

# Discerning Sensuousness in Keats's Poetry

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## Abstract

*Keats is not only a great romantic poet, but also a prominent mystic of English poetry saturated with sensuousness. Sensuousness as a striking quality in poetry affects the senses of hearing, seeing, touching, smelling and tasting. Sensuous poetry confers more delight to the senses of the readers rather than presenting ideas and philosophical thoughts. This article aims at discerning sensuousness in Keats's poetry. Some poetic lines from his poems are elicited as qualitative data which hint at the five senses of the readers. It is significant not only to the teachers, but also to the students of English literature.*

**Keywords:** Auditory, Gustatory, Images, Keats, Olfactory, Poetry, Sensuousness, Tactile, Visual

## Introduction

John Keats (1795-1821) was born in London, England as the eldest child of Thomas and Frances Jennings Keats, and died in Rome. He is a prominent English Romantic lyric poet who spent his short life for the perfection of poetry marked by vivid imagery and great sensuous appeal. He published just fifty-four poems, in three thin volumes, and only in some magazines. He remains one of the most influential poets of the Romantic epoch of poetry. Some of his popular poems are: *Endymion, Isabella, Lamia, The Eve of St. Agnes, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, Hyperion, Ode to Psyche, Ode to a Nightingale, Ode on a Grecian Urn, To Autumn, On the Sea, Bright Star, Ode on Melancholy and Ode on Indolence*. Major characteristics of his poetry are: richness in sensuousness, treatment of Medievalism, romantic imagery, melancholy, Hellenism, profound love for pessimism, nature, beauty.

He is an English Romantic poet and a sensuous lover of nature. He is one of the key personalities of the second generation of Romantic poets along with Lord Byron (1788-1824) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). Ahmed considers Keats as "the purest poet in the history of English Literature; and the poetry which gives pleasure to the senses is considered best and therefore can be called purest poetry."

## Review of Literature

Literature review in this article involves some writers' opinions about Keats and his poetry, definition and concept of poetry, and concept of sensuousness, images and sensuousness in poetry.

## Keats and his Poetry

Keats is an influential poet. His poetic lines sound like great maxims. His poems are full of sensuous waves. Kumar opines that the poetry of Keats is "characterized by the use of sensuous language. He is a worshipper of beauty and apprehends beauty everywhere."

Moreover, Nawaz and Jabeen maintain that Keats presents the “beauty of imagination that appeals to our senses and gives delight to our senses” Pointing out the characteristics of Keats’s poetry, Ahuja asserts that “Keats’s poetry is abundantly rich in sensuousness, suggestiveness and freshness, and the vision of beauty experienced by the poet has the finest real meaning of what he senses gathered from his environment.” Mundra supporting these writers expresses his view on Keats and use of senses as “Keats made an excellent use of all the senses in his poetry.” Trilling assumes about Keats’s pleasure of senses and claims that “the pleasure of the senses was for him not merely desirable –it was the very ground of life.”

His poems are also rich images that appeal to our senses. Pugh and Johnson opine that “images invite readers to experience them through the visual cues, but also through their acoustic, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile qualities.” Harmon defines an image as “a literal and concrete representation of a sensory experience or of an object that can be known by one or more of the senses.” His poems reflect his love for nature. Byron affirms that “Keats tends to see nature as something cultivated and arranged for display”. Similar idea is expressed by Pettet who states that “Keats enjoyed in nature he enjoyed with a simple, intense sensuousness.” He saw the principle of beauty in all in nature. Arnold points out that “Keats has made himself remembered, and remembered as no merely sensuous poet could be”; and he has done it by loving the principles of beauty in all the things. He followed the tradition of English poetry in his writing, and we can see his crave for Hellenism in his writing. Ward writes that Keats’s special originality was “his sense of dedication to the whole tradition of English poetry and his attempt to recover it for the use of poetry in his time.” Aabedi states that “Keats always selects the objects of his description and imagery with a keen eye on their sensuous appeal. This sensuousness is the principal charm of his poetry.” Ali mentions that “Keats’s perception of beauty and its relationship with human life reflects his perspective of nature as well as human being.” Zia describes the features of John Keats’ poetry to be “a concise but comprehensive summary of a larger work of the innovative use of lexical resources to create the desired impact on the readers.”

All the remarks expressed by the above mentioned writers regarding Keats obviously indicate that he is a great romantic poet who has revealed his strong passions for sensuousness, images, and love for nature in his poetry.

### Poetry as a Genre of Literature

Poetry is a popular genre of literature. It is more emotional, more sensuous and more musical than other genres. It is complex in constructions, and therefore requires the readers’ literary experiences and linguistic ability to decipher it. Lennard writes that “poetic syntax has additional license and must be more complex”. Pugh and Johnson remark that “poems often challenge readers as well, asking them to interpret words, phrases, images, and symbols conjoined in striking ways.” Poetry is rich in sensuousness, but it is not an easy task to probe into sensuousness in poetry.

