

Dissertation- John Keats' sonnets where influenced by many writers, however when it came to the theme of death and illness, his main inspiration was from Shakespeare's sonnets

Section on how John Keats may have believed that sonnet 73 spoke to him in a way as it is a poem about Shakespeare speaking to a young man.

Sonnet 29 was a much loved one by Romantics, including John Keats

On sitting down to read King Lear once again sonnet- Keats

When I Have fears sonnet- Keats

Why did I laugh tonight, no voice will tell- Sonnet- Keats

'From Carisbrooke, on 17 April 1817, Keats writes to his "dear [John Hamilton] Reynolds" that he is "about to become settled." Keats has been domesticating space for reading and for writing.' (Leinwand 106)

Introduction

The influences on John Keats are present through many different writers throughout history. He was firmly influenced by the works of writers who were from an era before even Shakespeare as John Keats' work was much to do about the sublime and the wonders of the natural world, a concept that meant that his writing would therefore become timeless and also belong to any era in the history of writing. 'Keats true precursor was not just Milton or Wordsworth, but also Shakespeare; and yet this is an even richer composite Shakespeare of Keats own creation, one that includes aspects of Spenser, Milton, and Wordsworth.' (Flesch 150). Keats' was one of the main writers of the Romantic period, another writer who was prominent towards the end of the romanticism and the beginning of the Victorian era was Robert Browning whose work is mentioned in the James Joyce short story The Dead. His work is compared to Shakespeare's as being a less valuable source as his work like many others in Browning's era was influenced by his work anyway, one of which to be influenced was of course John Keats. Joyce appears to recognise Romantics inspiration stemming from Shakespeare's work.

(find some quotes on James Joyce and Shakespeare at a later date).

Abstract

John Keats' sonnets were influenced by many writers, however when it came to the theme of death and illness, his main inspiration was from Shakespeare's sonnets

Shakespeare's Sonnet 73

Similar to Shakespeare's sonnet 73, Keats' 'To Autumn' has very similar themes in the poem. Themes of mortality, ageing and seasons of life are all present in the Keats poem. Most obvious of these themes is the seasons of life which is present in Shakespeare's sonnet 73, but also self-explained by the title of the Keats' poem 'To Autumn' in which the poem title itself leads the reader to conclude that autumn is approaching and autumn is a time of year where nature begins to shed its leaves and die to be reborn after winter passes. This idea of using the seasons to demonstrate a deeper meaning of death and life and mortality is an obvious inspiration of Shakespeare on Keats. Shakespeare's sonnet however is a lot more explicit with its details of the seasons and themes of using the seasons to show progression of characters emotions in the sonnet. 'Upon those boughs that shake against the cold' is a link of using the cold as an example of winter and the liveliness of the work shake that suggests a more excitable approach to writing of winter and autumn, meanwhile Keats creates a more mortal approach to autumn as he suggests nature as a more implicit form of death and seems to have a more contemporary view of Autumn and seasonal changes as he is from the Romantic period some years after Shakespeare. The sonnet's wishful thinking of getting older and coming of age is the type of theme that is shared in Keats' 'To Autumn' death is present throughout 'To Autumn' and appears to be a response to this very sonnet of Shakespeare's, as Keats writes in the poem 'Until they think warm days will never cease' which is a suggestion that Shakespeare's sonnet is perhaps one that is hopeful and yet Keats' being from the era he is more realistic and this could be for a number of reasons, from scientific advancements being made at the time so we now understood more about mortality, this is suggested through the word 'think' which is reference to when people had faith that summer will come eventually and spring will follow winter and however this is not always the case hence the line 'days will never cease' and the reference to 'they' could be Keats interacting with writers from the past and most noticeably as he read a lot of his work, Shakespeare.

Another of Keats' sonnets that links well with Shakespeare's sonnet 73 is the poem 'When I fear I may cease to be' which by the title of the poem alone is centred around the fear of the death that the person in the poem feels and therefore is a reflection of this fear that John Keats himself has when it comes to death as the events happening around his life seem to represent death in every way at the time of writing, for example like when he wrote 'To Autumn' this sonnet is similar as not only was Keats suffering at this point with his illness of Tuberculosis and therefore fearing his life would be cut short, but he was also seeing illness and death all around him, for instance the Peterloo massacre happened around the time it was written and this poem appears to be a reflection of not only Keats, but society as a whole at the time following such a terrible event. This sonnet by Keats shows how John Keats

may have approached Shakespeare's work when reading it, as the sonnet is the poet writing to a young adult about the themes such as death and this could be interpreted by John Keats as a poem written for himself, as he was a young man at the time he would have read this poem and at the time death was a very real possibility for Keats, as he died at such a young age. This is further exemplified by the line 'Before high-pilèd books, in character,' and these high-piled books could be suggested as a description of Keats surrounding when writing this poem and of course history tells us that Keats was a fond reader and collector of Shakespeare's works and so whilst writing this Keats must have taken some inspiration by the books he had beside him when writing. Therefore to write such a morbid piece of poetry with the assistance of Shakespeare's writing beside him conveys this inspiration that Keats was given by Shakespeare when it came to themes of death and illness.

