

Is the poetry of Keats best enjoyed by young readers?

Children were not the intended audience of Keats, who strove to establish himself as a sophisticated and serious writer, and to 'secure a place among the English poets'¹ he admired, such as Milton, Wordsworth and Shakespeare.² For this reason, he hesitated to publish some poems, such as 'Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil' which he complained had 'too much inexperience of life and simplicity of knowledge', instead preferring 'fine things which cannot be laugh'd at'.^{3,4} However, his poems can undoubtedly be enjoyed by young readers despite the linguistic challenges and disturbing themes.

'A Song about Myself' is a poem which immediately stands out as enjoyable for children. Originally written in 1818 to amuse Keats' sister, Frances Mary Keats, the poem is now often used to introduce young readers to his work.⁴ From the outset, the child's perspective is clear as the speaker declares 'There was a naughty boy', using a phrase reminiscent of a fairy-tale and hinting at mischievousness. We soon discover he is led by curiosity to run to the 'ghostès/And postès/And witches/And ditches' of Scotland, conveying his irrepressible sense of adventure, especially as he faces fantastical 'ghostès...and witches'. The use of rhyme adds humour, following Woolf's advice to 'commit every fault of style, grammar, taste, and syntax...in whatever metre, prose, poetry or gibberish'⁵, and the result is a poem which would immensely appeal to children.

However, a large proportion of Keats' work contains complex language and concepts, which would challenge young readers. For example, many images in 'Ode to a Nightingale' are inspired by classical knowledge, such as when the speaker craves a cup of the 'blushful Hippocrene', which is the spring considered sacred to the Muses of Greek mythology. Thus, Keats seeks divine inspiration for his poetry before dying blissfully. Similarly, Keats imagines being 'charioted by Bacchus and his pards', alluding to the God of wine and revelry in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.⁴ Without this context, young readers may feel an emotional disconnection with the text as the power of the imagery is lost. These allusions also reveal Keats' astounding knowledge of classical literature, stemming from his voracious reading as a child. At school he loved Virgil's *Eclogues* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and even won a prize for translating Virgil's *Aeneid*.⁶ It is unlikely his passion and extraordinary enthusiasm for these texts would be shared by the average young reader today, and so many would struggle with the allusions and extensive vocabulary found throughout his poems.

However, perhaps linguistic challenges are irrelevant to young readers' enjoyment of literature. Keats himself advocated negative capability, and children are naturally more 'capable of being in uncertainties...without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' compared to adults.⁷ Therefore, instead of reasoning or debating interpretations, they may simply accept the mysterious imagery and euphony of expressions, such as when Keats names the nightingale a 'light-winged dryad of the trees' or describes 'the murmurous haunt of flies'. Thus, for them the 'sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration'.⁷

Some poems also have disturbing moments, which may be considered unsuitable for children. For instance, 'Isabella; Or, the Pot of Basil' is inspired by Boccaccio's *The Decameron* and

recounts the tragic death of two lovers.⁴ Keats focuses on Lorenzo's physical decay when describing 'skull, confined bones...each form that hungry Death hath marred', presenting death as ravenous and destructive. Pity turns to horror when we later see his head and 'The thing was vile with green and livid spot', with the gory details emphasising the repulsiveness of decay. Isabella's response is equally chilling as she 'forgot the stars, the moon, and sun...She had no knowledge when the day was done' with her obliviousness conveying her extreme depression as she dwells on grief with no hope of acceptance, and eventually 'died forlorn'. Her overwhelming distress and the focus on death may be distressing for young readers.

However, the tale may appeal to children regardless of what we judge to be suitable for them, as children have always been drawn to tragic and brutal stories, even after the beginning of children's literature in the 18th century.⁹ For example, Puritan literature warned children against temptation and taught them 'how to die in a befitting manner',⁸ and yet the most famous of these texts, Janeway's 'A Token for Children' was proclaimed 'the most entertaining book that can be' by a parent and their child in 1821.⁹ Such tales are perhaps appealing as the suspense and horror create a gripping plot. The most terrible scenarios can be envisioned, but there is a comfort in knowing these exist only in the imagination, and readers can experience the intense emotions without facing the real consequences. In fact, Boccaccio's 'Decameron' was written to 'offer solace...to those who stand in need of it' as a result of the Italian plague, and although some tales are tragic, the imaginary offered an escape from the grim reality of the era.¹⁰ Thus, perhaps we should not dismiss children's ability to cope with the disturbing, including in Keats' darker poems, such as the romances in his final lifetime volume of poetry, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, and Other Poems*.

Overall, potential challenges to the enjoyment of Keats' poems are the complexity of language and the disturbing themes, but children would not necessarily be dissuaded by either. Therefore, the enjoyment of the poems is dependent on individual taste, rather than age. This is further shown through the differing opinions of adult readers, as T.S Elliott was a critic of romantic poetry, regretting how 'the dissociation of sensibility set in' and 'feeling became more crude',¹¹ whereas Shelley praised Keats' mastery of 'quick Dreams,/The passion-winged ministers of thought'.¹² Therefore, it is impossible to say who 'best enjoys' Keats' work, but it has brought joy to people of all ages, and as Shelley proclaims in 'Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats', 'his fate and fame shall be/An echo and a light unto eternity!'

Word Count: 986

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