

# HARMONIZING TWO HORIZONS: LITERATURE AND MEDICINE IN POETRY OF JOHN KEATS

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## Abstract

Literature is a product of experience and expression. Good literary works mirror the society and make suggestions for social correctness. The writer should artistically present the reality of his society and point the way forward to higher ideals and more humane options. As a way of conveying social reality, writers explore biological, socioeconomic and cultural dimensions of human health and medical practice. Literature and medicine, as an interdisciplinary study, shows the social function of literature which lies at the intersection of humanities, medicine and social sciences. Since illness and medical experiences are daily encountered in our society, writers' exploration of such health conditions attests, significantly, to their consciousness of societal deprivations and commitment for social and human improvement. The intricate web woven between literature and medicine has yielded fascinating insights into the human condition, illuminating both the physiological and emotional facets of existence. This nexus, often overlooked, finds a remarkably harmonious embodiment in the poetry of John Keats, a remarkable literary figure whose legacy extends beyond his verses and delves into his experiences as a trained surgeon's apprentice. This introductory section seeks to shed light on the significance of investigating the confluence of literature and medicine in Keats' poetry and the unique insights this union brings to the fore. This research paper delves into the intricate interplay between literature and medicine within the poetry of John Keats. It examines how Keats intricately weaved elements of medical knowledge and human experience into his poetic works. The paper explores how Keats's exposure to medical training and his poetic vision converged, resulting in a unique perspective that resonates through his portrayal of characters and themes in his poetry. By investigating Keats's engagement with both medical knowledge and artistic expression, this paper seeks to shed light on the ways in which literature and medicine harmonized in his creative process.

**Keyword-** Literature and medicine, Medical Humanities, healthcare, empathy, pain, suffering, illnesses, Health Humanities and mortality

## INTRODUCTION

Health Humanities or Medical Humanities is an interdisciplinary approach to find the relationship between literature and medicine. Since human health is very significant in the overall social activities of human beings, writers' imagination and exploration of experiences that border on physical and psychopathological condition attests to the social function of literature. Its primary aim is to acquaint all with the representation of pathological conditions— physical and mental— in literary texts. The creation of characters, suffering from pathologies— physical or mental— is a creative perspective that is anchored on social behaviours. The writer invented his ailing characters and the incident surrounding their health conditions from the society. The writer's universe is constructed from the universe inhabited by people of life and blood. Sometimes ailment is sometimes deployed as a metaphor for political and economic convulsion. By integrating disciplines such as literature, philosophy, ethics, history, and the arts into the context of medical practice and education, Medical Humanities seeks to enhance the understanding of healthcare experiences and foster more compassionate and holistic patient care. This field recognizes that the practice of medicine goes beyond the technical aspects of diagnosis and treatment; it encompasses the lived experiences of patients, the ethical dilemmas faced by healthcare professionals, and the societal and cultural influences on healthcare systems. Through engaging with literature, art, and narratives, healthcare practitioners develop greater empathy, communication skills, and self-awareness, enabling them to better connect with patients and understand their perspectives. Moreover, Medical Humanities provides a space for critical reflection on the ethical complexities inherent in medical decision-making and encourages a deeper exploration of the human dimensions of health and illness. As a result, the integration of Medical Humanities enriches medical education and practice by promoting a more comprehensive and patient-centered approach to healthcare.

The relationship between medical and the artistic culture has been traced back for centuries. In the classical Greek society, for instance, Apollo is acclaimed as the god of medicine and poetry. In the same vein, Hippocrates, the Greek philosopher and physician, is reputed as the father of medicine and the originator of the 'case note tradition' through which physicians record, comment or narrate their observation of patients' ailments. Aristotle, a contemporary of Hippocrates, also played a significant role in the evolution of medical thought through his literary, philosophical narratives. Best examples can be found in Poetics where Aristotle also has some prominent narratives on the biological composition of man, which help to create a significant link between the humanities and medical science.

