

Romanticism

Romanticism was at its height in England between **1790 – 1840**

John Keats lived from **1795 until 1821**.

He was writing from **1818** until his death at the age of 25 – he was therefore included in the second wave of Romanticism. The first wave took place during his childhood.

Romanticism ..	
Rejected	Embraced
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18th century <u>classicism</u> • The ordered rationality of <u>Enlightenment</u>. • Impersonal and artificial feeling. • Aristocratic patronage. • Mechanical convention. • Conservative morality. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom of individual expression. • Feelings of sincerity, spontaneity and originality. • Emotional directness. • Emotional intensity. • Power of the imagination.

Romanticism existed all over Europe, we will only be focusing on the movement in England.

The first wave of the movement in this country included :

William Blake
William Wordsworth
Samuel Taylor Coleridge

The second wave of the movement included:

George Gordon Byron
Percy Bysshe Shelley
John Keats

Many of the Romantic writers in the second wave admired:

Thomas Chatterton
Shakespeare
Milton
Chaucer
Spenser

Politically the movement was inspired by the revolutions in France and America and the popular wars of independence in Poland, Spain and Greece. The movement was often against any form of authoritarian government, some of the writers were republicans.

Emotionally the movement expressed an extreme assertion of the self, the value of individual experience and the dynamic nature of the imagination.

Socially the movement was in favour of progressive causes, such as democracy, liberty, the end to slavery and poverty etc.

Common Themes

Remembered childhood

Mythology

Revolution

Imagination

The exiled hero

Unrequited love

Power of the natural world

These six male writers believed that a better world was possible and that it could be achieved not in the afterlife, but in the real, material world that they inhabited.

Many of the writers avoided religion in favour of the powers of nature. They believed the imagination, inspired by nature, could overcome or ease human suffering. Their work was not escapist and was often rooted in human suffering.

Some of the writers had a strong interest in mythological and medieval texts; many saw these cultures as the ideal, both socially and artistically. They tended to hero worship certain writers, like Shakespeare, and were keen to establish a 'brotherhood' of exceptional writers throughout history.

The Historical Context of Keats's Poems

Keats and the critics

Some critics have argued that Keats had no interest in the political and social situation. They claim that he was concerned with beauty rather than truth. **Amy Lowell (1925)** believed he had only a slight interest in politics and **Sidney Colvin (1917)** believed he was not suited to writing about the ultimate truth. In the 1980s critics associated with **New Historicism** started to re-examine Keats's political and social imagination, many critics, such as **Jerome McGann (1983)** thought that Keats was reacting to the horrors of the social situation by writing escapist poetry. Other critics believed that Keats was a radical and that his poetry '*from the beginning is haunted by politics.*' **Daniel Watkins (1989)**

As you examine the poems, you must develop your own opinion on this issue.

		Timeline
1783	American War of independence ends.	
1789	French Revolution	
1792	French King executed England goes to war with France – Napoleonic Wars	
1795	Crop failures, inflation, bread shortages – people protested for an end to the war and parliamentary reform. The King's carriage was surrounded in the streets and the windows were smashed. <u>Keats was born</u>	
1811	George, the Prince of Wales, acts as regent for King George, who has been declared insane.	
1812	Luddite Riots	
1815	The war with France was over – many people hoped for an improvement in the social and economic situation. Instead the situation became worse – the rapid growth of the population (rose by 50% between 1801 and 1831) Low wages and increased prices – the majority of working people experienced a fall in their standard of living. The industrial change had left many skilled labourers out of work. There were bad harvests in the immediate post war years – farm labourers suffered badly.	

The government added to this distress by making a series of unfortunate decisions. The corn laws of 1815 kept the price of corn artificially high which benefited the landed classes and had a severe impact upon the poor. Protests in London as the bill was passed, rioting, member of the crowd shot.

The Game Laws – in 1816 a labourer found with a net at night could be transported for 7 years. People were resorting to poaching because they were starving. It was a severe and unjust law.

1819	There was a massacre at St. Peter's Fields (Peterloo) A protesting crowd was attacked by the yeomanry. Henry Hunt had been addressing the crowd on the subject of parliamentary reform. Keats was part of the crowd that welcomed Hunt back to London after the massacre.
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In these years the gap between the poor and the rich widened. The industrial revolution and the enclosure movement had caused large scale social problems. Conditions in factories were appalling and child labour was common. Workers were expected to work for 12 hours without a break in dangerous and unpleasant conditions.

Keats's poem *Isabella* (1818) describes the horrors of capitalism:

With her two brothers this fair lady dwelt,
Enriched from ancestral merchandise.
And from them many a weary hand swelt
In torched mines and noisy factories,
And many once proud-quivere'd loins did melt
In blood from stinging whip; - with hollow eyes
Many all day in dazzling river stood,
To take the rich-ored driftings of the flood.

There was general unrest amongst the lower classes and the Tory Government feared a revolution – as a result they passed oppressive and severe laws to punish those who showed signs of radicalism. Writers were imprisoned if they published radical ideas. Many writers were forced into exile. Pro-revolutionary ideas were seen as anti-British because of the war with France. Hunt's paper the *Examiner* frequently criticised these severe laws and was often persecuted by the Government.

