

## **The Healing Power of Poetry: A Study of the Select Works of John Keats**

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*It is difficult  
To get the news from poems  
Yet men die miserably every day  
For lack  
Of what is found there  
-William Carlos Williams*

### **Abstract**

The correlation between Epidemics/Pandemics and literature is an ongoing debate. Humankind has witnessed epidemics and pandemics, since antiquity, which have tremendously transformed the human consciousness in general and literary consciousness in particular, as a result of which a plethora of literary works have been written in response to them. The idea that art and literature have a healing and therapeutic power is not new. Since ages literature has been used as a means to cure patients with mental and psychological disorders. Literary works with the themes of hope, acceptance and redemption have played an important role in overcoming pain and grief.

Much has been written about the healing power of pandemic literature and its role in helping to face and overcome stress, chaos and a sense of loneliness during pandemics. The purpose of this paper, however, is to investigate and explore the healing and therapeutic power of literature in general and literature written in response to personal crisis and pain with a special

focus on the works of John Keats and how his works can play an important role in lifting one's spirits and finding meaning even in adversities both personal and collective

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Since December 2019 we are going through a harsh and a deadly pandemic. People in general and medical scientists, doctors, researchers, artists and writers in particular are working hard to make sense of these difficult times. From such experiences in the past, we infer that alongside medical cure for such pandemics we also need to address other issues and problems that the pandemics bring with them. It is believed that art and literature address the issues of loneliness, anxiety, fear, despair, death, loss and various mental health issues which are more prevalent in the times of pandemics and epidemics. As soon as the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread people started exploring and reviewing literary works written in response to pandemics and epidemics. Writers and researchers talked about the lessons that such works teach us and also emphasised their importance in helping humans to cope with such disasters. The idea that art and literature have a healing and therapeutic power is not new. Since ages literature has been used as a means to cure patients with mental and psychological disorders. Literary works with the themes of hope, acceptance and redemption have played an important role in helping readers to overcome pain and grief. Earnest Harms writes “if we turn our view back into history, we find in the world of primitive men, as in other earlier cultures, knowledge of and time-adapted practices of applying art and aesthetic elements as means of healing.” Geri Giebel Chavis writes “The special place of poetry in the history of healing is well established. The Shamans and medicine men and women of ancient civilisations chanted poems as a part of their healing art. In ancient Greece, Apollo, the patron God of poetry and music, is also recognised as the divinity of medicine and healing not only in his own right but also through his son, Asclepius.” Both reading and writing literature can aid and guide us to come to terms with the difficulties of our lives and to control negative feelings and thoughts.

Literature helps us to make sense of the world and of life. Poetry has recuperative, analeptic, soothing and tranquillising qualities. Treating various mental and emotional problems with the help of art and literature is not very rare. Bibliotherapy is now an established field. Laura J. Cohen defines bibliotherapy as the therapeutic use of literature which “can be invaluable in helping a patient understand and cope with his illness.” It can make People “recognise themselves, their significant others, and their life situations in the books they read” and it “can confirm for patients and families that their experiences and feelings are “normal” and help them to feel a sense of relief or release.” William Sieghart’s book, *The Poetry Pharmacy* reflects Williams’ belief and faith in the efficacy and essentiality of poetry to heal one’s mind and soul; to assuage our pain and to ease our woes. In this book he prescribes appropriate poems for various mental and emotional problems. He offers consolatory poems for anxiety, depression, hopelessness, loneliness, defeatism, emotional repression, heart break, divorce and several other problems. In the very introduction of the book Williams writes “the idea, that there can be a therapeutic power to a poem, is at the heart of the Poetry Pharmacy. But that therapeutic power only exists if you can find the right poem for the right state of mind.” Brian E. Wakeman acknowledges the vitalising and nourishing power of both reading and writing. He writes “Poems expressing pain or doubt ... can be cathartic, relieving and cleansing.” Poetry is a vehicle used by writers for expressing grief and pain thereby helping both the writers as well as readers to come to terms with sorrow and suffering. Literature assists in adjustment and plays a substantial role in shaping the life and existence of a person. Literary works can endow one with mental and spiritual health. Geri Giebel Chavis writes “with their evocative images, striking characters, dramatic situations and powerful phrasing, the literary works we respond to or the creative pieces we write can help us to lead better lives. They can nurture us, enlighten us and enable us to cope more effectively with everyday challenges and major crisis.”

Writing and reading abate our sense of isolation. Both reading and writing can enhance the process of healing and growth. Aagje M.C. Swinnen writes “poetry is not compared to medicine. Yet, this doesn’t imply poetry is deprived of healing value. We just have to look for its value in

the social realm rather than the medical.” Poetry may not heal the pain in the literal sense of the word but it can definitely bring relief and consolation. It can provide palliative care.