Johnson views poetry as “the art of uniting pleasure with truth by recalling imagination to the help of reason.” Hudson maintains that “poetry is an interpretation of life through imagination and feelings”. A reader needs to read poetry with his mind and heart. The mind gives birth to imagination and the heart gives birth to feelings. The use of both the mind and the heart can be very useful means to interpret and analyze poetry.

### Sensuousness

The term ‘sensuousness’ is a noun. It comes from the adjective ‘sensuous’. The general meaning of ‘sensuous’ is ‘relating to the senses’. Harmon maintains that “sensuous is a critical term characterizing writing that plays fully on the various senses of the reader.” Mundra mentions that sensuousness in poetry “implies that poetry is related, not to didacticism, but chiefly to the task of making a strong appeal to the senses and employs techniques which simultaneously exploit the sensuous aspects of language.” We can notice the dissemination and density of sensuousness in Keats’s poetry as in *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on Grecian Urn*, *The Eve of St, Agnes*, *Lamina*, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and so on.

## Images

Keats's poetry is rich in the employment of images. An image is a word or phrase that appeals directly to the reader's taste, touch, hearing, sight, smell, and feelings. It is thus any vivid or picturesque phrase that evokes a particular sensation in the reader's mind. Cuddon categorizes the types of images as "visual, olfactory, tactile, auditory, gustatory, abstract and kinaesthetic." A visual image describes what the speaker experiences through his eyes. An olfactory image deals with what the speaker experiences through his nose. A tactile image sets out what the speaker experiences through his skin or touch. An auditory image reveals what the speaker experiences through his ears. Similarly, a gustatory image describes what the poetic persona experiences through his tongue. An abstract image is a type of imagery that depends on the abstract concept. It is of cerebral and theological kind. A kinaesthetic image is related to the learning through feeling such as a sense of body posture and muscle movement. It deals with the movement or action of objects or people. Abrams opines that "images taken collectively are imagery that is used to signify all the things and qualities of sense perception referred to in poetry or other work of literature." Kirszner and Mandell highlight the significance of images in the poem by asserting "images enable poets to express ideas that would be intricate to convey in any other way". Anderson highlighting the importance of image asserts that "a good image in a poem encourages something more than a surface recognition; it resonates through the consciousness." Similarly, Wales points out literary images and asserts that "literary images, whether in prose or poetry, are not simply decorative, but serve to de-familiarize: to reveal aspects of experience in a new light; or to reinforce theme, characterization or setting" It is a matter of pleasure for us that we can enjoy almost all types of images in Keats's poetry.

## Sensuousness in Keats's Poetry

Sensuousness is a supreme quality of Keats's poetical works. The *Ode on a Grecian Urn* contains a series of sensuous pictures: passionate men and gods chasing unwilling maidens, the flute-players playing their ecstatic music, the fair youth trying to kiss his beloved, the cheerful branches of the tree enjoying

an everlasting spring, meadows with trodden weed and so on. The visual images are beautifully depicted in the following lines:

O attic shape! Fair attitude! With brede,  
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,  
With forest branches and the trodden weed,  
(Lines: 41-43)

The Sensuousness of Keats is a striking characteristic of his entire poetry. In the poem *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, the lady is described as "full beautiful, a fairy's child", with long hair, light foot, and wild eyes:

Full beautiful, a faery's child  
Her hair was long, her foot was light  
And her eyes were wild. (Lines: 14-16)

The poem *To Autumn* is considered to be a great epithet of concrete sensuous experience. The poem projects a graphic depiction of the season with all its array and richness. The intact aura and the mood of the season are presented through sensuous imagery and descriptions as in:

With fruits the vines that round the thatch-eves  
run;  
To bend with apples and moss'd cottage-trees,  
And fill all fruits with ripeness to the core.  
(Lines: 4-6)

*The Eve of Saint Mark* is also rich in visual sensation. The green thorny bloomless hedge, rivers, sedge (plant), primroses, rills, daisies and hills allude to the sense of sight as depicted in the following lines:

Of the green thorny bloomless hedge,  
Of rivers new with spring-tide sedge,  
Of primroses by sheltering rills,  
And daisies on the anguish hills. (Lines: 9-12)

Malik expresses his view about the poem *Ode to a Nightingale* that it "contrasts the happiness and joy of the bird with the weariness, the fever and the fret of the world."

