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THE CHIEF CHARACTERISTICS OF KEATS AS A POET

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In the history of English Romanticism, Keats is a unique phenomenon in more ways than one. He was the last to be born and the first to die. His powers matured rapidly and all his work was done within the short period of three years. Moreover, while all the other romantics were influenced profoundly by the political and social aims of the French Revolution, Keats remained unaffected by them. The ideas of the Revolution awoke the youthful passion of Coleridge and Wordsworth stirred the wrath of Scott, inspired Byron to creative activity, and kindled the revolutionary ardor of Shelley, but there is not one solitary trace of them in Keats, "It is not that they are consciously laid aside", says S.A.Brooke, "It is as if they had never existed in the world." In his poetry, he ever tries to escape from "the weariness, the fever and the fret" of life, into an imaginary world of Beauty.

All poets love Beauty and it is Beauty which inspired them to create. But the romantics, as Walter Pater points out, "added strangeness to Beauty". The remote, the distant and the unfamiliar had a special fascination of its own for them and they were curious to experience the pleasures of the unknown imaginatively, if not actually. This is also the attitude of Keats. Love of Beauty is Keats' differentia, but it is the Beauty of the unknown which attracts him the most.

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- What are the characteristics of Keats words which have made him an immortal poet, a poet for all times? First of all, it should be remembered that his *differentia* is love of Beauty. While Wordsworth worshipped nature, Keats worships Beauty wherever he finds it. Beauty of Nature, the Beauty of women, the Beauty of art and literature, all equally captivate and charm his heart. He is the most sensuous of English poets. As Matthew Arnold puts it, "He is abundantly and enchantingly sensuous". The sights and sounds, the fragrance and the delicacies, and the colours of nature, specially her colours, thrill his body and soul and excite his imagination to creative activity. His sensuousness is universal. He likes to luxuriate long over the loveliness of female anatomy. As he himself once wrote he loved the principle of Beauty in all things. It is

not sensuous beauty alone what he loves, but also the Beauty of a higher kind. As his powers matured, he could identify Beauty with Truth and later on with Power as well.

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- To him "A thing of Beauty is a Joy for Ever". This is one of the secrets of his greatness as Long puts it, "Keats sought to express Beauty for its own sake: that Beauty is a essential to normal humanity as is government or law : and that the higher man climbs in civilization the more imperative becomes his need of beauty as a reward for his labours". In his over mastering passion for beauty, Keats stands alone among English poets.

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- Not only did he love Beauty he could also communicate his own appreciation of Beauty to his readers in forms equally perfect. As he himself once said, he loved fine phrases like a lover. Phrases like, "*rich to die",* "*charmed magic casements".* Etc, are the very Pillars of Hercules of the human language. He is highly suggestive: he suggests much more than he actually describes. He is the greatest painter of word pictures in English literature. Often he could enclose vast concepts in a single identification or compound word. By his many coinages he enlarged the scope and richness of his mother-tongue. He was a conscious artists who polished and re-polished what he wrote and selected every word carefully taking into account both its sense and its sound, "*He seems to have studied words more carefully than did his contemporary",* Says Long, "*and his poetic expression, or the harmony of thought and word, is generally more perfect than theirs*". All this artistry was not the result of conscious art, but came to him by nature and inspiration. Many of his poems were written spontaneously; still they are perfect works of art.

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- As a matter of fact, Keats had a high conception of his calling, more than any other of his contemporaries. He believed poetry to be the noblest of arts. He was a pure poet. He believed that the function of a poet is to create things of beauty, and that poetry should stand by itself and not as a hand-maid of morality, politics or social reform. It should soothe the ruffled minds and hearts of men by bringing them in contact with loveliness of form and liveliness of ideas and emotions. It is for this reason that he does not deal with the disagreeable present, but rather with the world of the early Greeks or the middle ages. His attitude towards these ages is not that of a realist, but that of a romantic. He does not say anything about the darker aspects of life in the past, but paints it as it appears to his romantic imagination. The beauty of art, literature, and mythology of the ancient Greeks inspires him to poetic activity. His themes are chosen from the art and literature of Hellas and his poetry is heavily over loaded with references to their mythology. He has their passion for perfection and their zest for the good things of life. The chivalry, the knight-errantry, and woman-worship of the Middle Ages, have a special fascination for him and he renders them in his poetry with a romantic colouring from his own imagination. Whoever wants to escape, "the weariness, the fever and the fret", of life for the time being, must go to Keats and there he would find a continuous and rich feast ready for him. The vast vistas of matchless beauty opened out to his imagination would make him forget, at least for the moment, the hard reality of life.