Keats 'poems and letters evoke and inspire a degree of hope in the readers and acknowledge the reality of both joy and sorrow. The chief attitude espoused by Keats 'poetry is acceptance of life with all its contradictions. His poems and letters make us realise that pain is universal. Geri Giebel Chavis writes that the English Romantic poets including John Keats “affirmed poetry’s power to guide, to illuminate and heal” through their poems as well as prose writings. He further writes that “when Keats decided to devote himself to poetry instead of medicine, he ended up becoming a poet healer.” Keats 'poetry carries the power to help us face the harsh circumstances of life with a spirit of acceptance and helps us to overcome despair. Keats talks about pain and suffering as important aspects of the process of life. He is not talking about overcoming pain and grief but of learning to accept them and greet them as having a positive and productive role in our lives. John Keats believed that poetry is a sort of panacea for the troubled and sick humanity. He believed that the chief aim of poetry is to heal the suffering humanity. In his poem, “Sleep and poetry” he writes that the great end of poetry is “that it should be a friend/ To soothe the cares and lift the thoughts of man.” What can be more soothing and comforting than Keats 'sonnet, “After Dark Vapours have Oppressed our Plains” which is full of hope and positivity. Here Keats says that neither joy nor pain are permanent states of our existence and affirms that darkness is followed by light and pain and sorrow by happiness and joy. This knowledge helps an individual to face sadness and sufferings with the hope that pain will end someday. Keats's poem “Think not of it Sweet One” urges the addressee not to mourn a loss but to let go of it. The speaker of the poem says that it is natural to be sad at losing something or someone but we must accept that everything is born to die “Do not look so sad, sweet one/ Sad and fadingly/ Shed one drop then – it is gone-/ Oh! 'twas born to die.” This poem is full of consolation. His poem “On the Grasshopper and Cricket” celebrates the different seasons of a

year in particular and seasons of life in general. The poem suggests that all the stages of life have their own beauty though certain limitations also. This poem teaches us to be happy and content no matter what the situations of our lives are. With this attitude towards life, we can face all the difficulties and problems. Another poem, "The Human Seasons" says that just as there are four seasons in a year there are four seasons in human life and humans need to embrace all the four stages of their lives. The central theme of his poem "Welcome Joy, and Welcome Sorrow" is that we should accept and embrace life with all its negative and positive aspects. His poem, "Ode on Melancholy" says that the only way to cope with pain and suffering is to accept the reality of life, to accept both joy and pain as constructive forces of life. The speaker in the poem says that one should strengthen one's spirit so that one cannot give up on life when distressed. The soothing and consoling nature of Keats' ode, "To Autumn" is clear from the lines of the poem "Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they? / Think not of them, thou hast thy music too". In his poem, "The Fall of Hyperion" Keats has talked about the role of poets. For him a poet is "A Sage", "A Humanist" and a "Physician to All Men". He believes that a true poet is one who "pours out a balm upon the world". His poetry acts as succour to the suffering humanity. His poetry gives consolation to the distressed and depressed. In Hyperion, Oceanus tells the fallen Titans that "to bear all naked truths, / And to envisage circumstance, all calm, / That is the top of sovereignty," Michael E. Holstein says that from the beginning of his career Keats' mission was to console the suffering humanity but his "healing mission" reaches its zenith in his latter poetry, especially in the Fall of Hyperion. John Keats believed in the healing power of both writing and reading. When sad and feeling lonely he would read his favourite literary works. When he was nursing his dying brother Tom, he would often read Shakespeare, especially his play, King Lear. In a letter (written in April 1817) to George and Thomas Keats, he writes "I felt rather lonely this morning at Breakfast so I went and unboxed a Shakespeare there's my comfort". In a letter (written in May 1817) to Benjamin Robert Haydon, he writes "I never quite despair and I read Shakespeare". Not only Keats' poetry but his letters also inspire hope. In a letter (written on September 22, 1819) to his

brother, George and his sister-in-law, Georgiana Keats he writes “though there can be no stop put to troubles we are inheritors of, there can be, and must be, an end to immediate difficulties.” To Georgiana Augusta Keats he writes (on 13 January 1820) “Robinson Crusoe, when he saw himself in danger of perishing on the waters, looked back to his island as to the haven of his happiness, and on gaining it once more was more content with his solitude.” To his sister, Fanny Keats John Keats would always write to take care of her health and to be hopeful of good times to come. On May 4, 1820, he writes to her “bear your mind up with the consciousness that your situation cannot last forever ... health is the greatest of blessings – with health and hope we should be content to live, and so you will find as you grow older.” He further writes to her “Do not diet your mind with grief, it destroys the constitution; but let your chief care be your health, and with that you will meet your share of pleasure in the world.” To Fanny Brawne he writes “If my health would bear it, I could write a poem which I have in my head, which would be a consolation for people in such a situation as mine.” In a letter (written on September 28, 1820) to Charles Armitage Brown he writes “I wish for death every day and night to deliver me from these pains, and then I wish death away, for death would destroy even those pains which are better than nothing.” Both Keats’ poems and letters are consolatory in nature and can play a significant role in uplifting its readership and inculcating in them a zest and love for life. Their regenerative and consolatory nature can help us in facing and dealing with both personal and collective pain and suffering. William A. Ulmer’s statement that Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale” offers the “same consolation that Keats believed tragedy to offer” is applicable to much of Keats’ writings.

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