thought as moral indicated in poems such as *Ode on a Nightingale*, as he chases the beautiful song of the nightingale, a fleeting song and metaphorical of beauty. This idea is affirmed in *Ode on Melancholy*: beauty is no longer an immortal idea and is something that is fleeting, and ‘must die’. From Keats’ previous commentary on death, it’s clear it is not something he feared: rather the opposite. It was something he looked forward to and counted on to live out the fantasy of the dead, misunderstood genius – however, there is also an indication that he feared death, particularly dying before his poetic career was established. Whilst popular aesthetics of time romanticised the dead poet, he is jealous of the eternal life of concepts beyond himself, taking solace in the simple life he has built and the love within it. His grieving is apparent in his letters, the death of his brother Tom making forty appearances in the eighty (approx.) letters he wrote in 1818 (Whitcombe, 2023). Therefore, the purpose of *Ode on Melancholy* serves to meditate on grief of all things; fleeting life, fleeting beauty, and the fleeting nature of grieving itself.

We begin *Ode on Melancholy* with Keats confronting his grieving with another mythological allusion:

No, no! go not to Lethe, neither twist
Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;
Make not your rosary of yew-berries,
Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be
Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl
A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,
And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul. (Keats, 1819, l. 1-10)

‘Lethe’ is a river in Hades, causing the drinkers to forget their pasts, whilst the rest of this stanza refers to different poisonous plants or creatures associated with death (death moth and beetle, nightshades and yew berries – which are poisonous) and darkness (the owl, and Proserpine, queen of the underworld). Note that the stanza begins with the exclamation “No, no!”, for the

purpose of emphasising to the reader, or perhaps to Keats himself that he should not resort to methods of forgetting his sadness, nor numbing his pain or even perhaps dying to escape it. We have seen before in *Ode to a Nightingale*, in which Keats details a vision/dream that may have been under the influence of substances he used to numb pain. Despite this, Keats reasons that numbing this pain would result in the 'drowning' of the 'wakeful anguish of the soul', that being exaggerating the suffering and harming the self. The natural imagery here is bitter – and it is not unlike Keats to use nature symbolically – but the images of death and numbing smother the opening stanza. From this we can garner that Keats' is reasoning with the reader that melancholy and therefore grieving is something that cannot be halted, nor numbed, nor embraced. Keats' embraces melancholy, simply living through it, a theme in the following stanza:

But when the melancholy fit shall fall
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
And hides the green hill in an April shroud;
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,
Or on the wealth of globed peonies;
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes. (l. 11-20)

Melancholy is sudden: it falls upon its victim like a 'weeping cloud', hiding the beauty in nature, drooping flowers and obscuring the 'green hill's of springtime. In these opening 4 lines, melancholy is portrayed in pathetic fallacy in a raincloud that obscures the beautiful. However, then Keats' argues to find solace in 'roses' and 'peonies' (flowers associated with love and romance), or in rainbows over the sea. Thematic with this is the ultimate three lines, which depict a 'mistress' angering, in which Keats advises letting her 'rave' and 'feed deep, deep' upon her eyes. It is interesting that Keats' depicts a gendered picture of melancholy as a rather intensely angered woman, reminiscent of the opinions on sensibility at the time – that being a medical condition associated with the elasticity of nerves, and therefore resulting in its victim

being 'more emotional', perhaps sometimes 'irrational'. The purpose of this gendered depiction is perhaps to 'live through' these emotions, rather than finding solace from melancholy in intoxication, or sinking deeper into it. Keats now details finding beauty in the everyday once again – in nature, or in personal relationships. These, however, are not a way out of melancholy as he explores in the ultimate stanza:

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
His soul shalt taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung. (l.21-30)

'She dwells with beauty' is an allusion to one of Keats contemporaries, Lord Byron's *She walks in Beauty* – 'like the night', (Byron, 1814, l.1) Byron writes, painting a figure of a woman adorned in dark, possibly grieving clothing and surrounded by images associated with death (ravens) which accent her beauty. Keats follows with 'Beauty that must die'. Byron's figure is beautiful, innocent and graceful, and Keats links this figure to Melancholy, Haverkamp writes:

"The grammatical subject of Keats's sentence, however, which seemed to refer to the object of the preceding stanza, the mistress of pervert desire, turns out to be the objectifying instance, the goddess Melancholy herself" (Haverkamp, 1990, p.700)

