

The Romantic Period: Selected Letters of John Keats (1789-1821)

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Abstract

This essay will look at a very important period in Europe and how it impacted the whole world. The period also brought about a revolution that was social and technological. There was a marked holistic philosophical and literary change. Continental Europe and its country side experienced a fundamental change as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Technologically, the steam engine replaced wind and water as sources for energy. This resulted in new industries springing up across Europe. These changes in mode of production created a scenario whereby new urban environments sprang up virtually, overnight. This led inevitably, to overcrowding and other vices such as crime and diseases in these packed and smoky settlements. The French Revolution (1789-1815) was the precursor of the Industrial Revolution. Alongside the social and technological revolution was the philosophical and literary revolution. A new perspective was given to the whole idea of truth and nature. Nature became a force which binds man to mother earth. What affects Mother Earth is the mill chimney and the steam engine, factory labour and the city slum. Writers in that age such as William Wordsworths, P.B.Shelley, John Keats and so on knew that something special and all-pervasive intellectually and imaginatively was inherent in their time. They called this feeling the 'spirit of the age'. In John Keats' letters which this essay will analyse, this all-pervasive feeling was adequately seen. The letters highlighted Keats' views about life and relationships at a time of critical changes in Europe which had affected the whole world.

Keywords: Consumption, French Revolution, Industrial Revolution, Romantic, 'spirit of the age'

I. Introduction

The Industrial Revolution was an age of revolution that is both social and technological, philosophical and literary.

Social and Technological Revolution.

The Industrial Revolution transformed the whole of Europe and consequently, changed the face of the country side. The steam engine replaced wind and water as sources for energy. New industries began to appear in the country side. As a result of these changes in the mode of production workers were thrust together in the new urban environments – packed and smoky. There was a fundamental change from the old economic order to a new order. “No attempt was made to regulate this shift from the old economic world to the new, not only because of inertia and the power of vested interests, but because even liberal reformers were dominated by the social philosophy of Laissez-faire. This theory of “let alone” holds that the general welfare can be ensured only by the free operation of economic laws; the government must maintain a policy of strict non-interference and leave people to pursue their private interest”. Abram (Ed) (1993:3).

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As a result of this theory therefore, workers were bitterly exploited – women, and children as young as five years of age were made to work long hours under very harsh and strenuous conditions. The French Revolution 1789 – 1815, was an issue that excites the attention of analyst. The Revolution brought about the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte and his final defeat at Waterloo in 1815.

Again, the French Revolution fed two contrary impulses, the demand for political and social reform, and the determination to avoid a blood bath. Initially, the revolution was supported by English liberals and radicals but, their sympathy died off as it became increasingly grim and violent. The rise of Napoleon and the subsequent war between England and France cast a shadow over many libertarian movements in England. Yet, the intellectual ferment of which the revolution was born infected thinking men and women with disturbing uncertainties, not only about the inherited social fabric of society, but also about the inherited fabrics of belief and morality.

II. Philosophical and Literary Revolution

A new connotation was given to the concept of truth to nature. Nature is no longer primarily the principle of simplicity which fashionable society offends with its ornaments and fopperies. It is the force which binds man to mother earth, which surrounds him with hills and covers him with sky. And what offends against it is the Mill chimney and the steam engine, factory-labour and the city slum.

“The Spirit of the age”

It will be difficult to attach any meaningful definition to the word “Romanticism” this is as a result of the range and diversity of achievements of the period it covered.

“Writers in Wordsworth’s lifetime did not think of themselves as “Romantic”, the word was not applied until half a century later, by English Historians.’ (1993:4).

Critics sometimes treat them as independent individuals or sometimes group them into separate schools – “the lake school” of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Robert Southey; “the Cockney school”; a derogatory term for the Londoners Leigh Hunt, Hazlitt, and associated writers, including John Keats; and “the Satanic school” of Byron, Shelley and their followers.

Almost all the writers however, felt that there was something special, all pervasive – intellectually and imaginatively about their time. They called this feeling “the spirit of the age”. According to P.B Shelley the literary spirit of the age was an accompaniment of the political and social revolution taking place in Europe at the time.

The imagination of many Romantic writers was, indeed, preoccupied with the fact and idea of revolution. This is because the literary emanation from writers such as Robert Burns, William Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, and Mary Wollstonecraft were in support of the French Revolution.