It is an academic specialty that examines the literary representation of human's pathologies and healing, medical ethics and other experiences that border on human health and biomedical experiences. It also highlights the role of literature in narrating ethical issues in the medical profession. It also creates awareness on different human health situations through the instrumentality of literary expression. It exposes many creative works by physician-writers, patient-writers and non-physician writers that convey experiences of physical and mental suffering as well as ethical issues, treatment and healing. There are many physician-writers whose works are indispensable in medical humanities across the globe like John Keats, Tobias Smollet, George Buchner, Anton Chekhov, Arthur Conan Doyle, Arthur Schnitzler and William Carlos William, Oliver Goldsmith, Allen Richard Seltzer, Sir Geoffrey Keynes, Samuel Shem, Sigmund Freud, A. J Cronin, Michael Crichton, Paul Carson, Anezi Okoro, Latunde Adeku, Wale Okediran, Tolu Ajayi, Femi Oyebode, Marthin Akpaa, Eghosa Imasuen, and many others.

John Keats, renowned for his exquisite imagery, sensual language, and profound explorations of beauty and mortality, stands as one of the leading figures of the Romantic movement. However, an aspect of his life that is less frequently discussed is his medical background. Prior to fully dedicating himself to his poetic pursuits, Keats embarked on a medical journey, immersing himself in the world of medicine as an apprentice to Thomas Hammond, a licensed surgeon and apothecary. This dual role that Keats inhabited as both a burgeoning poet and an apprentice to medicine forms the foundation upon which the interplay between literature and medicine in his poetry is built.

The relationship between literature and medicine has often been viewed from a dichotomous perspective—where one delves into the realms of imagination and artistic expression, and the other into empirical observations and scientific analysis. However, Keats' works offer a compelling testament to the fact that this dichotomy is far from absolute. Rather, it is a dynamic intersection where the realms of literary artistry and medical understanding converge in nuanced and enlightening ways. Keats' engagement with medicine not only infused his poetry with a distinct blend of knowledge and sensitivity but also enriched his medical understanding with a heightened awareness of the human experience.

In exploring this convergence, we are presented with a unique opportunity to delve into the depths of Keats' poetry, extracting layers of meaning that are often obscured by traditional literary analysis. His poems reveal a meticulous intertwining of medical insights with lyrical brilliance, wherein human emotions and physiological realities find an evocative resonance. As we embark on this exploration, it becomes evident that Keats' familiarity with medicine enabled him to craft verses that encapsulate the fragility of the human body and soul, as well as the transcendence that artistic expression can offer.

This research endeavors to unravel the intricate threads that Keats wove between literature and medicine, illuminating how his poetic narratives resonate with the human condition on both physiological and emotional planes. By delving into his poetic works, we aim to unveil how Keats' unique vantage point as a poet and a medical apprentice allowed him to create a body of work that harmonizes these seemingly disparate horizons. Through his verses, Keats not only captures the essence of the human experience but also offers a lens through which we can perceive the interconnectedness of literary creativity and medical observation. In the pages that follow, we will explore selected poems that exemplify this harmonious fusion, shedding light on the myriad ways in which literature and medicine entwine within Keats' poetic universe.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology which is applied in this research is thematic and qualitative analysis. The thematic analysis is one of the most popular qualitative data analysis techniques used in social sciences, literary studies, psychology and health sciences. It requires in-depth textual analysis. It emphasizes the role of context in understanding the text. It involves the use of all sorts of data. Qualitative analysis also looks at what language does and how it is used in the text; it is a sort of discourse analysis. Examining the thematic analysis of Literature and medicine in Keats will allow us to have better understanding of Keats's expression and points of view towards life and society

## EARLY MEDICAL EDUCATION SHAPING KEATS'S POETIC SENSIBILITY

Keats' medical education was extensive and comprehensive. To comprehend the interwoven connection between literature and medicine in Keats's work, it is imperative to delve into his initial venture into the

medical realm. This exploration reveals how Keats intertwined literature and medicine, showing how his poetry connects with the human experience, both physically and emotionally. By exploring Keats' personal journey in medical education, we can also discover his unique views on the blend of medicine and poetry. After the death of his mother in 1810, John Keats was sent to apprentice and learn medicine under a well-known apothecary, Thomas Hammond in 1811. Hammond was the family doctor and neighbor.

