

## SONNETS OF JOHN KEATS: A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

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### **Abstract:**

Sonnets of John Keats conveys range of his interests, his concerns, his attachments, and his obsessions which are replete with a sensuous feeling for nature that looks back to Wordsworth and forward to Frost. They also luxuriate in the spaces of imagination and trigger the daydreaming capacities of the mind. Keats experimented with the fourteen line genere when he was eighteen and wrote overall sixty four sonnets from 1814 to 1819. He was born in the age when fourteen lines revival was in its full bloom, that had fallen into disfavour and disuse in the latter half of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries.

**Introduction:**

Keats's first book, *Poems* (1817), comprises a substantial number of sonnets. This work shows how vigorously he applied himself to the Petrarchan sonnet, which consists of an octave (*abbaabba*) and a sestet (*cdecde*). The Petrarchan structure invites an asymmetrical division of an argument. It tends to create an obsessive feeling in the first section and then to respond to that feeling 'to let it loose' in the second part. It builds the pressure in the first eight lines, turns, and then releases that pressure in the final six lines. Keats was temperamentally drawn to one of the key emotional archetypes of the Petrarchan love sonnet, which creates, as Paul Fussell suggests, "the pattern of sexual pressure and release." He also determined to master the binary structure as a form for meditation, a vessel for internal dialogue and debate. Keats loved the intoxication of creating in a fine frenzy. He believed that "the excellence of every Art is its intensity" (*Letters*, I, no. 45), and the sonnet offered him a form of powerful compactness. He was highly responsive to others so his sonnets are filled with addresses and dedications, acknowledgments, and literary debts repaid. Friendship and love were his triggering subjects.

**For I am brimfull of the friendliness  
That in a little cottage I have found;  
Of fair-hair'd Milton's eloquent distress,  
And all his love for gentle Lycid drown'd;  
Of lovely Laura in her light green dress,  
And faithful Petrarch gloriously crown'd.**

Keats was always deeply impressed by imaginative things. He loved to be carried away and overwhelmed, to wander in fictive spaces, secondary worlds. He was a voracious reader with an insatiable appetite for poetry. This was certainly the case with his breakthrough sonnet "On first looking into Chapman's Homer," which he wrote at a fever pitch in a couple of enthralling early morning hours in October 1816. Some of the early sonnets are interesting for the circumstances of their composition and might fit into a discussion of collaboration and influence. Keats wrote "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" in October 1816 after staying up all night with his friend George Cowden Clarke, to whom he sent the poem in time for breakfast the following morning. "On the Grasshopper and Cricket" was written on 30 December 1816 during one of Keats's and Leigh Hunt's quarter-hour sonnetwriting contests. Keats's version appeared in his *Poems* (1817), and Hunt published the two poems side by side in *The Examiner* on 21 September 1817. Many of

the sonnets trace Keats's poetic ambitions and the place he saw himself taking among the ranks of Homer, Shakespeare, and Milton. The "Cockney School" debate might be brought up here, especially since part of what was being criticized was the version of Homer that Keats chose to write about. On the one hand, the fact that he was reading a translation and not the original marked him as someone who had not learned classical languages. On the other hand, the standard translation of Homer of the day was Alexander Pope's, which came in tidy couplets. To choose Chapman's Elizabethan translation was to dismiss Pope's literary authority and the Tory establishment's political authority at the same time. Other sonnets, in particular "When I Have Fears" and "Bright Star," trace the conflict Keats faced between love, ambition, poetry, and fears of impending death. These sonnets might be read from a biographical perspective by those interested in how Keats conceived of himself as a poet and a human being. These themes can be traced throughout Keats's body of writing. "Ode on Indolence" and the letter to George and Georgiana Keats (747) in particular trace how Keats felt himself to be haunted by love, ambition, and poesy. The fragment "This Living Hand," whose context is not known, actively reaches out to the reader, provoking haunting guilt. The "hand" is not simply the biological one but also the hand that writes, so this poem, too, might be read as a lament about a life of composition cut short. "On first looking into Chapman's Homer" was an emblematic or allegorical moment in Keats's writing life—in the life of any young poet—because his reading vitally seized him and spurred him into his own extravagant making. It fostered his imagination and gave him to himself. Keats's sonnet enacts a feeling of rapturous discovery; it breathes its own wonderment. It creates the sensation of tremendous vastness within the prescribed space of the Petrarchan form. The twenty-year-old poet builds his case so convincingly that readers ever after have been powerfully affected by the swelling turn in the sonnet, the reverberations of the final sestet. Keats's sonnet "completely announced the new poet taking possession," as Hunt put it. It is his first major work. Yet there is also a touching way that Keats reveals himself to be a newcomer to high culture. He implicitly acknowledges that he doesn't read Homer in the original Greek, that he is just now coming upon Chapman's translation: "On *first* looking . . ." (In a later sonnet entitled "To Homer," he refers to his own "giant ignorance.") So, too, he mistakes Balboa for Cortez, as Tennyson first pointed out to Palgrave. But what matters more deeply is the rising excitement and sense of limitless possibility created in him by reading Homer, so that he feels poised on the brink of a great discovery, like Herschel finding the planet Uranus or Balboa suddenly sighting the

Pacific Ocean. Reading Homer, even in translation, Keats enters a fabulous new world. He, too, ascends into a space of silent awe, and he instills that same feeling in us. Some critics have worried that Keats's aspirations to high culture are somehow suspect, but I believe they have an almost Blakean political dignity. They speak to what we all might gain access to, what we would joyously create within ourselves. Chapman's Homer becomes Keats's method of transport, his way of joining with "the mighty dead" (*Endymion*), attaining the sublime. He had found a means for declaring, possessing, and authoring himself. Keats was actively taken—almost physically seized—by art and often pulled into the visual realm of paintings, engravings, and sculptures. The sonnet "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" dramatizes Keats's experience of speechless astonishment.

### Conclusion:

The passage of time counterpoised against the immutable splendor of Grecian art induced in him a dizzying panic, a debilitating vertigo. He could but dimly apprehend the magnitude he was seeking. Yet he had already begun to apprentice himself to what he called "the religion of Joy," the Greek spirit made flesh. I suspect he was steeling himself for a fresh start, for what the poem deems "godlike hardship," for the great work to come. The threat of failure could overwhelm Keats, as in his dirge-like sonnet "When I have fears that I may cease to be," but he ultimately responded by rededicating himself to the creative task with a deeper candor, a more furious resolve. Keats wrote his sonnets in a wide variety of moods: with affection, with disgust, with outrage, with embarrassment, with passionate longing. They have a mortal stamp and increasingly take on a tragic grandeur. He conceived his early sonnets under the spell of Spenserian romance, his later ones under the sign of Shakespearean tragedy. Sixty-four sonnets at once a major accomplishment and an intimate and approachable body of work by one of the great poets of sympathetic absorption, a writer who believed in the "holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination". These fourteen-line poems deliver us to ourselves more fully and more wholly, through the sensuous, rhythmic, musical language of attainment. Keats discovered that the sonnet is a small vessel capable of plunging tremendous depths. It is one of the enabling forms of human inwardness. We are befriended by these passionate, wayward, adventurous poems. Indeed, we are befriended by art itself, Keats teaches us, in our struggle with ourselves, in our urgent soul-making. We are made more human and noble by reading him, for he is a hero of our jubilant, flawed, tragic humanity.

**References:**

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