

Finding solace in the sublime: Romantic poetry in the face of adversity

"The pleasure that is in sorrow is sweeter than the pleasure of pleasure itself" ~ Percy Bysshe Shelley

Poetry is a beautiful, powerful force; humans have for millennia turned to it as a source of guidance and solace in adversity. Egyptian medicine in the fourth millennium BCE included poetry written on papyrus, liquified to be ingested by the patients¹. The Greeks were renowned for their belief in the power of words for poetry and healing purposes; it seems fitting, therefore, that Apollo, god of medicine, was also the god of poetry. We may have surpassed the days where depression was treated with comedies and mania prescribed with tragedy; nevertheless, the raw, emotive force of poetry remains a guiding force of hope and inspiration. That of the romantic period, risen from the ashes of socio-political upheaval under the ever-looming capitalist threat of industrialisation, is some of the most moving and passionate; the poetry of the Romantic era and in particular Keats and Shelley are profound, emotive beacons of hope in the face of modern adversity, both personal and social.

In current times, the very fears pervading the minds of the Romantics- rising industrialisation and capitalist exploitation, the environmental threat it posed, social unrest and divide- can only be seen as prophetic in their prevalence. Unprecedented recent global events have also forced a distressing and uncomfortable revisioning of human connection and mortality, yet comfort can be sought in the arms of Shelley and Keats, the work of whom is overshadowed in many places by not only contemplation of the human condition but specifically illness and mortality. Keats' *Ode To A Nightingale* was composed in a time of personal crisis- the culmination of tragedy, emotional turmoil and intellectual strain. Though pessimism is woven deeply into the fabric of Romantic poetry, Keats' reveries are undeniably soul wrenching; the grief of the one is translated through lyrical form into the grief of the whole, allowing poetry to become a force of interconnection and sympathy in the face of adversity. The morbid pleasure many poets take in self-aware melancholy is absent; Keats' personal turmoil is presented as an insight into man's place in his world, a profoundly unifying expression of human emotion and existentialism. *An Ode* is a desperate plea for salvation, for escape from the futility of a life lived with beauty and perfection so in reach yet never attained. The melodic beauty to which Keats struggled perpetually towards in his art is yet the unknowing birth right of the simple nightingale², the "immortal Bird"; capitalised in God-like reverence, yet also eternalised in an ageless generalisation, the "blithe Spirit" of Shelley's skylark. Both Shelley and Keats uphold the bird, symbolic of liberation and natural harmony, as the coveted, futile yet everlasting ideal of the poet; yet we find beauty in the indescribable, the unattainable, and

¹ Reiter, S. (2017) The magic of poetic healing, *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 30:4, 241-247

² Shackford, A. (1924) Keats and Adversity. *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4 pp. 474-487

ultimately comfort in the unknown, something that placates crisis; global, personal and existential. *An Ode* soothes mortal grief with the balm of natural bliss, as encapsulated in the all-consuming paradox of the “verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways”; twisting confusion, darkness and melancholy are sweetened with the untouchable force of nature. Keats’ arguably most-loved poem is a resoundingly empathetic acceptance of the unknown, as steadfast as the rhyming couplet concluding his sonnet, *Why Did I Laugh Tonight?*; “Verse, Fame, and Beauty are intense indeed, / But Death intenser -- Death is Life’s high meed”. The iambic heartbeat, faltering through cries of “O Darkness! Darkness! ever must I moan”, reaches at the sonnet’s conclusion not simply acceptance of death’s coexistence with life, but exude a quiet, eloquent sanity reminiscent of Shelley’s *To A Skylark*; “Waking or asleep / Thou of death must deem / Things more true and deep / Than we mortals dream”. Keats must “question Heaven and Hell and Heart in vain” as Shelley pleads knowledge from the simple skylark, conscious of the inexplicability of mortality, time and living. Shelley’s intense desire to liberate himself- and indeed the world- from a system with “all its superstructure of maximisms and forms” bleeds through his writing. Romantic reverence for the indefinable ‘sublime’ presents the existential dread of uncertainty as something to celebrate rather than fear. Man’s reason alone was insufficient to guide him; rejecting the maxims of neo-classical tradition liberated him from both poetic and social structure, finding in the Romantic consciousness of man’s fallibility and fatal egoism a crucial lesson to preserve in an era of political turmoil.

Political polarisation worsens, our oceans continue to rise, loved ones are evermore threatened by illness and isolation; yet, despite it all, human spirit and perseverance endures. Through the often lyrical and imaginative poetic form, it can seem escapist to realise socio-political utopia within the artistic confines of rhyme and metre; however, as we have seen, it is undeniable that in times of adversity, mutability and loss, literature emerges as a guiding force of hope and inspiration. Sources of reflection and revolution, comfort and controversy, Romantic poetry will only serve to guide us in difficult times, and as we are evermore forced to reflect upon our own mortality and the importance of human connection in the midst of an unprecedented global pandemic, we can seek comfort and guidance from the words of those who came before us. Both Shelley and Keats write on and for the individual and society, exploring the human condition and the conflicts that rage both internally and between us, fuelling the everlasting strive for equality and allowing us to find some consolation in the arms of Romanticism’s acceptance of the inexplicable.

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