The use of the word cease is a common theme in Keats sonnets, especially one chosen to analyse with that of Shakespeare. Cease is used in both of the sonnets, one of which even has the word in the title and therefore is a suggestion of mortality as cease is a word used to connotative the death of something or even the non-existence of something that once existed.

When talking about 'To Autumn' Mark Bracher claims 'it is thought by most as fundamentally about death (a somewhat paradoxical claim itself, prima facie, since death nowhere figures as an explicit topic in the poem)'.

Shakespeare's sonnet 29

Shakespeare's sonnet 29 is one that is not just fondly read by John Keats, but by most of the Romantic writers as it summed up the sublime force of love. The poem is based on the speaker being an outcast and failure but is given hope by his beloved. This sonnet appears to speak out to John Keats, as it may have been a point of reference for many of his own sonnets, as Keats himself was always seen as an outcast to many of the more experienced romantic writers of the period, particularly Lord Byron. It is a poem of comfort and hope when all seems lost, and this epitomises the style of Keats towards his own sonnets when the theme of death and illness was involved. In Shakespeare's sonnet there is the mention of 'heaven', therefore a hopeful theme of the afterlife. This theme runs through the whole poem as later in the poem Shakespeare mentions heaven again, this time even more explicitly to do with the idea of afterlife 'sings hymns at heaven's gate' the scene of heaven's gate is a famous one and one that immediately is associated with the idea of death and the hope that comes with it.

Whilst this sonnet of Shakespeare's appeared to be an inspiration to many of the Romantics at the time, it was certainly read in a different way by Keats compared to the likes of Shelley, especially when it came to interpreting the meanings of heaven not just in this sonnet but in general use of the word in sonnets. 'the melancholy that might "fall/ Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud ("Ode to Melancholy" 10-14).¹⁹ The atmospherics of melancholy are present in Keats's poetry in a way that eludes the more utopian minded Shelley. "Four seasons fill the measure of the year;/ Four seasons are there in the mind of man," ("Four seasons" 1-2) Keats wrote, and a large part of the pathos of his verse is its insistence upon the rich and productive combination of joy and melancholy in our earthly existence.' (Gidal 96) Despite this being analysis of Keats and Shelley's attitudes towards life in general, it is safe to say that Keats uses the concept of

heaven very similarly in his writing to the way Shakespeare uses it in sonnet 29. Although heaven is used in a hopeful afterlife, it is also one that is approached by both Keats and Shakespeare to represent the sad reality that death does exist, and in the poem quoted by Gidal it is apparent that Keats uses heaven as a symbol of life coming to an end and that death is a sad inevitability that has to happen. In the same way that Shakespeare uses it to convey speaker's failures and the only time the speaker is not an outcast in sonnet 29 is when he is mentioned along with heaven as death happens to us all. Gidal even explicitly mentions that Shelley has an idea of utopia in his poem whilst Keats is a lot more downbeat, and this is even with the mention of heaven which would very often be an image to capture happier emotions, but Keats uses it to demonstrate just how quick death can come and how it is always present in life.

On Sitting down to read King Lear once again

Throughout literary history, writers have been influenced by what has gone before and therefore inspired other writers in the future. Even Shakespeare it could be said was heavily influenced by the likes of Edmund Spenser and John Milton, meanwhile Shakespeare is famously an influential writer to most writers post his life. John Keats was not only inspired by Shakespeare but influenced other writers in the Victorian era and writers of the early 20th Century. 'Over 30 years ago, Goodman (1967) argued that reading is a selection process that relies on a readers expectation or anticipation of what a text could mean: "skill in reading involves not greater precision [of the graphic input], but more accurate first guesses based on better sampling techniques, greater control over language structure, broader experiences, and increased conceptual development" (Weih 1) and this is exemplified in the works over a number of years and his work naturally picked up the similar themes of Shakespeare and the writing patterns are also similar and also allow Keats to have his own voice when it comes to his opinions on Shakespeare's writing styles and themes. 'We should not underestimate the meaningfulness of such a "moring's work," this finding the right place in which to settle. For Keats, as for all of us, not just the ways we prepare to write, but the ways we prepare to read, to read in this instance nothing less than Shakespeare' (Leinwand 107) . This itself argues with the previous quote from a study in which the influence of how we write heavily influenced by the books we read as youngsters and that this is at the forefront of our own writing styles.