Soon John Keats moved in with Hammond and lived in the attic above the surgery for four years. During this time, he learned various tasks like bleeding, vaccinating, treating wounds, setting bones, extracting teeth, and applying treatments like leeches, cups, and poultices. This training was typical for someone aspiring to be an apothecary or apothecary-surgeon. After receiving his apothecary's license on July 25, 1816, he spent a few months at Guy's Hospital, studying and working as a surgeon's dresser. During this period, he learned how to diagnose and cure sickness and conduct minor procedures. Keats also studied a variety of scientific subjects, from chemistry and physics to biology and physiology. Keats's lecture notes cover a wide range of medical topics, from exact measurements of the body to more abstract ideas. The knowledge of pharmacology, medical botany, and the methods of experimental surgery and chemical treatments practiced on most of the patients have shaped his early life and poetic sensibility. As for the impact of medical training on Keats's poetry, many critics investigated the strong connection between the two professions. It is true that Keats abandoned the profession of medicine in favor of poetry soon after obtaining his medical license; he continued to consider that a poet and a medical practitioner are morally connected. He saw poetry as a potential therapeutic agent. It is quite evident that many medical terms that he took from his courses and patients' situations, symptoms, and solutions can be found very clearly in his poetry. Working as an apothecary gave him many ideas for his often mixed-up pictures, which he uses in his important poems either knowingly or without realizing it. Instead of leaving behind his scientific background, he decided to begin his journey as an artist. He made sure to keep his old medical books and often referred back to them. These early readings became the foundation of the extraordinary connection between medicine and poetry seen uniquely in British Romanticism through his work. When reading and studying Keats's poems, it is crucial to remember that he was also a physician. Through the medium of poetry, Keats seeks relief from his bodily and mental suffering. For Keats, poetry serves as a conduit and a method of treatment. Psychotherapy sessions appear often in his poems. Moreover, Keats had extensively read Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* and he drafted some of his famous poems of the pages of the book such as *Ode to Psyche* (White, 2022, p.4). Keats in his poem stated that, a poet is "A humanist, Physician to all men." (*The Fall of Hyperion*, I. 189–190). After abandoning his career in medicine, Keats considered poetry to be a type of medicine or a method of self-improvement (Epstein, 1999, p. 55). His belief that poetry could heal and address ailments when medical science fell short was a significant aspect of his idea of a poet as a healer. He thought that poetry had the power to comfort, heal, and mend the pain and distress of others. Recognizing these parallels, Keats envisioned the potential of merging medical study and emotional poetry, bridging theory and practice. In this regard, Keats follows a tradition of writers and doctors that includes Rabelais, William Carlos Williams, Tobias Smollett, and, notably, Anton Chekhov. In fact, Keats is one of the few medically trained authors who never practiced medicine. Evidently, his medical background aids his artistic ability to clearly express death and suffering. His medical experience is converted into emotional art. While searching through Keats's poetry, every now and then a medical ring may be heard in some of his poems. Keats used pictures, concepts, and sometimes even the technique, the method of thinking about things that he had learned during his medical studies.

### THE IMPACT OF MEDICAL TRAINING ON KEATS'S POETIC VISION

Keats's medical training significantly influenced how he saw poetry. With his knowledge of the human body and its vulnerabilities, his medical background gave him a special skill to talk about things like death, suffering, and the complex parts of life. This skill helped him describe death and pain in his poems with real feeling and truth. He turned his medical ideas into art, using words and ideas from medicine in his poems. Ultimately, Keats's capacity to combine the scientific and the emotional, through his mastery of both medicine and poetry, enriched his work with a profound and enduring depth that continues to captivate readers across generations. Keats's medical knowledge and practice provided him with images to describe many of his personas and their physical and mental suffering in a medical way.

Although he abandoned medicine as a career, Keats could not easily forget what he had heard and seen and learnt during his six years of training. Keats's medical training also introduced him to certain images, metaphors, ideas, and ideals, which, as part of his intellectual equipment, would inevitably find their way into his poetry and letters. It remains to be shown how his knowledge of chemistry, botany, anatomy, physiology, pathology and medical influenced Keats in his new career as a poet. Keats's attitudes towards experimental proof and towards the use of analogy, however, were ambiguous. As a poet, he inevitably made extensive use of analogy, speculated at length about life, and insisted on the primacy of the imagination in grasping truth.

