

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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John Keats (1795-1821) *Poems and Letters (B, 1820-1884)*

The English Romantic poets seldom lived long, and Keats led them all in early death, at age 26. It is the belief of our Norton editors that had Keats lived a full life he would have excelled such as Chaucer and Shakespeare in achievement. Yet rather than mourn we may better suppose that the brevity of this life was the price of Keats' distinctive brilliance, intermixed as it is with the premonition of death. Trained as an apothecary-surgeon, Keats exercised his medical career for a brief period, then found his way into a lively circuit of London poets and before long had decided to devote himself to poetry. His brilliant activity as a poet was frenetic, dominated by his premonition of death, and in fact fate proved him right, for in 1820 he began to cough up blood, a result of tuberculosis, and a year later he was dead.

Question: What is Unique about Keats' poetry?

The question may sound like an excerpt from a parlor game. Surely answers will be as different as answerers. For this author, though, the answer is sure: that Keats' *aesthetic perspective* is uniquely pervasive, and finds exquisite expression in his work. It is not that Keats is "arty," or superficially caught up in the details of beautiful things, but that he finds truth, as he said, in beauty. That is not all he finds in beauty, either, for in the evanescent, shimmering will o the wisp of the aesthetic he finds his own deepest human environment, the proximity of sleep, narcosis, and that kind of loveable death toward which the Nightingale draws him.

Comparative Literature:

1. How is literature related to music? You might want to compare Keats to other poets whose work seems to border on the musical. (I think of Whitman in America, Paul Verlaine in France, Heine in Germany; you can supply other and better examples.) Does pure sound have significance by itself, in poetry, or must sound be allied to meaning in order to constitute poetry? You might apply this subtle question to a poem like the "Ode to a Nightingale," which is about the music of the bird's call, as it ultimately narcotizes rational (or perhaps any) meaning. Keats is forever working the borders between music, as topic and as part of his poetry, and music as thematic material *in* his poetry.

2. Sometimes the best commentary on an author's writings lies in other writings by the same person. Keats' *Letters*, of which you have examples in our anthology, are marked by the same fervor, sudden starts and stops, and brilliant flashes as his poetry. Can you think of other literary figures whose letters you know? (Tolstoy? Lawrence? T.S. Eliot?) if so, you may want to see whether letters give us a down to earth appreciation of an author, and thus a special mode of access to the writer's major creations.