It was not just John Keats who was inspired and influenced by Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. Many of the Romantics have examples of influence in their works. Many critics have mentioned the Romantics in the same breath of Shakespeare, 'No history of Shakespearean criticism would be complete without a substantial reference to the writings of the Romantic period'. (Williams 61). Percy Shelley where all strongly influenced by Shakespeare. Despite this it is clearer in the work of Keats that Shakespeare has a massive influence on him and his style of writing. However some of the Romantics did not fall into the same category, mainly the maverick of the romantic period, Lord Byron 'Byron shows almost nothing of these kinds of interest in Shakespeare. He evinces little concern in the effect of words and actions on the Shakespearean stage, nor does he explore the workings

of Shakespeare's mind.' (Williams 65). The two, Byron and Keats have incredibly different writing styles despite being associated due to living in the same period. In seeing these differences between the two, it is clear that Keats was influenced by Shakespeare and was very conscious of the inspiration he had from Shakespeare, when compared to Byron's work. Using Byron's *Don Juan* for example uses the structure of iambic pentameter with a rhyme scheme of ab ab ab cc, which differs from that of any Shakespeare sonnet. Meanwhile John Keats structures his poems to be similar to that of Shakespeare's sonnet.

As mentioned in the previous section, Keats was inspired by Shakespeare's work to the extent that I suggested even made mention of the fact that Shakespeare's work was beside him whilst he wrote his sonnets, particularly the ones that share the themes of death and illness. When writing the sonnet 'Cease not be' Keats makes note that the person in the poem has a stack of books and I explored the idea that these books may have been the works and therefore the influence on his work by Shakespeare.

When analysing Shakespeare, one play that resonates with the theme of death and illness most is *King Lear*. Therefore it is easy to see why Keats found comfort and inspiration in this play and therefore made note of it in his sonnet by suggesting his interest in the play in the title of the sonnet. 'McGann also makes the conventional critical point of engaging with intertexts which combine impaired sight, old age, and prophetic wisdom (or lack of it), such as Homer, and Shakespeare's *King Lear*' (Bradshaw 7). When it came to discussing Keats and theme of illness it would be easy to associate this with his own illness of Tuberculosis, however like many other Romantic poets who read Shakespeare's work, it was not just physical illness that was being written about in the Romantics works and where influenced by Shakespeare's characters in his plays. When discussing Lord Byron and his writings on the theme of illness and how he links to works by Shakespeare Kenyon Jones wrote 'Such examples show how Byron read, reread, and sometimes deliberately misread the subject of disability in others' texts and lives in order to construct a dissident literary alternative to a 'normal' body. Another group of Byron's references to disability centres on the well-worn question of the association between poets and madness or other kinds of illness. Shakespeare's 'the lunatic, the lover and the poet [...] of imagination all compact' is a venerable statement of the traditional view that the intellectual rigours of the poetic or scholarly life give rise to constitutional weaknesses in the poet's mind and body.' (Jones 153).

In one of Keats letters to Mr J.H. Reynolds he mentions *King Lear* and even quotes to demonstrate the emotion he feels towards in a difficult time in his life, the letter is concerning a trip that Keats takes to Shanklin, however the letter is dated April 1817, which was also the same month and time that he had left training in hospital due to constantly suffering from cold, and living in damp rooms in London. As well as his own concerns his brother Tom was struggling massively with Tuberculosis during the month. In the letter he makes reference to *King Lear* 'and the passage in *Lear*- "Do you not hear the sea?"- has haunted me intensely.' (Letters of Keats 20) this reference is whilst he speaks of his loneliness and solitude and the fear that he therefore must have subconsciously that his brother might soon pass on and that he himself is suffering from disease after training in the

hospital and the fears that surround that and the comfort he takes in reading Shakespeare's King Lear is therefore a sure inspiration to his own sonnets in the future and the time writing this letter. This illness of his brother Tom is often brought up in his letters and is very often mentioned in the same breath as King Lear, which therefore suggests that this Shakespeare play was a reference of escapism for John Keats and that when it came to the themes of illness in Keats' life he would use King Lear to inspire him to write sonnets and ease his mind from the illness of his brother, 'My brother Tom is getting stronger but his spitting of blood continues. I sat down to read King Lear yesterday, and felt the greatness of the thing up to the writing of a sonnet preparatory thereto- in my next you shall have it (meaning next letter).' (Letters of Keats 86).

