

In the Name of God



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Faculty of Foreign Languages

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M.A. Thesis

Keatsian Trajectory: from " Lamia" to "To Autumn"

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Dedication

I wish to dedicate this work to my younger brother, who, in his short life showed me how to accept the challenge of life with a smile, and not give up.

Abstract

This thesis aims at introducing – tentatively - John Keats' concept of pleasure and its stages which the author of the thesis believes is manifested in his four works *Lamia*, "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "To Autumn." In the researcher's view, Keats' harsh life, his deprivation, his personality, and his literary talent compelled him to project conceptions of human pleasure and bliss in his imagination. In other words, since Keats was deprived of experiencing pleasure in actual life, he "felt" what it would be like to have the pleasure he craved for in his imagination. Defining the concept of pleasure as the state of positively unified focus on an outside phenomenon or internal condition, the researcher divides this concept into the stages of anticipation, focus and void. A state beyond pleasure, i.e. freedom from desire is the final stage of this definition. These stages of pleasure are traced in the four poems discussed. These poems are, therefore, considered collectively and as a sequence. "Lamia," it is suggested corresponds with the stages of anticipation and void; "Ode to a Nightingale" realizes the illusory nature of pleasure; "Ode on a Grecian Urn" corresponds with the focus stage; and, finally, "To Autumn" manifests the state of freedom from desire. It is thus shown how Keats' poetry implicitly reveals his philosophical perspective on the concept of pleasure – the above definition and stages and freedom from desire.

Key Words: John Keats, material pleasure, spiritual pleasure, spiritual pain, *Lamia*, "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "To Autumn."

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Chapter One: Introducing John Keats

1-1 Thesis Statement

The primary aims of this thesis are threefold. Firstly, the author wants to establish that John Keats's life compelled him to formulate a certain philosophy regarding the concept of human pleasure in his imagination. Therefore, a general overview of his life with emphasis on those elements in his life that provoked this philosophy is given. Secondly, the author wants to present – subjectively – the meaning and stages of pleasure; this meaning is, he deems, very close to Keats' philosophy regarding this concept. Therefore, he proposes a definition for the concept of pleasure as the state of positively unified focus on an outside phenomenon or internal condition dividing it into the stages of anticipation, focus and void. This discussion on the meaning of pleasure reaches its culmination in

the state of "freedom from desire." And finally, he wants to trace this presentation of pleasure and its stages in four poems by Keats: *Lamia*, *Ode to Nightingale*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and *To Autumn*. Therefore, these poems are interpreted as a sequence closely related to one another. "Lamia" is given correspondence with the stages of anticipation and void; "Ode to a Nightingale" realizes the illusory nature of pleasure; "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is given correspondence with the focus stage; and, finally, "To Autumn" enters the state of freedom from desire. In addition, with regard to these objectives, a review of what critics have discussed about the above poems and the concept of pleasure seems a necessity; therefore, the thesis also aims at discussing what the critics have said in relation to these issues.

1-2 Methodology

In the first chapter of the thesis, following the introductory sections, an overview of Keats' life, the events that befell him and an outline of his most significant personality traits and philosophical orientations are given. This biographical approach aims at introducing John Keats to the reader and showing the kind of life he led, the circumstances in which he was entrapped and the intellectual – emotional personality he possessed. His biography will show how he suffered at the hands of his enemies, how he was deprived of a strong love for a woman and how he was at the mercy of his own volatile moods. It will also show the high degree of his intellect and his sensitively proud nature. In the opinion of the author of this thesis, such circumstances compelled him to

contemplate the nature of human life and its pleasures and, eventually, gain insight on them. Therefore in this chapter, the research question “How did his personal experiences direct Keats’ line of thought?” will be answered.

The second chapter will present a review of literature on the poems under focus in this thesis. The third chapter is also a review of literature concerning the concept of pleasure from ancient times to the present.

In the fourth chapter the author will present a description of pleasure that is, in his mind, plausible for anyone on basis of personal experience. Very broadly, pleasure in this description is divided into the stages of anticipation, focus and void. This view of pleasure, the author believes, is the perspective Keats embraced after his imaginative struggle for heartfelt knowledge on the nature of man and human pleasure. Therefore, in this chapter the research question “What was Keats’ notion on the concept of human pleasure?” will be focused.

The fifth chapter will present the author’s interpretation of the poems previously mentioned, on the basis of the description of pleasure offered in the fourth chapter. This interpretation will be based on a close reading of the poems and will answer the research question “What was the movement of his mind concerning the concept of pleasure as depicted through his poetry?” Also, in the interpretation of “To Autumn” the research question “To what final conclusion did his imagination and his stressful life lead him?” will receive its answer.