Keats adapted certain chemical terms and theories as metaphors to explain his ideas concerning the creative process of writing poetry. Since medical chemistry is largely concerned with describing processes of change, combination, decomposition, and refinement, it is easy to recognize how Keats saw these processes as

analogous to what occurs when the imagination works on various ideas, sensations, and emotions to produce poetry.

After getting a degree and being fully capable in medical practice, he gave importance to the depiction of thoughts and feelings and serve the humanity through halo of his writings, for he knew that the mental hurts harm much and hamper the emotional growth. He is of the view that poetry can heal distressed soul and depressed mind where as a physician deals with physical states. Like a good mentor, a poet prescribes different poetic prescriptions seeing the intensity of agony of mentees. Seeing the situation, he becomes a sage and philosophises life, sometimes he assays the role of a humanist to give balm to distressed and depressed souls and at occasions, turns out to be a physician to heal the mental scars of the readers. His poetry instills a hope in dreary life of people to lead a very joyous life. His poetry has the potential to trounce the devil of despair and duress. He is of firm conviction that pain is universal and strikes all at one pretext or the other. The chief aim of poetry is to serve the ailing mankind. What a poet has to do, just to guide and goad his readers and heal their woes. In his famous poetic treatise “The Fall of Hyperion” (1819), he defines the objectives and goals of a poet in following alchemy of words.:

In sickness not ignoble, I rejoice,  
Ay, and could weep for love of such award.  
So answered I, continuing, 'If it please,  
Majestic shadows, tell me: sure not all  
Those melodies sung into the world's ear  
Are useless: sure a poet is a Sage;  
A humanist, Physician to all men

John Keats illustrates his poetic creed and the role of a poet in the world in his treatise “Hyperion” (1819). The poem presents a panacea for human sufferings in the abstractions of poetry. The poem is weaved around the theme of war between Titans and Olympians- two dynasties of Greek gods, the defeat of son-god Hyperion and usurpation of the throne by Apollo. The warfare between Hyperion and Apollo symbolises the role of the poet to heal human pain. In “The Fall of Hyperion: A Vision”, Canto I, John Keats refer Greek goddess Mnemosyne as Moneta, and shows her to safeguard the Saturn's temple. The protagonist of the poem comes to Moneta's temple to heal his dilemma, she exhorts him that his ailment can be cured by empathizing with the pains of humans. Those who are gifted with this notion are blessed in the temple to be transformed into a poet, poetry can end human miseries. Keats in the poem predicts that free souls can dream but power lies in the mind of the poet who can transfix his imagination into an enthralling piece of verse, and thereby sublimating fumes of furies. The following lines ensconce the poet's proactive role in healing the wounds of sufferers:

Art thou not of the dreamer tribe?  
The poet and the dreamer are distinct,  
Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes.  
The one pours out a balm upon the world,  
The other vexes it.

In the poem, he presents a testament on functions of poetry, and leaves onus on the poet to balm human's sufferings. Moneta, the priestess, mother of muses, charms the protagonist with her spells and exhorts to get blessings only through his resolve to end the human predicament. The true obeisance to her is to share the grief with one another, and troubleshooting the problems and plight of the fellow humans. She emphasises that poets should give shoulders to the pain of sufferers through verses. He endeavours to build an interface between art and life. Keats draws an analogy in the poem between active and passive dreamy mind; and between creative potential of the poet and the inert dreamer. Mark the melody of the lines reminding the duty of a poet:

My power, which to me is still a curse,  
Shall be to thee a wonder, for the scenes  
Still swooning vivid through my globed brain,  
With an electral changing misery,  
Thou shalt with these dull mortal eyes behold  
Free from all pain.

John Keats' preoccupation with medical science enables him to evolve mastery over the use of medical terms to size up the ecstasy and agony of the people. His medical profession arms him with a force to enrich his poetic language like prescriptions, idioms, metaphors and symbols to show the intensity of the disease and mental state of the readers.