King Lear was one of Shakespeare's later plays therefore the suggestion of death and descending into death is very conscious throughout the play and perhaps this gave Keats not only hope when faced with death but inspiration for his own work and sonnets. Even the main character in the play descends into madness, and as mentioned earlier this madness in itself an illness and carries the themes of mental illness and therefore creates a conscious theme in the play that Shakespeare himself has one eye on death and illness in his own life and in doing so this comforts Keats in his time of need hence his much appreciation of the play.

Why did I laugh tonight, no voice will tell

If there is a particular poem written by Keats that exemplifies his fears, thoughts and overall feelings towards death and illness it is the sonnet 'Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell'. Not only does the poem deal with the concept of death itself but it also delves into the afterlife which implements this thought that death was very much at the forefront of John Keats' mind when writing this poem. Keats suggests in his poem that death is not as bad as it may be conveyed to the world. He implies that death is in fact an honour 'Verse, Fame, and Beauty are intense indeed, But Death intenser -Death is Life's high meed.' In saying that death is life's high meed he is suggesting that death is the pinnacle of praise by the demons or God that he mentions earlier in the sonnet and therefore death should be looked at as an honour more so than the verse, fame and beauty he mentions in the line before. This approach to death by Keats' is again comparable to one of Shakespeare's sonnets, particularly his sonnet 71. In Shakespeare's sonnet 71 his approach to death is likewise a positive one as the speaker appears to be almost relieved of his own death so he can escape the world that is described in the poem as vile, 'Give warning to the world that I am fled/ From this vile world, with vilest worms to dwell;'. However with this sonnet by Shakespeare it is clear that the speaker is not in fact actually dead at the start of the poem 'No longer mourn for me when I am dead' as it is written in the future tense, this therefore could be suggestion of the speaker's illness in the poem and an illness that will lead to his eventual death, very similar to that of the speaker in Keats' poem 'Why did I laugh tonight, no voice will tell' as in one of the lines the speaker confirms that he is not speaking from his experience of death but instead speaking from experience of knowing that death is about to occur and this again suggests in the poem illness as well as death, 'My fancy to its utmost blisses spreads; Yet would I on this very midnight cease,' This is a suggestion that Keats'

perhaps used this technique and style of Shakespeare's in his sonnet to convey a sense of illness through one line of the sonnet as oppose to just speaking of death and the afterlife all the way through, both poems are very comparable as they do however share the exact same themes and despite the mentions of mourning throughout, it is possible that both poets are conveying their emotions towards illness as well as it was a period of which illnesses such as tuberculosis were rife and tended to result in death.

Keats' sonnet further discusses the concept of illness that the speaker suffers from and knows will lead to death, 'I say, why did I laugh? O mortal pain!' this clever use of mortal to suggest that something will come to an end eventually is a clever use of death in a positive light as it suggests that the speaker looks forward to the idea of being mortal so that the pain of illness ends, similar to the pain that people suffered from tuberculosis towards the end in the period. Meanwhile Shakespeare's sonnet appears to show a speaker interacting with their lover on their death bed almost 'But let your love even with my life decay,' this is a suggestion that death does not take away the pain of the illness in Shakespeare's sonnet like in Keats' but in fact takes away the pain of a lover having to cling on to the memories and love that is shared for the speaker whose death is imminent. This perhaps a suggestion of the lifespans of the two poets that one is able to write of love in a time when death is on the brink, and the other is only able to write of illness and this in turn is the only way each poet can write positively about death showing that despite their being an influence on Keats' by Shakespeare there is also a difference in the techniques used by them in the two sonnets.

Conclusion

Overall John Keats' sonnets tend to follow a similar path of discussing the theme of death and illness implicitly or explicitly. Like many writers Keats' was influenced by Shakespeare and this was well documented. However the themes of death and illness appear to be written in a style similar to that of Shakespeare also, creating a sense that Keats' own feelings towards death were somehow similar to Shakespeare despite the two of them being very different in terms of age of their death and the illnesses they both suffered from.

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‘Keats managed to do what he did, and that Keats managed to do far more in his four years than Shakespeare managed to do in the same space. Shakespeare could take his time: Keats had the vague foreboding of death unconsciously driving him to pack hours into minutes and years into months, Shakespeare had thirty years where Keats had four.’ (Murry 13).