In the poem, *Ode to a Nightingale*, the poet expresses his great love for the song of nightingale. He considers the bird an immortal one. He hears the song of the bird, and further asserts that its song was

also heard in the ancient days by the emperor and the common person. Exemplifying the *Ode to a Nightingale*, Nath articulates that “Keats speaks of the eternality of the bird and expresses his peaceful existence amidst the bird’s world.” The sense of hearing is clearly depicted in the following lines:

The voice I hear this passing night was heard,  
In ancient days, by emperor and clown:  
(Lines: 63-64)

Akhter enunciates that “Keats’s *Ode on a Grecian Urn* offers a complex and new concept of beauty.” In *Ode on Grecian Urn*, the poet urges the piper carved on the surface of the Grecian urn to keep on playing the pipe. The music we actually hear is sweet, but the music realized by imagination or a spiritual ear is much sweeter. The following expression depicts the auditory image:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard,  
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes play on;  
(Lines: 11-12)

The sense of hearing is vividly depicted in the poem *To Autumn* as the poet mentions the sounds of lambs, hedge-crickets, red-breast and swallows:

And full- grown lambs loud bleat from the hilly  
bourn:  
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft  
The red-breast whistles from a gardener-croft;  
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.  
(Lines: 30-33)

In *Ode to Apollo*, the poet mentions the sweet majestic music of the musical instruments played by the ancient poets whom he respects. He hears the sweet magical music of Spenser who sings in the praise of chastity:

A silver trumpet Spenser blows,  
And, as its martial notes to silence flee,  
From a virgin chorus flows  
A hymn in praise of spotless chastity,  
(Lines: 30-33)

In *The Eve of St. Agnes*, the reference to the music of the instruments appeals to our sense of hearing

The boisterous, mid-night, festive clarion,  
The kettle-drum, and far-heard clarionet:  
(Lines: 258-259)

In the opening lines of *La Bella Dame Sans Merci*, the poet describes the Knight at arms in a sad state. He looks pale and alone. The environment is extremely melancholic as depicted below:

O what can all thee, knight at arms,  
Alone and palely loitering?  
The sedge is withered from the lake  
And no birds sing! (Lines: 1-4)

A sense of touch or tactile image is presented in *The Eve of St. Agnes*. The poet commences with a description of the winter and suggests some powerful pictures while depicting the effect of the season on animals, birds, and men as in:

ST. AGNES’S EVE –Ah, bitter chill it was!  
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;  
The hare limped trembling through the frozen  
grass,  
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:  
(Lines: 1-4)

The poet in the poem *I Stood Tip-Toe* presents a sense of touch by mentioning the nature and effect of the breeze. He describes:

The breezes were ethereal, and pure,  
And crept through half closed lattices to cure  
The languid sick; it cool’d their fever’d sleep,  
And soothed them into slumbers full and deep.  
(Lines: 221-224)

*Ode to a Nightingale* is a rich poem in the description of sensuousness. Keats describes a sense of taste resulting in intoxication:

O for a breaker full of the warm south,  
Full of the true the blushful Hippocrene.  
(Lines: 15-16)

*To Autumn* appeals to the sense of taste. The phrase ‘mellow fruitfulness’ indicates the condition of ripe fruits that taste sweet. The juicy grapes and other fruits such as the apples, the gourd, the hazelnuts and flowers for the bees produce water to the mouths of the readers and appeal to the sense of taste of the readers. Although these images at first appeal to the sense of sight, they eventually appeal to the sense of taste:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
Close bosom friend of the maturing sun;  
(Lines: 1-2)

In *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, the poet mentions how a beautiful lady finds the Knight roots of relish sweet of honey. The sense of taste can be expressed in this poem:

She found me roots of relish sweet  
Of honey wild and manna dew. (Lines: 25-26)

In *Ode to Nightingale*, the poet cannot see the flowers in darkness, but he knows them through their smell. There is intermingled perfume of many flowers. He describes:

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,  
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet.  
(Lines: 41-43)

A poem may have more than one image to appeal to the senses of the readers. *The Eve of St. Agnes* appeals to the eye, to the sense of touch, to the sense of smell, and to the ear:

Of all its wreathed pearls, her she frees;  
Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;  
Loosens her fragrant bodice; by degrees  
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:  
(Lines: 227-230)

*Ode to a Nightingale* is one of the finest examples of Keats's rich sensuousness. The lines in which the poet expresses of passionate yearning for some Provençal wine or the red wine from the fountain of the Muses appeal to both our senses of smell and taste:

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been  
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,  
Tasting of Flora and the country green,  
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!  
(Lines: 11-14)

The poems composed by Keats can be noticed with a dense dissemination of sensuousness. Some poetic lines retain a single sense, whereas some poetic lines have the blending senses, therefore his poetry is rich in sensuousness.

## Conclusion

Keats is a genuinely influential poet of senses. His poems are fully laden with the dense sensuousness.

The readers need to discern the sensuous aspects in his poems for understanding, interpreting and analyzing them. Discerning sensuous aspects in the poems can be one of the big keys to open the door and enter the poet's poetic creation to decipher its meaning. Analyzing poetry by considering its sensuousness is not only a nice way of enjoying poetry, but it is also a process of enhancing our literary sensual experiences.

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