In the poem “Hyperion”, he uses the term ‘fever’ thrice much talked about word in medical field. His allusion by using the term ‘fever’ is to denote the mental anguish of Saturn by tasting the defeat by Jupiter. The same strategy, he applies in “The Fall of Hyperion” to show the spectacle of miseries and psychological state of the fallen Titans. He employs the medical words “clod”, “palsied chill”, “spleen”, “nest of woe”, “appetite”, “flesh”, “bones”, “sickness”, “globed brain”, “medicine”, “fear”, “despair”, “convulsion”, “pain of feebleness” etc. In the



second book of "Hyperion", Keats uses medical metaphors to show the physical and mental state of the defeated god Saturn. Like an adept poet-physician, he tells his readers that fever which is the most occurring diseases may increase the temperature of the body causing physical effects, but negative thought pillages the calmness of the mind. Hyperion's tender spouse Thea consoles her husband telling him that Saturn's precarious position is due to his mental turmoil and forbids him not succumb to negative thoughts. Mark the following lines of poem "Hyperion" (Book II) extending comfort to fury of the mind:

Then Thea spread abroad her trembling arms  
Upon the precincts of this nest pain,  
And sidelong fixed her eye on Saturn's face:  
There saw she direst strife; the supreme God  
At war with all the frailty of grief,  
Of rage, of fear, anxiety, revenge,  
Remorse, spleen, hope, but most of all despair.  
Against these plagues he strove in vain

Thea, the Greek goddess of sight and vision, is represented as a female nurse for Saturn who had lost his kingdom to Jupiter. In writing Hyperion, Keats has used a lot of medical knowledge to describe the dilemma of the Titans and their falling state. Keats was also nursing his dying brother (Tom) by the time he was writing the poem. This may explain some of the medical allusions contained in the text and may also explain the importance of the role of nurse exercised by Thea.

John Keats prescribes that poetry can act like medicine. Keats saw through his own eyes the tragedies occurring in his family, he understood and felt the pain, physical sickness and mental anguish stemming from their sufferings. Images of sickness and illness contributed to his poetic imagination.

In some of Keats' poems, he explores the scientific and medical culture, including physical and mental pathologies. He privileges the therapeutic power of imagination over bioscientific invention and medicine. In "Ode to Nightingale", he showcases the power of poetry to heal the woes, and feel its therapeutic effects. The poem was composed by Keats just after the loss of his loving brother Thomas. The poem draws an analogy between the ecstasy, mirth and buoyance of the bird and the pangs of human sufferings and sorrows. When he hears the song of the garden of his friend Brown, he feels sedated by charm of the voice as the intoxication of hemlock. He uses the name of a medicine 'opiate' that was used as a pain reliever at that time. The poem illustrates the mortality of humans and the temporariness of joy, youth and beauty, and, moreover, the immortality of art and poetry. He injects a dulcet dose of beauty in art. Mark the following lines of the poem" Ode to Nightingale "offer some significant therapeutic effect:

The voice I hear this passing night was heard  
In ancient days by emperor and clown:  
Perhaps the self- same song that found a path  
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when sick for home,  
She stood in tears amid the alien corn

In 'Ode to a Nightingale', Keats unfolds the redemptive power of poetic imagination to mental health. The poet, who was nursing traumatic memories, heard the soothing rhythm produced by a nightingale, which takes away the poet's feeling of mental distress. Keats, in the poem, believes that through the power of artistic beauty and imagination, one could receive mental recuperation. The beautiful rhythm generated by the sound made by the nightingale bird, and what Keats perceives as the songbird's happy mood, elicit his own mood of joyous elation:

My heart aches, and drowsy numbness pains  
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk  
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains

...

Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,  
But being too happy in thine happiness,  
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees  
In melodious plot  
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,  
Singing of summer in full-throated ease.

The poet admires the joy of the nightingale which contrasts sharply with his experience of pain and mental depression. The nightingale's song makes him feel as though he has drunk 'hemlock' or 'emptied some dull opiate to the drain'. Opiate, sometimes called narcotics, are drugs prescribed to relieve pains. Keats believes that the consumption of the nightingale's song is like a medicine that takes his mind away from the troubles of this world. Keats' narration of human's suffering and mortality in the poem conveys the contrast between the despairing world of human beings and the soothing, natural world of the bird.