The concept of Poetry and the Poet of the Romantics contradicted those of the Classics and Neo-Classicals – who sees poetry as principally an art – an imitation of human life-rendered according to laid down rules by the poet especially designed to instruct and give artistic pleasure to the reader. But to the Romantics in the words of Wordsworth, that good poetry is at the moment of composition “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”.

He sees the source of a poem “were not external people and events, and the inner feelings of . . . the author, or external objects only after these have been transformed or initiated by the author’s feeling”. Keats also “listed as an “axiom” that “if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all” (1993:6 & 7).

The emphasis in this period therefore, is on the free activities of imagination as it relates to an insistence on the essential role of instinct, intuition, and the feelings of “the heart” to supplement the judgments of the purely logical faculty, “the head”, whether in the province of artistic beauty, philosophical and religious truth, or moral goodness”.

Romantic poetry begin with an aspect of change in the natural scene and this serves only as stimulus to the most characteristic human activities, that of thinking. Again, Romantic poems habitually endow the landscape with human life, passion and expressiveness.

John Keats was born October 31st 1795 and he died of consumption (T.B) on 23rd February 1821. He had two younger brothers and a Kid Sister. George Keats (1797- 1841) was next to him in birth. Indeed, George was more than a brother to him. He was one of his closest friends and confidant. George emigrated from England to Louisville in the New World (USA). Before his death in 1841 he was a very prominent citizen of Kentucky, Louisville. Next to George was Thomas Keats (1799-1818) Tom, like John died young. He also suffered from consumption. It was speculated that John's health was further destroyed when he came close to Tom whose condition at the time was quite terminal. Fanny Keats (1803-1889) was the youngest of the Keats'. She also lived longer. John Keats wrote many letters to her especially, when she was living with Richard Abbey (d.-1837) at one time Abbey took care of all the Keats children in his house. He was also the one who apprenticed John Keats to a surgeon – Thomas Hammond at Edmonton.

John Keats wrote his letters between 1814 and 1820. Incidentally, this happened to be the period in which he did most of his life's work. For the purpose of understanding Keats the letters are more important almost than the poetry. In the letters he speaks out as he expresses his hopes, his fears and his aspirations. The poems are considered to be several stages behind the letters. Indeed the letters are the truest criticism of the poems. T. S. Eliot maintained that the letters are a "model of correspondence" and they reveal a "charming personality". To him they are certainly both the most notable and important ever written by any English poet.

The major interest that Keats' letters has for the modern critics is the light they throw on the composition of poetry and on aesthetic theory.

According to T. S. Eliot: "There is hardly one statement of Keats about poetry, which, when considered carefully and with due allowance for the difficulties of communication, will not be found to be true: and what is more, true for greater and more mature poetry than anything Keats ever wrote".Gittings (1966: 12)

Keats' letters are valid because he probably thought more continually about poetry than any of his contemporaries. He thought and wrote with boundless interest about literature and literary composition. His ideas are a product of a genuine reaction, unaffected by fashion. The letters also throws light on the background and thought of his own composition. It gradually, became clear to critics as they studied his letters that an incident, idea or expression from them anticipates or coincides with a poem that he writes.

The letters are not only about aesthetic and poetic ideas; they expresses Keats' intense feeling for what seemed to him essential and real in human existence. Through the letters he has been able to give the modern reader a vivid portrait of the people he had relationships with- their individual characters - their reactions to him and to each other. This clear and vivid picture made these people alive as if they are our own contemporaries.

Again, his appreciation of their idiosyncrasies has generally a charity and an understanding that: ... "men should bear with each other ... their lives not the man who may not be cut up, aye hashed to pieces on his weakest side" Gittings (1966: 14)

Again, the letters also record contemporary manners, the daily life and habits of people of his level of societal interaction. He judged above all "with detachment what was merely fashionable and temporary."

The letters of Keats also tells us so much about Keats himself. They bring us close to him as a person. The letters ranges over nearly every aspect of his life. There are however, in the letters very few areas of non-communication and which are quite significant. Keats was almost totally silent about his parents and childhood. Money questions also, do not seem to bother him. These can easily be explained by his early history.

The letters can also be seen as an entirely unselfconscious stream of consciousness. In these letters Keats analyses himself in every situation in a way that helps to explain his splendid sanity in a life of extreme stress. He is supremely conscious of his own nature, and it is clear that much of his letter writing, often far into the night, and the impromptu and impulsive poems that sprinkle its pages, were a kind of therapy for his complicated spirit. Keats' conviction was that life should be faced and its difficulties put to use - "Lord!, a man should have the fine point of his soul taken off to become fit for this world. "Gittings (1966: 17). We read his letters for encouragement, though not for escape, and his life, so generously and modestly displayed in them, help us to enlarge our own.

