

JOHN KEATS'S LETTERS ON POETRY: QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

This handout was prepared by Dr. William Tarvin, a retired professor of literature. Please visit my free website www.tarvinlit.com. Over 500 works of American and British literature are analyzed there for free.

Text used: Charles Kaplan and William David Anderson, eds. Criticism: Major Statements, 4th ed. New York: Bedford, 2000.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. John Keats's early death at 26 snuffed out one of England's most brilliant poets. He left behind some of the greatest poems ever written in English.

2. Keats's letters show him in the process of forming his own conclusions about "the poetical 'self,'" how "the poet differs from other people," and how poetry is "the expression of . . . self," the editors state (Kaplan and Anderson 279).

3. **EXPRESSIVE THEORY:** To Keats, poetry was self-expression, the revelation not of moral precepts or abstract ideas but of personal feeling.

4. **MIMETIC THEORY:** Poetry to Keats was a fine art that should make the depiction of beauty an end in itself.

II. LETTER 43: TO BENJAMIN BAILEY

1. Bailey was a close friend of Keats and at the time of the letter an undergraduate student at Oxford University.

2. This letter stresses three ideas which are central to the **EXPRESSIVE** approach to poetry: the high realm of emotions and the ability of imagination to perceive things.

3. First, Poetry is based in the poet's capacity to feel, not in his ability to reason or think:

(1) "I have never yet been able to perceive how any thing can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning" (Kaplan and Anderson 281)

(2) "O for a Life of Sensations [feelings] rather than of Thoughts!" (281).

(3) I "delight in sensation rather than hunger as you do after [scientific] truth" (281).

4. Secondly, Imagination is the central aspect of a poet's mind which allows the poet to create poetry.

- (1) Keats writes, "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth" (280. Note: A similar idea became the last lines of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn").
- (2) This beauty-truth synthesis is attained not by thought or logic but by the "silent working" (281) of the imagination.

5. Thirdly Imagination allows the poet to sublimate his own character and to assume the character of what he is writing about:

- (1) "Men of Genius . . . have not any individuality, and determined Character. I would call the top and head of those who have a proper self Men of Power" (280).
- (2) Seeing a sparrow picking at the gravel, Keats writes that a poet feels himself becoming that sparrow through an empathetic identification: ". . . nothing startles me beyond the Moment. . . . if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel" (282).

III. LETTER 45: TO GEORGE AND TOM KEATS

1. John Keats had two younger brothers, with both of whom he was close. George married and moved to Kentucky in 1820. Tom, the baby of the family, contracted tuberculosis in 1818 and was tended by John until Tom died at the end of that year. Keats presumably picked up the disease from Tom, himself dying in Feb. 1821.

2. Still using an EXPRESSIVE approach, Keats analyzes an important mental quality which, he feels, a poet must have: impersonality (what Keats calls "Negative Capability" (283).

3. As Kaplan and Anderson write, "But to achieve these feats of imagination [a poet] must possess Negative Capability, which is the central concept in Keats's definition of the poet: the faculty of not having to force one's observations into doctrinaire systems, philosophies, or opinions" (279).

4. The poet, Keats writes, must be able to make "all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth" (283).

5. How is the poet able to do this? Keats writes that "at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which

Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (283).

6. Thus even without having the answers to everything, the great writer can still function; he can live in a time of doubt and uncertainty, not being hindered by these times.

7. At least Shakespeare could, Keats maintains, while Coleridge, he felt, could not: “Coleridge” was “incapable of remaining content with half knowledge” (283).

IV. LETTER 62: TO J. H. REYNOLDS

1. Reynolds, a fellow poet, was a friend of Keats. At the time of the letter, Reynolds was working as an insurance clerk.

2. In this letter Keats connects his EXPRESSIVE orientation with the MIMETIC world which the poet will portray in his poems.

3. He stresses that the poet must be open and receptive to experiences in the physical world.

4. As Kaplan and Anderson note, “Keats uses the paradoxical phrase ‘diligent indolence’ [284] to refer to the necessary receptivity and openness to experience that marks a great writer like Shakespeare, whose own ego is nowhere to be found in his works” (279).

5. To express this relationship between the Mimetic world and the Expressive poet, Keats uses the bee and flower image.

6. He writes that “we should rather be the flower than the Bee—for it is a false notion that more is gained by receiving than giving—no the receiver and the giver are equal in their benefits” (284).

7. He continues: “[L]et us not therefore go hurrying about and collecting honey-bee like [that is, like a honeybee], buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be arrived at: but let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive” (284).

8. His point is that poets should be more like flowers than bees. As the bee pollinates the flower, so the experiences of the world should be received by the poet, who should not use his poems to impose his ego on his world.

V. LETTER 118: TO RICHARD WOODHOUSE

1. Woodhouse was a young lawyer with literary interests who early recognized Keats's genius; he preserved manuscript copies of many of Keats's poems and letters.
2. In this letter, Keats takes up the ideas of the previously letter studied, again the relationship between the MIMETIC world and the EXPRESSIVE poet.
3. As Kaplan and Anderson write, Keats here states that a poet must not "allow ego to interfere with sensations; Keats everywhere rejects the ego in art" (279).
4. To Keats, Wordsworth represents this artistic egotism, which he calls the "wordsworthian or egotistical sublime" (285).
5. Rather, the poet should repress his egotism: Keats says his own "poetical Character" is "not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—It has no character" (285).
6. A true poet "has as much delight in conceiving [creating] an Iago as an Imogen" (286) (allusions to the most devilish and the most angelic characters in Shakespeare: Iago appears in Othello, while Imogen is in Cymbeline (286).
7. Keats states, "What shocks the virtuous philosop[h]er delights the camelion Poet" (285). Thus a poet is like a chameleon which blends into its surroundings unnoticed, not like a philosopher who wants to stamp his view of reality on the world.
8. Keats continues, "A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity"—unlike all other things, including other people, in creation—because the poet is always assuming someone or something else's identity: "filling some other Body" (286).
9. Hence, Keats sums up, the poet "is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures" (286).