

## **Que sais-je?<sup>1</sup> and the Unique Appeal of the Trinity of Second-Generation Romantic Poets for Young Readers.**

We, young readers, are on an adventure where the everyday hasn't faded into the mundane ordinarys of life. There is a flurry of firsts to be experienced. These firsts are encapsulated in the poetry of Keats, Shelley and Byron whose merits include making the common magnificent and memorable. The beating heart and soul of their verses burst forth with a spontaneous outflow of emotions that correspond with the spontaneity of childhood. The *que sera sera* attitude of the Romantics translates into YOLO (you only live once) for us. The gradual evolution of their ideas, such as Keats' progression in style from *O Solitude* to *Bright Star*, holds a mirror to our lived experiences and evolving understanding of the world. The relevance of the Romantics among young readers is unquestionable. In fact, it has led Keats and other Romantics to emerge as more popular figures than ever before. "He has his lusty Spring, when fancy clear/Takes in all beauty with an easy span:/ He has his Summer, when luxuriously/Spring's honied cud of youthful thought he loves/ To ruminate, and by such dreaming high/ Is nearest unto heaven: quiet coves"<sup>2</sup> Therefore, in our "lusty Spring", we appreciate the fullness and richness of their expression in its entirety. In our "ruminating Summer", we deconstruct their depiction of the human experience. The imagery, symbolism, metaphors, verse-pattern and verbal music predominant in their poetry soothe and aid us in our Spring and Summer respectively.

"Que sais-je?"<sup>3</sup>: Who am I? What do I know? These resounding questions bind us to Montaigne and the second-generation Romantics. We are impressionable and eager to establish good impressions. We claim with all our heart anything in which we see even the faintest reflections of ourselves. Then it is easy to understand why Keats, Shelley and Byron have become our messiahs. The driving force behind their poetry is their desire to work out solutions to their deepest quandaries. They, like us, are on a quest to reconcile the reality with the ideal. They voice out our concerns, "Then, what is Life?"<sup>4</sup> in an era where information is available at our fingertips, yet misinformation and disinformation prevail. When our own imagination has no limits, we are awed by their imagination and synaesthetic imagery. In our tumultuous period of growth, "Love, Hope, and Self-esteem, like clouds depart/And come, for some uncertain moments lent."<sup>5</sup> but their poetry provides stable solace.

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<sup>1</sup> Montaigne's sceptical remark which translates to what do I know?

<sup>2</sup> Poetry Foundation. "The Human Seasons by John Keats." *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44472/the-human-seasons>.

<sup>3</sup> Montaigne's sceptical remark which translates to what do I know?

<sup>4</sup> Poetry Foundation. "The Triumph of Life by Percy Bysshe Shelley." *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45143/the-triumph-of-life>.

<sup>5</sup> Poetry Foundation. "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty by Percy Bysshe Shelley." *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45123/hymn-to-intellectual-beauty>

Keats, Shelley and Byron embody the epitome of the Romantic paradox where there is a polarity in their lives, opinions and poetic productions. There is variation in their writing even if we only consider poetry in their rich corpus of works. Similarly, we are still developing our personalities by coalescing the contradictory to defy conformity. Take Byron, for example, who rallied for oppressed people in every land yet displayed a childish aristocratic pride. Some critics have considered his unwillingness to adopt a fixed stance on issues a weakness, but it reminds us of our own experience of flitting between vast and varied ideologies before forming informed opinions. The negative capability<sup>6</sup> admired by Keats and aspired by us, i.e. the capability of “being in uncertainties”<sup>7</sup>, can be found in the works of Romantics. Byron’s Don Juan with “A non-descript and ever varying rhyme, / A versified Aurora Borealis, / Which flashes o’er a waste and icy clime”<sup>8</sup> is a prime example of negative capability because it explores the uncertainties of life with self-deception. Even Keats’ odes are multidimensional and antithetical because they deal with the ephemeral and eternal, human and immortal. Furthermore, the critical response to these Romantics shows us the vagaries of validation thrust upon young minds, which are parallel to the echo chambers of social media that manufacture cultural currency these days. The versatility, flexibility and dialectical nature of their poetry echo our own understanding of issues. We are not yet bound by rigid conventions hardened with experience. Therefore, their poetry encourages us to pierce through the armour of falsehood to reveal the human condition, revel in its goodness and denounce its shortcomings even if it’s contradictory and complex.

The jeux d’esprit, aspirations and melancholy which permeate the poems of these Romantics appeal to our sensibility. They used mockery as a cover for intellectual and emotional honesty, which is relatable because our generation laughs at memes to deal with climate change anxiety and the mental health crisis. Shelley’s unswerving concern with politics is similar to our own where the personal is the political. For example, young people led protests to demand urgent action to combat climate change during COP 26. Shelley is the radical cosmopolitan parody of the social butterfly<sup>9</sup> who grew up in the ranks of the gentry but rejected upper-class norms. This mirrors our urge for socio-economic mobility, to be better and do better. Similar to Shelley’s self-imposed exile in Italy, we need the space and time to test our capabilities and move beyond our privilege to gain profound empathy for others.

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<sup>6</sup> John, Keats. “Letter #37: To George and Tom Keats, 21-27 [?] December 1817.” *The Keats Letters Project*, 21 Dec. 2017, <http://keatslettersproject.com/letters/negcapletter/>.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> *The Project Gutenberg EBook of Don Juan, by Lord Byron.*  
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/21700/21700-h/21700-h.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Moore, Timothy. *The Cambridge Companion To Shelley*. Cambridge University Press.

The reflections of our aspirations, fears, emotions and experiences are encapsulated in the lives and works of Keats, Shelley and Byron. Therefore, we find the poetry of the trinity of Romantics to be uniquely endearing and enjoyable. However, it would be rather narcissistic and silly to assume that we are the only readers to whom their works appeal. The power of poetry lies in shape-shifting abilities, i.e. it lends itself to a multitude of interpretations. It grows with us and on us. When “the day is gone, and all its sweets are gone!”<sup>10</sup>, we will continue to savour the sweetness of poetry, albeit in a different manner. Since the poetry of Romantics is truly “a thing of beauty”<sup>11</sup> which “is a joy for ever”<sup>12</sup>, we read the Romantics, etch their verses into our memory and carve out their meaning by thrusting our own onto the immortal in our adolescence. We will continue to enjoy its “loveliness”<sup>13</sup> for days yet unseen.

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<sup>10</sup> Poetry Foundation. “‘The Day Is Gone, and All Its Sweets Are Gone!’ By John Keats.” *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50374/the-day-is-gone-and-all-its-sweets-are-gone>.

<sup>11</sup> Poetry Foundation. “From Endymion by John Keats.” *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44469/endymion-56d2239287ca5>.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*