The social and economic situation started to ease in 1821, when Lord Liverpool attempted to improve the situation with more liberal policies.

Additional notes on context

Keats and the Poetic Form

- Keats was a constant experimenter with poetic forms and used most of those he attempted with great success, always striving to find the right stanza or the right line length for the story he wished to tell or the idea he wanted to express.

Some of Keats's early poems are written in **Spenserian stanza**. Keats appears to be experimenting with the form.

The first form with which the poet really worked seriously was the **sonnet**, the form in which his initial masterpiece - "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" - was written and which would later evolve into the stanza forms of the great odes.

For his early meditative pieces, such as "Sleep and Poetry," his epistles, and his long poem "Endymion," Keats use **rhymed couplets of iambic pentameter**, carefully avoiding, however, the so-called **end - stopped** or **heroic couplets** which had helped to make Alexander Pope anathema to the Romantics. Indeed, some critics feel that Keats went too far in avoiding end-stops, especially in "Endymion." In any case, it is significant that none of the poet's best work was composed in this form.

For his long narrative poems, Keats experimented with a number of stanzas. "Isabella" is written in **ottava rima**, eight-line stanzas with the rhyme scheme abababcc, and the poem's failure to a certain extent is due to the unsuitability of the form for the subject. The material of the poem is grisly, the stanza tends to create humorous effects, and the result of the combination is unfortunate.

The **Spenserian stanza** Keats chose for "The Eve of St. Agnes" is another matter. The nine-line form, the last line with its six beats, is exactly right for depicting the sensual and sentimental adventure of Madeline and Porphyro. Only Shelley, in his elegy for Keats, "Adonais," used the form with comparable skill in the nineteenth century.

By this time, Keats had begun to get frustrated at the limitations of the **sonnet**. What he had to say, while suitable to the sonnet, could no longer be confined within fourteen lines, so he began to experiment, first with the rhyme scheme, as in "On the Sonnet," and then in the different stanzas of the odes, stanzas that are composed of various elements of the sonnet.

Finally, in the unfinished Hyperion poems, Keats used the **blank verse** of Milton's epics and used it effectively.

Keats's Sonnets

Sonnets

There are two main types of sonnet – Italian (or Petrarchan) and English (or Shakespearean).

Edmund Spenser also varied the English sonnet to produce the Spenserian sonnet.

All have 14 lines and use iambic pentameters.

Keats used both Italian and English forms, although he often varies the form slightly to make it irregular.

(e.g. uses an irregular Shakespearean sonnet for 'On Peace')

In the early poetry (1816-1817) he mainly uses the Italian form, after 1818 he becomes more interested in the Shakespearean form.

Italian – An octave followed by a sestet – 14 lines in all. The transition from octave to sestet usually coincides with a 'turn' in the argument or mood of the poem. Example of this form - 'Written on the day Leigh Hunt left Prison' and 'To Leigh Hunt, esq.'

English – Made up of three quatrains, with a couplet at the end – rhyming abab cdcd efef gg. The 'turn' comes with the final couplet. Examples of this form – 'When I have fears that I may cease to be'.

The **Spenserian** sonnet has a rhyme scheme of ababbabccdcdee.

Octave

1. A group of 8 verse lines forming the first part of an **Italian sonnet** – rhymes abbaabba
2. More unusually, the term may refer to a stanza of eight lines.

Sestet

1. A group of six verse lines forming the second part of an Italian sonnet – rhymes cdecde or cdcdcd
2. More rarely, the term may refer to a stanza of six lines.

Quatrain

A verse stanza of four lines that rhyme. (e.g. abcb or abab)

Iambic pentameter

10 syllable line (Five feet) – one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable. You can vary where you put the 5 stresses (e.g. it can start with a stressed syllable) It can be found rhymed in heroic couplets and sonnets; unrhymed in blank verse.

Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

Half-rhyme

An imperfect rhyme in which the final consonants of stressed syllables agree but the vowel sound do not match (cape/deep)

Heroic Couplet

A rhymed pair of iambic pentameter lines – used as closed couplets by Pope. Keats referred to this technique as a ‘wretched rule’ (*Sleep and Poetry*, 1816)

Spenserian Stanza

Stanza of nine iambic lines – first eight lines are pentameters, while the ninth line is a iambic line of 6 feet. Rhymes ababbcbcc. The Eve of St. Agnes takes this form.

Other Notes on Language

A-Level Note Sharing and Presentations

Everyone in the class will be allocated a poem from the anthology; each person will then produce a page of clear notes, using the following headings as a guide.

Type up the notes and make sure you use bullet points, headings etc. **Use 12pt Times New Roman font only.**

Your sheet of notes will be the basis of your presentation and everyone in the class will receive a copy.

Title of Poem –

Date of presentation -

- Date poem was written.
- Date poem was published.
- Brief background of poem – what was happening in Keats's personal life when he wrote the poem, what was happening socially and historically
- Two line summary of subject.
- **Details of language features – imagery, form, mood, etc.**
- Personal response to the poem.
- Does the poem show the influence of another poet? (Spenser, Milton, Wordsworth, Hunt etc.)
- Importance of poem in Keats's development. (is it typical of his work at this time, was it a work he admired etc.)
- Explain the historical/political references.
- Explanation of mythological allusions etc.