

# Five British Writers

Day 19  
(of 28)



# Posting Clarifications

- Make sure you number your posts appropriately so classmates can find them (our next posting set, on *Jane Eyre*, will be number 9).
- Do proofread your posts carefully!
- Would you like to continue to have the option of posting or responding for credit? Does the choice seem fair to you?

# *Day of Discussion!*

- Keats and Criticism
- A Closer Look at Keats's Poetry
- The Nature of Poetic Composition
- The Nature of Poetic Fame
- Life and Letters
- Keats: Sources and Audience
- Keats Today?

# *The Romantic Movement(s?)*

In very broad and general terms, the Romantic poets differed from the earlier 'Neo-Classical' style of poetry through their emphasis on

- transcendental spirituality, instead of more orthodox religious logic
- intuition and emotion, positing a kind of knowledge not attained through reason but through feeling
- the particular or unique, presenting individual and subjective perspectives, rather than presenting a seemingly objective and universal viewpoint
- interest in the primitive, in nature, and in natural language, rather than more formal or artificial/ornate styles of writing

# Wordsworth

William Wordsworth, seminal figure in Romantic movement and perhaps longest lived—born in 1770, more than two decades before Keats, he lived to be eighty and was made poet laureate of England in his seventies. Keats calls him a “genius” “giant” and “gold” in a letter to Reynolds (497-500)



Wordsworth was interested not just in natural objects but in the mind of the perceiver; he helped to promote the conception of poetry as a means of expressing a unique self engaging with the world, through both sensation and thought.

In the 1802 preface to his first volume of poetry (defending his work), Wordsworth assures readers that though his poetry describes nature and rustic people, and his language is very natural (not much using previously popular stylized language of personifications or classical allusion), there is nonetheless a purpose to all his poems. He claimed “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: but...poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced...but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.”

# *“Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime” (500)*

## *“poetry that has a palpable design” (493)*

“Sublime” in Keats’s usage means something like “affecting the mind with a sense of overwhelming grandeur or irresistible power; calculated to inspire awe, deep reverence, or lofty emotion, by reason of its beauty, vastness, or grandeur.” The distinction between the beautiful and the sublime was a popular 18<sup>th</sup> c. philosophical subject.

Wordsworth did claim good poetry should have a purpose and did see the poet’s own experience of perception as a fitting part of what poetry expresses... “Poetry is the image of man and nature”

But was his conception of poetry and the poetic self really so different from Keats?

Wordsworth does present the idea of partaking in others’ nature (compare Keats p. 490, : “However exalted a notion we would wish to cherish of the character of a poet, it is obvious, that, while he describes and imitates passions, his situation is altogether slavish and mechanical compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering. So that it will be the wish of the poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay for short spaces of time perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs”

Immediately after writing each poem has a worthy purpose, Wordsworth explains “Not that I mean to say, that I always began to write with a distinct purpose formally conceived; but I believe that my habits of meditation have so formed my feelings...those feelings will be found to carry along with them a *purpose*.”

# Commentaries on Keats

- Leigh Hunt, 1816 (579)

A radical poet, imprisoned briefly for printing criticism of the Prince Regent; his journal the *Examiner* was the first to publish Keats's poems

- John W. Crocker, 1818 (580), John G. Lockhart, 1818 (582)

Reviewers of Keats's poetry in leading literary magazines of the day—note their association of Keats with Hunt and the importance of class to their reviews

- Matthew Arnold, 1880 (584)

A Victorian poet who is now best known for his writings about literary criticism and the goals of literary study—Arnold advocated culture as a means of promoting both an intellectual and moral good, in a famous phrase, “the pursuit of sweetness and light”

- T.S. Eliot, 1933 (591)

An American Modernist poet, who won Nobel Prize for literature in 1948, well known for works such as *The Waste Land*; the musical *Cats* is based on his book of poetry for children, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*

- Walter Bate, 1963 (593)

American scholar and biographer who won a Pulitzer for his biography of Keats in the 60's; Bate went on to write other works on Keats, including one titled *Negative Capability*



# *Wordsworth on the gothic novel...*

As Wordsworth supports his claim that poetry joins sensation to deep thought, and has the moral purpose of enlarging readers' ideas, he criticizes the popular works he sees as arousing sensation without thought:

“The invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said the works of Shakespeare and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and elegant stories in verse. When I think upon this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation, I am almost ashamed to have spoken of the feeble effort with which I have endeavored to counteract it”



# *Next: Begin Jane Eyre!*

We will be talking about the ‘rise of the novel’ and the expectations developing around this form of writing.

We will also be thinking about the pseudo-autobiographical nature of the novel—how do Charlotte (author) and Jane (narrator) relate to one another? How is this relationship different from or similar to that found in other works we have read?