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- In nothing is Keats more Greek, than in his attitude towards nature. He enjoys both the activity of nature and her repose. The beauty of the colours, the scents, and the forms of nature appeals to him and in one poem after another he communicates his own sensuous enjoyment of her loveliness to his readers. He is habitually personifying the objects and forces of nature and his personification have the clearness of outline, firmness and solidity of a Greek sculpture. Moreover, he cannot see a tree without seeing a Dryad on it. For him, as for the early Greeks, holy are the haunted boughs, "and Holy the air, the water, and the fire". He has nothing of the mysticism of Wordsworth or Shelley, but, like the early Greeks, he peoples all nature with innumerable gods and goddesses.

- Though Keats has left behind him a number of long narrative poems – Endymion, Isabella, Lamia, Hyperion etc. – his genius was essentially Odic: It is in his six great Odes that Keats is at his best. These Odes are a thing apart in literature and they shall last as long as English literature and language are read and admired. There never were, nor have there been ever since, things of such perfect beauty. Keats himself thought that his name was writ in water. Shelley thought he would never be a popular poet in water, no doubt, but in the water of life.

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It was Shelley who once wrote that in spite of "*his transcendent genius Keats never was, nor ever will be, a popular poet*" Shelly did not have any high opinion of Keats' poetry, for it is frankly escapist and does not deal with current events, political or religious, as does the poetry of Shelley himself. Keats kept aloof from the stirring events of the day, for him they did not exist at all. Shelley did not like him, for he did not find in his poetry his own revolutionary ardor, his own urge to demolish the present order and usher in a golden age. *Keats lived apart from men and from all political measures, worshipping beauty like a devotee, perfectly content to write what was in his own heart, or to reflect some splendor of the natural world as he saw or dreamed it*. In other words, Keats' poetry lacks human interest. Shelley, therefore, felt that his poetry would never appeal to the common man, who is interested in his everyday life and wants it discussed in literature.

Moreover, Keats' poetry suffers from a number of other well-marked faults. For one thing, it is too heavily over-loaded with mythology. So many references to Greek literature and mythology are likely to confuse the average reader and present unconquerable difficulties for him. All are not so familiar as Keats was with the world of the Greeks and hence cannot enjoy a poetry which deals with the unfamiliar and remote past. Keats lacked taste and artistic self-control. He believed that poetry should surprise by a "fine excess", and so makes excessive use of word-pictures, which, however fine, become distasteful by their very excess and the readers become surfeited. Their attention gets distracted between so many beauties and they fail to concentrate on any one of them. His habit of loading every rift of his subject with ore also frequently becomes a stumbling block in the way of his readers. His narration is marred by too many deviations. The result is that his stories are thin, vague and confused. Often it becomes difficult to follow the intentions of

the poet. His lovers are weak, and have a tendency to faint at the slightest excuse. His poetry, on the whole, is rather un manful.

His poetry, specially the early one, suffers from a number of other faults **R.L. Black wood** summarizes them as follows.

1. Frequent Vulgarisms both of vocabulary and pronunciation e.g. feel and shines as nouns, perhaps as a monosyllable.
2. The over frequent use of words like luxury, delicious, melting, fainting etc.
3. Fondness for abstract nouns, often coined for the occasion, and often used by straining the meaning to express a concrete idea. Examples: Mossiness, freshness, doings, etc.
4. The formation of adverbs from present participles, often coupled with a loose use of the word e.g. lingerlingly.
5. The use of adjectives ending in –'Y' e.g. liny marble
6. His heroic couplets often tend to be monotonous for does not use triplets, as did Dryden, to impart variety.

It was owing to such well-marked faults that Shelley supposed that Keats would never be popular. It is also for this reason that his poetry has been criticized as being fit only for immature youths and adolescents. Keats, who was extremely modest and humble himself, thought that his name was writ in water. He thought that just as anything written on water cannot endure, can have no permanence, so also his poetry would soon be forgotten. Nobody would remember him or waste his time over his works. But time has shown that both Shelley and Keats were wrong. Keats' reputation has continued to grow and today he is regarded as one of the greatest poets of England. His poetry has so many Excellencies that all now agree with Saintsbury that his name is, '*Writ on the water of life',* i.e., would last as long as human life lasts.

Keats is a unique phenomenon in more ways than one, but in nothing so much as in the rapid maturing of his powers. Dying at twenty five, he has left behind a rich body of poetry which merits comparison with the best of Shakespeare. It should also be added that his letters show a growing awareness of life and its problems and, had he lived longer, his poetry would have shown greater concern for the life of his fellowmen. His faults, in short, are the faults of immaturity. It is idle to prophesy what he would have done, had he been granted a Tennyson's long life and artistic training. As it is, Keats is truly a poets' poet, who has influenced profoundly Tennyson, the Pre-Raphaelites, and a host of other poets. His Odes shall be read and enjoyed so long as English language and literature are read and enjoyed.

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