III. The Letters of John Keats

For the sake of clarity, coherence and space, this essay will consider only nine (9) letters which Keats wrote to some friends, his brothers and sister. These selected letters are quite exhaustive in the sense that they were able to throw some light on Keats' ideas about poetry and aesthetics. They also bring to light his personal life - his love and jealousies and also his struggle against his terminal ailment. These selected letters also show his indomitable spirit and his zest for life. Again, these correspondences have firmly and effectively located Keats among the major poets of the Romantic Movement. His deep respect for William Wordsworth and the niche in which he placed him. He compared Milton and Wordsworth. Wordsworth emerged the winner among these two great Poets.

On Wednesday 9th October, 1816 Keats wrote a letter to Charles Cawden Clarke, (CCC) (1787-1842). CCC was the son of the master of Enfield school where Keats and his other brothers studied. CCC influenced the literary tastes and achievements of Keats. In this letter Keats was informing him of his willingness to meet with Leigh Hunt, (1784-1859). CCC eventually introduced Keats to Hunt in mid-October of 1816. This meeting between Leigh Hunt and John Keats proved highly beneficial to the latter. Not only did Hunt encouraged and fostered Keats' literary talents; he also published some of Keats' poems in his journals - *The Examiner* and *The Indicator*. Hunt in his turn also introduced Keats to P.B. Shelley, Haydon and other celebrities of his age.

This letter throws some light on the relationship between Keats and CCC. When Keats was apprenticed by Richard Abbey to a surgeon in Edmonton he used to pass by a brook that lies between Edmonton and Enfield to visit CCC at his old school- The Enfield School. The poem "I stood Tip-Toe upon a little hill" was written in memory of those times mentioned in this letter. Again, the Poem "On first looking into chapman's Homer" was also written in recollection of Keats' relationship with CCC. In October of 1816 Keats and CCC read George Chapman's translation of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. So, early the next morning Keats composed this sonnet. We can see clearly therefore, that his friendship with CCC has influenced his writing of the above mentioned two poems. Keats' eventual meeting with Leigh Hunt in mid-October of 1816 influenced his writing of the poem: "Keen, fitful Gusts".

John Keats wrote to John Hamilton Reynolds (1794-1852) on Thursday 17th April, 1817. He was described as Keats' greatest friends. The two met at Leigh Hunts' place in October 1816. It was Reynolds who introduced Keats to Charles Brown (1787 -1842), Benjamin Bailey (1791-1853) and other leading personalities of the age. He reviewed Keats' 1817 Poems in the *Champion* quite favourably. In this letter to Reynolds Keats expressed his deep love for nature:

"Shanklin is a most beautiful place – sloping wood and meadow ground reaches round the chine, which is a cleft between the cliffs of nearly 300 feet at least. This cliff is filled with trees and bushes...., perched midway in the Balustrades of beautiful green Hedges along their steps down to the sands. "Keats to Reynolds in Gittings (1966:28)

Keats' description of the beauty of the trees, the flowers and also the sea in the Isle of Wight shows his deep love and veneration of nature. The quietness, the beauty and the history of these natural surroundings creates a sense of peace and nostalgia in the poet. Keats was a Romantic Poet - for inspiration he goes back

to nature with its unsullied and beautiful surroundings. The Poem "On the sea" was also written on the same day as the letter. Indeed it was written for Reynolds. The letter and the vivid description in it of the natural beauty of the Isle of Wight influenced the writing of this Poem.

The Poem "Endymion" was also written at about the same time as this letter to Reynolds. It was written between the months of April to November 1817. It was published in April 1818. In his letter to Reynolds we can see a deep love for nature and also the sea. "Endymion" is based on the Greek legend of "Endymion" the shepherd king, who was loved by the moon goddess, Cynthia. It is an allegory of a young man's for love. This quest for love can be equated to Keats' quest for love in nature - the beauty and the quiet - love is fresh and untainted - a thing to crave for. Throughout the letter Keats has shown a deep craving for nature which was akin to a search for love.

