



## Keats on Art and Poetry

Dr. Jyoti Kulshrestha

Assistant Professor in English, Delhi University, Delhi, India

### Abstract

The Romantic age saw two generations of poets. Keats the second generation figure of the Romantic age was a great craftsman in expressing himself in his poetic forms. As a poet he has shown how art and poetry evades decay and retains its essence. The poet developed his own school of poetry allowing him to think constantly and consistently about his poetic instincts

**Keywords:** art and poetry, beauty and truth, imagination

### Introduction

While dwelling on Keats’ views on poetry, it should be borne in mind that Keats was not a formal critic or theorist in the domain of Art and Poetry in the same sense in which Aristotle, Longinus, Johnson, Coleridge and Eliot were. And yet the broad fact remains that Keats gave his well-thought ideas, pertaining to poetry; which lent him the status of an original and astute critic. His critical formulations have a distinct identity of his own. His observations and pronouncements spread over his letters and poetical works which, when strung together, present the cardinal canons of poetry. According to him, “the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeable evaporate from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth” [1]. The Critic in him urged him to say in modesty:

“O Poesy! for thee I hold my pen  
That am not yet a glorious denizen  
Of thy wide heaven.....”

**Sleep and poetry-LL-47-49**

Keats was very conscious of the vital role of a Poet. Like Shelley, he had a high opinion of the calling of a poet. To him the greatest thing in the culture of a country was the role of a poet. He proclaims- “I would jump down Aetna for any great Public Good” [2] He wrote to Benjamin Robert Haydon asserting that, “I feel confident that I should have been a rebel Angel had the opportunity been mine.” [3] In a letter to Richard Woodhouse he declares that, “I am ambitious of doing the world some good.” [4] The best sort of “poetry—that is all I care for, all I live for,” [5] asserted Keats.

Keats said several times that he loved pleasures of life but that was not enough, he went beyond it. On one hand, his dream was to:

“Catch the white headed nymphs in shady places,  
to woo sweet Kisses from averted faces,”

**Sleep & Poetry-LL-105-106**

But on the other hand he believed that pleasures alone were not enough for him or a poet for that matter. Hence

he wrote these memorable lines which reflect his vision as a poet. He puts a question to himself and seeks to answer it;

“And can ever bid these joys farewell?  
Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,  
Where I may find the agonies, the strife  
Of human hearts:...”

**Sleep and poetry-LL-122-125**

Keats hold that poetry is the finest in the finest flowering of feelings nourished by imagination and chastened by thought. In his letter to Reynolds, Keats says, “for although I take poetry to be Chief (yet) there is something else wanting to one who passes his life among Books and thoughts on Books,” [6] This view of poets urged Keats to launch onslaught on English Neo-classical poets had created “a schism nurture by foppery and barbarism, and made great Apollo blush for this his land.” [7] Keats’s criticism of neo- classical poets was that they were not alive and responsive to the splendid spectacle of Nature’s infinite beauty, bounty, richness and variety. They were wedded to “musty laws lined out whit wretched rule and compass vide.” [8] The result was that they-

“.....Taught a school  
Of dolts to smooth, inlay, and  
clip, and fit,  
.....  
.....  
Easy was the task:  
A thousand handicraftsmen wore the mask  
Of Poesy...”

**Sleep and poetry-LL-196-201**

Keats’ view on poetry is the finest manifestation of truth and beauty. There is no Hiatus between beauty and truth. Poetry cannot be divorced from truth, knowledge and philosophy. So he observes that, “A drainless shower of light is poesy: it is supreme power” [9] Keats’s passion for poetry can be judged from his declaration- “I cannot exist without poetry without external poetry-half the day will not do-the whole of it” [10]. Regarding a long poem, he

says that, “a long poem is a test of invention which I take to be the polar star of the poetry, as Fancy is the sail and Imagination the rudder”.<sup>[11]</sup>

For Keats, poetry must be natural and spontaneous. “If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all.”<sup>[12]</sup> Shelley the poet says that the world is “a vale of tears”<sup>[17]</sup> but expressing a divergent opinion Keats says to Shelley that “call the world if you please, the vale of soul-making”<sup>[13]</sup>. Looking upon a poetic creation as something sacred, Keats proclaims, “My Imagination is a monastery and I am its monk”.<sup>[14]</sup> So much sacredly devout he was to poetry. While evaluating the achievements of Shakespeare, Keats uses the touch stone of “negative capability”<sup>[18]</sup>.

Stressing on Objectivity as an essential element of poetry, Keats observes: “A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence because he has no-Identity—he is continually in for and filling some other Body- the sun, the moon, the sea and men and women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute-the poet has none: no identity-he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God’s creature”<sup>[15]</sup>. He wrote to Shelley, “You must curve your magnanimity and he be more of an artist and ‘load every rift’ of your subject with ore”<sup>[16]</sup>. Poetry alone can save Imagination-

“For Poesy alone can tell her dreams,  
With the fine spell of words alone can save  
Imagination from the sable chain  
And dumb enchantment”

**The fall of Hyperion: A dream.  
Canto 1- LL- 8-11**

Keats had a high opinion about poets and poetry. Keats felt that the poets feel the agony of the world and toil for the welfare of humanity. There are thousands-

“who love their fellow even to the death  
Who feel the giant agony of the world;  
And more like slaves to poor humanity,  
Labour for mortal good...!”

**The fall of Hyperion: A dream.  
Canto 1- LL- 156-159**

Keats emphasizes the fact that melodies sung into the world’s ear are certainly not useless. In truth-

“...Sure a poet is a sage  
‘A humanist: Physician to all men”

**The fall of Hyperion: A dream.  
Canto 1- LL - 189-190**

There is an essential difference between a dreamer and a poet. The two are different entities from each other. The dreamer vexes the world while the poet assuages it:

“The poet and the dreamer are distinct,  
‘Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes,  
‘The one pours out a balm upon the world,  
The other vexes it: ...”

**The fall of Hyperion: A dream.  
Canto 1- LL - 199-202**

Thus, Keats extended the frontiers of progressive romantic criticism inaugurated by Wordsworth.

**References**

1. Keats John. The Letters of John Keats, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman. London: 1952; 70.
2. Ibid. 130
3. Ibid. 3
4. Ibid. 227
5. Ibid. 136
6. John Keats. The Letter of John Keats, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman London: 1952.
7. John Keats, Sleep & Poetry, LL 181-183.
8. Ibid. LL195-196
9. John Keats Sleep & Poetry. LL 235-236.
10. John Keats. The Letter of John Keats ed. Maurice Buxton Forman (London: 1952) 21.
11. Ibid. 52.
12. Ibid. 187.
13. Ibid. 334.
14. Ibid. 508.
15. Ibid. 227.
16. Ibid. 507.
17. Hymn to intellectual Beauty. L. 17.
18. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negative\\_capability](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negative_capability)  
Li,ou (2009) keats and negative capability. Continuum International Publications Group p.IX. Keats used the phrase only briefly in a private letter, and it became known only after his correspondence was collected and published. In a letter to his brothers, George and Thomas, on 21 December 1817, Keats described a conversation he had been engaged in a few days previously.