1-3 Definition of Key Terms

Pleasure: what is intended by pleasure is the feeling human beings have when indulging in activities which fulfill their natural needs i.e. eating food. This type of pleasure will be termed physical pleasure; pleasure may also rise to a higher-quality level and result from the fulfillment of psychological needs i.e. acquiring knowledge (abstract pleasure). Both types of pleasure, the thesis will argue, are in essence the same.

Spiritual pain: This is the state in which the individual having first enjoyed the elation of pleasure is faced with the lack resulting from the inability to remain at the height of such elation, and is forced of physical necessity to return to a normal state. What is meant is the condition in which the individual loses the feeling that is pleasure and the lack of pleasure causes a spiritual void that will be termed “pain”.

The margin of pain and pleasure: the thesis will argue that all physical pleasure ultimately reaches the margin where it mingles with pain in the above meaning.

Spiritual ecstasy: The state in which the individual having forsaken (physical) pleasure is freed from the anguish of spiritual pain.

1-4 Review of Literature

The author of this thesis attempts subjective interpretation in two directions. He aims at presenting a view on the concept of human pleasure; that

is, he aims at giving a description of what pleasure is and the stages one goes through when experiencing pleasure. This he believes was Keats' view on pleasure. He also attempts to offer a close reading of four poems by Keats in which pleasure and its stages are implicitly manifest. The initial aim was to obtain support in the work of critics for the interpretation of the poems according to this view of pleasure. However, as far as the author knows from research of all available information, there has been no commentary along the lines of argument which are aimed at in this thesis in the work of the critics. Therefore, the third and fourth chapters of this thesis present a review of literature on the four poems under consideration, and on the concept of pleasure respectively. The third chapter reviews the literature on *Lamia*, *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and *To Autumn*. The fourth chapter reviews the literature on "pleasure" from ancient times to the present.

1-5 Aspects of Keats' Life and Work

In this chapter, John Keats will be presented to the reader. A broad outline of his life, his personality, his aesthetic orientations and subjective views about him will be given. Imbedded within the various aspects of his life, there are certain elements that had significant influence on shaping his conception of human pleasure. These aspects, as will be seen in the following pages, are: he had a strong love for a woman, Fanny Brawne, whom he could not marry; he had a very sensitive and proud nature; he had a tendency to know the inner truth of things, to "feel" what he knew; he believed in the power of the mind, in its

capacity to understand with its own resources, the nature of humanity; he believed in "negative capability," which means he believed that he could feel the emotions of others in his own being; and he had a high degree of intellect and original literary talent and innovation.

Keats was desperately in love with Fanny Brawne; therefore, he would, naturally, want to feel the pleasure of the consummation of his love; not necessarily the physical consummation, of course, but the overall pleasure of a relationship permeated with true love. However, the experience of such pleasure was, in reality, out of his reach. On the other hand, he had a proud and sensitive nature; therefore, he could not have simply accepted being deprived of this pleasure. He would have wanted to "feel" the nature of this pleasure. Since he believed in the power of the mind, and also believed that a poet is one who has no identity but, rather, can take on other identities, he would have thought it possible to perceive the nature of pleasure with the resources of his own mind and emotions. In addition, Keats had highly changeable moods and would have craved stability of mind. Fanny Brawne afforded him such stability, but he could not have her; he would, therefore, have searched for this stability in his own being. His strong intellect would have enabled him to perceive the nature of pleasure in the world of his own imagination. And his literary talent would have registered this insight implicitly in the lines of his poetry. In the last chapter of this thesis, his insight on human pleasure will be elicited from between the lines of his poems.

1-6 Chronology

The chronology below sketches a broad outline of Keats' life giving its most important events of his life in chronological order.

On Oct 31, 1795 John Keats is born near London, the first of five children of a stable keeper Thomas Keats and Frances Jennings Keats. In 1803 he starts School. Keats begins his studies at a small school in Enfield, England, run by a man named John Clarke. On Apr 16, 1804 his father dies; Thomas Keats is thrown from a horse and dies of a fractured skull. John's mother, now a widow with four surviving children, remarries later the same year. Two years later in 1805 his mother disappears. Keats' mother abandons the family and disappears for three and a half years, leaving the children with their grandmother. Ten-year-old John suffers from chronic anxiety. His mother Returns in 1809 to the family, sick with tuberculosis and rheumatism. Keats nurses her. Frances Jennings Keats dies of tuberculosis on Feb 1810, the disease that eventually claims two of her sons. She leaves the children in the care of their grandmother. The grandmother signs over care of the children to a guardian, Richard Abbey, who takes the children's inheritance money for himself. In 1811 Keats leaves school; Abbey pulls him from his studies at Enfield and apprentices him to a surgeon in nearby Edmonton. Keats studies at night with Charles Cowden Clarke, a sympathetic administrator at the school who sees his potential. Keats starts Medical School in 1815. After four years as an apprentice, he begins his medical studies at Guy's Hospital in London. Privately, he has started to write poetry. It is in September