In his letter to his Kid sister Fanny Keats (1803-1889) on Wednesday 10th September, 1817 he wrote to tell her he is staying with Benjamin Bailey of Magdalen Hall, Oxford. He told her that he is writing a poem (Endymion). He gave her a brief sketch of the plot:

"Many years ago there was a young handsome shepherd who fed his flocks on a mountain's side called Latmus" Keats to Fanny in Gittings (1966:35). The Poem as has already been pointed out was from the Greek legend of Endymion. The letter also gave a vivid description of Oxford - its Gothic building, spires, towers and quadrangles but above all Keats was able to observe that Oxford was surrounded by clear streams. He walks by the side of one of them every evening. Here again, an important aspect of the life of Keats was given - his love and constant attachment to anything that is related to nature.

The Poem "Lines rhymed in a letter Received"(by JHR) from Oxford was written in September, 1817 to John Hamilton Reynolds while Keats was staying in Oxford with Benjamin Bailey and composing the third Book of Endymion. The Poem gave an amusing picture of his stay in Oxford overlooking the dear - Park of Magdalen College.

-"Negative capability"-

Keats wrote to his two younger brothers - George Keats (1797-1841) and Thomas Keats (1799-1818) - on Sunday 21st December 1817. In this letter he discussed his idea of Negative Capability. He feels that a "Man of Achievement" especially, in literature must possess certain qualities: To him a Poet must be capable of being in "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason - With a great Poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration ... "Gittings (1966:41).

The Poet of "negative capability" is the objective poet - his subject matter must appeal to our sense of beauty. This is enough truth about the reality of things. As a Romantic Poet Keats believed that the Poets' primary influence should be from Nature. The inspiration should be the Beauty and the untainted peace afforded by Nature. So, the feelings developed and engendered by this love for Nature gives importance to

the action and situation and not the action and situation to the feelings. So, the poet should not be "reaching after fact and reason "in his poems rather, his sense and appreciation of beauty must inspire what he writes.

IV. Keats's Axioms in Poetry-

On Friday 27th February 1818 Keats wrote to John Taylor (1781-1864). Taylor and James Augustus Hessey (1785-1870) were lifelong friends. They established business together. Keats respected and liked Taylor and Hessey. They in turn were thoroughly convinced of his greatness. They assisted Keats in every possible way. In the letter Keats bared his mind to Taylor about his feelings concerning poetry. His view differs from the accepted norm" ... and you will see how far I am from their centre". Gittings (1966:46) - To Keats Poetry "should surprise by a fine excess and not by singularity - it should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance." He also maintained that "Its touches of beauty should never be half way there by making the reader breathless instead of content: the rise, the progress, the setting of imagery should like the sun come natural to him - shine over him and set soberly although in magnificence leaving him in luxury of twilight -". Again, Keats believed that if poetry does not come naturally"... as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all ..." Keats to Taylor in Gittings (1966:46)

Basically, Keats is here contending that Poetry should be beautiful. It must also satisfy the reader. It should also portray the highest and noblest thoughts of the Poet. To Keats the tension in a Poem must build gradually like the rise and the setting of the sun. The plot, the subject - matter and the use of imagery must come naturally to the poet. He finally, felt that if Poetry does not come naturally to the Poet then, there shouldn't be any poem.

V. Milton, Wordsworth, and the Chambers of Human Life

Keats wrote again to John Hamilton Reynolds on Sunday May 3rd, 1818. Here, he describes the new Romantic Movement. The stature of William Wordsworth and the attempt by Wordsworth to avoid the misery, pain, Heartbreak, sickness and oppression of their generation. The new Romantic Movement by Wordsworth was actualized by the writing of "Tintern Abbey". Keats shares the very principles and dogmas of this new movement. He compared Milton and Wordsworth. He reached the conclusion: ... It proves that a mighty providence subdues the mightiest minds to the service of the time being whether it be in human knowledge or religion.... "To Keats Wordsworth was greater than Milton because "He did not think into the human heart, as Wordsworth has done.

In a letter he wrote to his brother Thomas Keats on Saturday 27th June 1818 Keats gave a vivid picture of Nature. Of course his description brings into focus his deep love and attachment to Nature. He said: "I shall learn poetry here and shall henceforth write more than ever, for the abstract endeavour of being able to add a mite to that mass of beauty which is harvested from these grand materials, by the finest spirits and put into ethereal existence for the relish of one's fellows." Here, Keats was clearly telling his brother what the major preoccupation of his poetry will be - a deep veneration of nature - extolling its beauty and freshness.