The goddess Melancholy is intertwined with 'Joy', 'whose hand is ever at his lips', and saying goodbye. Therefore, as Melancholy is intertwined with 'Joy', both are mortal beings that 'must die', and are mortal beings. This is referring to the fleeting nature of both joy and grieving as emotions. He continues in the following lines that the 'temple of delight', contains melancholy's 'sovran shrine', meaning that delight contains melancholy, and they coexist within the same place, and those who taste joy shall in turn, 'taste the sadness of her might' and become one of

her 'cloudy trophies'. The journey throughout the poem is an acceptance of Melancholy as a symptom of experiencing life; Joy and delight cannot be experienced without melancholy, and vice versa. Keats is using natural imagery once again to depict the duality of mortal life, where he has explored his desire to drown his sorrows, intoxicate himself and die easefully, he is here accepting that whilst these emotions overwhelm him, the best way to suit his grief and pain is to simply live through it – which will then grant him the ability to feel joy in fuller capacity.

Again, Keats has depicted an extremely sensuous poem that tackles ways of processing grief. Drawing from the argument of poetry itself being in contest with various other art forms of the time, it is clear that he was trying to depict actions and feelings synonymous possibly with modern theatre: in the ultimate stanza we see gustatory imagery of the grape with 'burst Joy's grape against his palate fine' (l.28), the sensation of touch and feeling of romance in the penultimate stanza with 'emprison her soft hand' and 'feed, deep, deep upon her peerless eyes' (l. 19-20). This poem in general moves towards enhancing and empowering the senses, which is possibly a mimicry of the visual art Keats' was contested with. We know now that at the time he was unsuccessful, but modernly his poetry is received well, completing the dramatic life cycle of a Romantic poet – an image Keats' admired.

Linking these images to the death of John Keats, him thanking God that death had arrived and eventually dying wasted away and beautifully in an 'easeful' slumber, the quiet acceptance of grief here mirrors his quiet acceptance of his death. There was Joy bought with Keats' death – his works are now recognised significantly more than when he was alive, and along with Shelley and Byron is known as one of the 'greats' of second-generation Romanticism. And indeed, there was beauty in John Keats' death – the quietness he longed for throughout his life finally reached him, and whilst his premature death meant he left many of his poems unfinished and many of his potential works unspoken, he is remembered fondly and inspired generations after him. His pursuit of poetry as an exploration, celebration and meditation upon complex theories was successful, and thus his life work finally met its conclusion after he died. This itself is a beautiful irony that justifies the work of Romantic – tireless, passionate, beautiful works that meet their objectives after their makers are gone.

Conclusion

Keats' poetry is a contemplation on beauty, meditating the different forms of beauty and the way it coincides with human existence. Beauty is truth, but it is also fleeting, mortal and elusive, manifesting in most everything Keats' views: in nature, in art, in death, in war and famine. Keats' finding the beauty in everything is summative of human experience and the existence of pleasure within pain and vice versa – that beauty is simultaneously a painful and pleasurable experience for Keats. The multifaceted nature of beauty follows Keats through the entirety of the Odes.

Beauty's aesthetics shift and change in different cultural and natural settings, giving beauty a formless and shifting body that can be found in the most basic and complex subjects. This 'formlessness' of beauty means that it can be found in anything and everything, which then feels like Keats' mission: to find beauty, and therefore truth in everything. Keats does not understand; however, it is not his aim to understand though he is wrought and frustrated by his limitations as a human. Keats suggests that if we seek truth, we seek beauty – and due to the thirst for knowledge at the time and society transitioning into the industrial revolution, it means that at the core of human curiosity is a thirst for beauty.

Using the 'absolute power' of the imagination is to evoke the sublime, the stillness in his poetry despite a yearning for movement being reminiscent of the 'stunning' effect of sublimity on the human soul and body and is an acceptance of the limits of human imagination on fully comprehending beauty and therefore truths beyond mortal understanding. Keats portrays a journey of yearning, frustration and acceptance and invites the reader to join him through his vast imagination into a realm that is confusing and beautiful.

Finally, the exploration of death within Keats poetry serves as a reminder that even in horrific concepts such as disease, illness, and death, beauty is what death leaves behind in its immense emotional burden. Death is a moment of beauty, and Keats invites the reader to contemplate the positive aspects of death and grieving, because contained within it is delight, as contained within immense pain is pleasure, and vice versa. In this final chapter, Keats' legacy is reflected in his own illuminations on death and grieving, and the final, tragic image of Keats is immortalised for generations in its own beauty.

Ultimately, beauty is a complex and omnipresent force, and its very essence is forever tied to the human condition; beauty, like humanity, is mortal, fleeting and imperfect. Beauty is something we can all appreciate in its different forms, and the world contains so much beauty, that indeed it is truth.

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