1816 that Keats becomes serious about poetry. He meets the poet Leigh Hunt, who encourages him, introduces him to other poets (including Percy Bysshe Shelley) and becomes an important influence on his work. November 1816 is a turning point in Keats' life: he decides to abandon his medical career for good so that he can focus on his poetry. Richard Abbey is furious and the two have a falling-out. On March 3, 1817 Keats' first poetry collection, a volume simply entitled *Poems*, is published. In June 1818 he embarks on a six-week walking tour of England and Scotland with his friend Charles Armitage Brown. His brother Thomas is ill with tuberculosis, but Keats is assured that he will survive his journey. On Dec 1, 1818 his brother dies; Keats' beloved brother Thomas dies of tuberculosis at the age of 19 as Keats is nursing him and scars him with a sorrow that haunts him all his life. In 1819 he meets Fanny Brawne. After his brother's death, Keats moves in with his friend Charles Brown in the Hampstead neighborhood of London. There, he meets and soon falls in love with his neighbor, Fanny Brawne. By the end of the year, the couple are engaged. This is a year of ups and downs for Keats - he writes many of his best poems, including the famous *Odes*, but also battles depression and the first symptoms of tuberculosis. In February, 1820 tuberculosis appears: Keats has a lung hemorrhage, the first serious symptom of the tuberculosis that will eventually take his life. When the second one happens a few months later, he moves into Leigh Hunt's house, where Fanny nurses him. On September 17, 1820 he sails for Italy; Keats' doctor informs him that his lungs will not survive an English winter.

Keats bids Fanny Brawne a painful farewell and sails to Italy with his friend, the painter Joseph Severn. Eventually on February 23, 1821 John Keats dies of tuberculosis at the age of 25 in Rome. He is buried in the Protestant cemetery. Percy Bysshe Shelley writes the poem "Adonais" as an elegy for him (Sharrock 20).

1-7 Overview of Keats' Life

Edmund Blunden in his *John Keats* gives an account of the life of the Romantic poet John Keats. Keats was born in 1795 in London. His contemporaries were Byron, Shelley, Carlyle, Tennyson and Dickens. His closest peer in terms of social position was Dickens. The great names in poetry were Cowper and Burns at the time.

His father, Thomas Keats, was a quick-witted young man and doing well in London having come from elsewhere, but not interested in literature. He was in charge of livery stables, a groom. Thomas Keats died having fallen off a horse one night on his way back home; Frances, his wife, almost immediately remarried. This marriage was a failure. The children went to live with their grandparents, the Jennings. The mental strife must have been pressing but material life with their grandparents was relatively comfortable. Timothy Hilton confirms this with the assertion that "if the Keats family were in no sense well-connected, they were certainly of a prosperous class, and were not short of money" (5). The children's grandmother decided on a Guardian and trustee when her grandchildren were orphaned. When John the oldest was 14 she chose

Richard Abbey a City tea merchant, putting at his disposal a sum of 9000 pounds (Hilton 8). One wonders if the case had not been that “His unfeeling attitude towards the Keats children no less than his tightfisted handling of their money, proved to be a continual difficulty in their lives” (8), would not John have been able to marry Fanny Brawne comfortably and have a happy modest life which would have satisfied his modest tastes?

Keats attended a school with seventy or eighty pupils and a sensible schoolmaster. From 1803 to 1810 or 1811 Keats was a boarder at the school. This school according to Hilton was an excellent private school, a small one headed by John Clarke who did not believe in beating but did believe in other than schoolbooks being available for his students. The school is at Enfield about 7 miles north of London. Their father’s accident occurred on his way back from visiting the two sons John and George at their school.

During his school years the young Keats, who has been described as surprisingly beautiful, became renowned as a fighter always prepared for a fistfight and a participant in all active exercises. His passionate temper was completed with a “love of the grotesque and comical” (Blunden 12). Of his temper it has been written that he gave the impression of being destined for a military career since he was always fighting; however, a schoolfellow wrote: “the generosity and daring of his character... in passions of tears or outrageous fits of laughter always in extremes will help to paint Keats in his boyhood” (Hilton 8). When his mother died, according to Hilton he had huddled without a word under