
Keats' Poetry

Gabby

Keats' Context

- Keats was born in 1795 to a lower-middle-class family and sadly lost both parents at a young age
- He entered medical school at age 15 but withdrew when he turned 20 to devote himself to poetry
- His original poems garnered much harsh criticism and his 2nd book gained little attention - he still remained confident in his abilities however, believing he would be considered one of '*the* English poets' when he died
- His works become more well known after his death
- Many of his poems are influenced and/or written about people within his life. This is reflected with Fanny Brawne (his love) as well as his brother
- He was one of the key figures in early nineteenth-century Romanticism, a movement that espoused the sanctity of emotion and imagination, and privileged the beauty of the natural world

The Romantic Era

- The Romantic period is applied to literature from the first third of the nineteenth century - however it is interesting to note that many poets of the time wouldn't consider themselves Romantic (despite knowing what the term meant within poetry)
- It is largely categorised by high levels of
 - Emotion
 - Imagination
 - Individual sensibility
- The Romantic era included two generations of writers
 - Those born during 20/30 years before the 1800s and the 2nd generation born in the last decade of the 1800s (Keats belongs to the 2nd generation)

Symbols of Keats' Poetry

Music and Musicians:

- Keats uses music to symbolise the atmosphere and mood within a piece

Nature:

- Keats uses nature as source of poetic inspiration and he describes nature with precision and beauty
- Nature is often written about in similes and metaphors for the spiritual and emotional states he describes

The ancient world:

- Keats has an enduring interest in antiquity and the ancient world
- His poems are often set in a mythical world or have reference to mythological ideas

Themes of Keats' Poetry

The inevitability of death:

- Keats often wrote about death both literally and metaphorically - he would often craft human experiences of loss (loss of a lover, sickness) and liken them to death

The contemplation of beauty:

- Keats proposed that admiring beauty was of reveling in the 'here and now'
- He often wrote about the beauty within nature and everyday life - reflective of the Romantic tradition

Romantic notions of the female

- Mystical female figures are frequent in Keats' poetry and are often marked by mysterious dreaminess not typically found within the world

Motifs of Keats' Poetry

Departures and reveries:

- Keats' poems often transcend the living world and explore the mythical, aesthetic realm
- This choice to explore the after-life may be as a result of the extreme loss Keats experienced during his short life

The 5 senses and art

- Keats imagined that the five senses correspond and connect us to various art forms
- His poems can be seen to argue that each of the five senses must be involved in worthwhile experiences

The disappearance of the poet and the speaker

- In Keats' work he often erases the poet/speaker due his fixation on the the beauty of objects/ nature

Practice Questions

1. Taken together, do Keats' work tell a "story" or do they simply develop a theme? Is it the same speaker in each ode?
2. From first glance, "To Autumn" seems to be more of a description, but beneath the surface it is one of the most thematically rich poems. How does Keats manage to embody complex themes in such an apparently simple poem?
3. What does the lady in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" represent?
4. What literary devices does Keats use to describe the season in "To Autumn"?
5. What are some types of struggle exemplified in "The Eve of St. Agnes"? What are the opposing forces in this poem?
6. What does the urn represent in "Ode on a Grecian Urn"?
7. What does the nightingale represent in "Ode to a Nightingale"?
8. What themes in "Bright Star, would I were steadfast as thou art" are typical of Keats?
9. What type of cultural/religious figures does Keats repeatedly cite in his poetry? What may be his motivation for doing so?
10. How does dreaminess play a role in Keats' poems, and what concept of his does such dreaminess reflect?

Additional help/preparation

Essay examples:

- <https://www.gradesaver.com/keats-poems-and-letters/essays>

Questions answered:

- <https://www.gradesaver.com/keats-poems-and-letters/q-and-a>

A quiz to test your knowledge:

- <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/k/keats-poems/study-help/quiz>