“Lamia” is a beautiful poem demonstrating a serpent who transforms into a beautiful woman “full of silver moons” and “eyed like peacock”, showcases poet’s preoccupation with chemistry. She is blessed to have love of an Athenian youth, but is disgruntled at marriage feast by bald headed and ferocious philosopher. She is a sorcerer and also the victim of sorcery. She builds a pristine palace by her magic for her lover, but their bliss is blotted by the philosopher. Her transformation is not full of jocundity but with thorns, pains and paleness of human mortality. Keats describes her pain scarlet and her transition painful. The poem is inundated with medical metaphors like “mouth foamed”, “flashed phosphor”, “convulsed”, “scarlet pain” etc. His poems are full of healing vigour and act as a medicine to assuage the sufferings of Homo sapiens. Mark the therapeutic effect of the following lines of the poem “Lamia”:

But God fostering her chilled hand,  
She felt the warmth, her eyelids opened bland,  
And, like new flowers at morning song of bees,  
Bloomed, and gave up her honey to the lees

As a trained medical doctor, taking up the vocation of literary imagination, Keats explores experiences that border on illnesses, diseases, death and recoveries. Keats’ exploration of pathological conditions is based on his personal experiences of illnesses, suffering and mortality. John Keats conscientiously endeavours to evolve a relation between pain, relief and identity through the entity soul. In the poem “Ode to Psyche”, he expresses his devotion to Psyche, a king’s daughter was united with her lover, Cupid, the god, after bearing the slings of fortunes. Keats like to worship as he finds to approach to immortality through the most striking entity of human soul, the imagination. Psyche was the by-product of imagination to replenish the gap between the mortal and immortal. In the charming poem “The Eve of St. Agnes”, Porphyro’s desire to cure the pain of his soul by drowsing in lap of lady, Madeline. In “Isabella”, the poet finds a correlation between pain and soul by depicting the pain of the soul of slain Lorenzo finding solace in freedom from loneliness. The very popular poem is treatise on the relation of soul and pain. Keats read Robert Burton’s book “The Anatomy of Melancholy” and was highly influenced with the notions inscribed therein. The message the poem affords is that melancholy in an inherent malady in us. The poem elucidates that pleasure and pain are intertwined together and tethered with the awakening anguish of the soul. He exerts emphasis on soul making. John Keats, a poet-physician underlined the role of poetry to balm the sufferings of humanity. He wants to drown in the charm of natural beauty but he must forsake it to probe reasons behind the agony and strife of human hearts, and anoint the balm of healing on the brow of their aching souls. The lines of the poem “Sleep And Poetry” exhibits its therapeutic effects:

We rest in silence, like two gems upcurled  
In the recesses of a pearly shell  
And Can I ever bid these joys farewell?  
Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,  
Where I may find the agonies, the strife  
Of human hearts: for lo! I see afar.

## SUMMING UP

In conclusion, we may assert that John Keats was a poet-physician who nursed and nourished the suffering humanity. He extended relief, relaxation and recovery to the bruises of depressed and distressed minds. His poetry diminishes and devours our sorrows, sadness and severity. He was of the firm conviction that poetry reading, writing, listening is a panacea for the emotional losses of the people. He wrote poetry to improve and elevate human conditions. His preoccupation with medical profession gave him a force to heal the mental anguish of the people. He employs miraculous medical metaphors to depict negativity and mental disorders. He lets his readers to identify their problems with anguish of his characters of the poems, and thus creating therapeutic effects on their ailments. The mental agony was spliced and comprehended within the corporal of physical pain emanated from feelings and emotions ensconced during illness. By melting his medical knowledge into the ice of poetry, he evolves drops of frost to soothe the feeble senses.

Keats always hoped to write poetry that would profoundly improve the human condition. From the first account of the poet as a “physician” in Hyperion, to the development of his own poetics of negative capability in the 1819 spring odes, he continued to wish his works might be of some benefit to his audience. Keats’s mature works test the notion that identity can be shaped by pain and express the idea that the pain that creates identity is the proper vehicle of poetry. As the proper vehicle of poetry, this pain can also be beautiful. But beauty is no palliative; poetry should not attempt to aestheticize pain into pleasure for its own sake.

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