As had already been cited John Taylor and James Augustus Hessey were very helpful to Keats. They particularly defended him against hostile reviewers of his works. The letter he wrote to Hessey on Thursday October 8th 1818 was a reaction to some of these hostile criticisms of his works. He maintained that his own "domestic criticism has given me pain without comparison beyond what Blackwood or the quarterly could possibly inflict."

In effect Keats is emphasizing in this letter that whether good or bad he has always been the best critic of his works. He again maintained that whatever anyone would say he will continue writing because he is an independent writer NOT writing in accordance or compliance with what someone else said about his works. He emphasized that: "I have written independently without judgment. - I may write independently and with judgment hereafter. - The genius of Poetry must work out its salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law or precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself. That which is creative must create itself". Gittings (1966:85)

Keats wrote to Fanny Keats on Saturday May 1st 1819. Fanny was being prepared for confirmation in Church. He made mention of a visit he was expecting from Mr. & Mrs. Bilke to Wentworth Place. He was staying at this time with Charles Brown. He alluded to fine weather, health, books, fine country side, claret wine cool out of a cellar a mile deep. A strawberry bed to say your prayers to Flora in, etc. These allusions in this letter will lead to the writing of the poem "Ode to a Nightingale" which was written early in May 1819. At this time Keats was already sick with consumption which he knew will be terminal for him. The Poem contrasts the realities of human life and death with the ideal world of natural beauty, typified by the nightingale's song, the same through all the passing generations of man; yet the conclusion hints that this too may be a fancy that has deceived the poet. According to Charles Brown the Poem was inspired by the song of an actual nightingale in the garden at Wentworth place.

On Tuesday 8th February 1820 Keats again wrote to Fanny Keats from Wentworth place where he was lying down terminally ill. His descriptions of things, objects, animals and people clearly show the level of loneliness and despondency. Because of the contagious nature of consumption (T.B) Keats was quarantined at Wentworth place in order to prevent other people from getting infected. This was very hard for Keats. The resulting pain (both physical and psychological) was palpable in the next letter he wrote.

In June 1820 Keats wrote to Fanny Browne (1800-1865). At this time Keats' condition had further deteriorated. Not only did his loneliness which was occasioned by the quarantine leads him to feel effectively isolated; it also created a bitter feeling in him. He felt loveless. And so, his terribly debilitating condition made him to write this bitter and painful letter to the only woman he ever truly loved in his short life. "He was sick, jealous, demanding, and suspicious; she was young, gay, fond of society. The two lovers were star - crossed." Rollins (Ed) (1958:67). Of course Keats' condition prevented him from marrying Fanny Browne. This letter revealed the pain he passed through while, pointing out his intense feelings and a love that was seemingly unrequited. He never wrote or read any letters to or from Fanny Browne. He saw her for the last time on September 20th 1820.

VI. Keats' Last Letter

The letter he wrote Charles Brown on November 30th, 1820 was the last letter he wrote. Although he received a few after this. At this time Keats has been removed from Wentworth place to Rome, Italy. A doctor was taking care of him and Joseph Severn (1793- 1879) was ministering to his personal needs. When he wrote this letter his condition was gradually getting from bad to worse. Even in this serious condition he was able to remember his close friends, his brother and sister. He asked Charles Brown to write to George his brother who was at this time in the USA.

VII. Conclusion

The letters of John Keats are very important because they have been able to chronicle a life that was rich and original both in thought and relationships. The few letters that were selected in this essay gave us an insight into Keats' ideas on poetry and aesthetics. Keats believed that poetry should come as naturally to a poet as the rising and setting of the sun. To him beauty overcomes all other considerations in poetry.

In Keats' day consumption (TB) had no cure. An infected person will have to be quarantined in order to avoid contaminating other people. The implications of this is that, Keats who has a zest for living got infected and slowly wasted away. In his final days he experienced both physical and psychological pain which was occasioned by loneliness, sickness, personal privation, and above all the absence of love especially, from Fanny Browne. The Poem "Ode to a nightingale" was written by Keats to contrast the realities of human life - the pain and the eventual death with the ideal world of natural beauty, typified by the nightingale's song.

Keats had to contend with many difficulties in his short life. He was poor - he virtually had to depend on friends and relatives, his terminal illness and his failed love life. However, he believed that life should be faced and its difficulties put to use. We read his letters ... for encouragement, though not for escape, and his life, so generously and modestly displayed in them, help us to enlarge our own.

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