



John Keats

(1795-1821)

John Keats was born in London on October 29 or 31, 1795, the son of a well-to-do livery stable owner.

He began his studies at a private school at Enfield, and his junior school master, Charles Cowden Clarke, greatly encouraged him in his early years, introducing him to the joys of literature.

By 1810 Keats had **lost both his parents** and was placed in the care of a strict guardian, who took him out of Enfield school, thus prematurely ending his formal education.

At the age of 15 he was apprenticed to a surgeon and spent the next four years following **medical studies**, but his inclinations were literary, and he devoted most of the time reading passionately. He soon added poets like Wordsworth and Shelley to the list of literary greats whom he knew. In 1816 he abandoned surgery and chose **poetry as a profession**. Later in the same year the reading of Chapman's translation of Homer thrilled him and prompted his wonderful early sonnet.

Clarke introduced him to Leigh Hunt, the famous radical journalist and poet, and through Hunt Keats came to know Benjamin Robert Haydon, a painter and art critic who defended the aesthetic value of the Elgin marbles*, and whose devotion to art influenced the young poet.

In 1817 he published his first volume of verse, simply titled *Poems*, but it attracted little notice, and except for the sonnet *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer* it gave little indication of the brilliance to come.

By this time **the family tendency to consumption** became manifest in him, and Keats left London for the Isle of Wight and the curative effects of the seashore. It was in this period that he began to work on his first long and serious poem, *Endymion*, which contains the famous "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever". He was dissatisfied with this poem, insecure in style and weak in narrative as he himself admitted, and before its completion began *Isabella, or The pot of Basil*.



* **Elgin Marbles:** collection of sculptures chiefly from the Parthenon at Athens, brought to England by the earl of Elgin between 1803 and 1812, and placed in the British Museum.



Study for Christ's Entry Into Jerusalem by Benjamin Robert Haydon, c.1816



Isabella and the Pot of Basil, by the Pre-Raphaelite painter W. Holman Hunt (1866-1868)



Sketch of Keats by
Charles Wass, c 1841

*conservative

goodly: fine,
pleasant.
bards: Celtic poets or
singers.
fealty:
acknowledgement of
fidelity, loyalty.
Apollo: in classical
mythology the god of
poetry.
demesne: territory,
possession.
Chapman: George
Chapman (1559-1634),
Elizabethan
dramatist. He
translated the Iliad.
swims into his ken:
moves as if floating
into his range of
sight.
Cortez: Hernán
Cortés, Spanish
conqueror of México.
surmise: suspicion,
conjecture,
supposition.
Darien: area
including the eastern
part of the Isthmus of
Panama. Balboa
started from Darien
when he discovered
the Pacific Ocean in
1513.

Endymion was published in April 1818; in the summer of the same year Keats went with a friend on a walking tour through the Highlands, but the hardships affected his health. He returned to London to find that his brother was dying of consumption, and assisted him till his death. Meanwhile the reviews on *Endymion* came out. His poem was battered by Blackwood's Magazine and The Quarterly Review, the two leading journals of the day. These Tory* journals brutally assailed the young poet not only for his literary shortcomings, but mainly for his friendship with the radical Leigh Hunt. Keats bore the attack with apparent serenity, but there can be little doubt that his health was affected to some degree.

Around this time he fell passionately in love with Fanny Brawne and they were engaged for a time, but financial difficulties and Keats's failing health precluded marriage.

Keats continued to write poetry with almost **feverish urgency**, which indicates that he was well aware that only a very short time was left to him to find a place in English literature. "I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death", he wrote in a letter to his brother in 1818. Between 1819 and 1820 he produced the best of his poetic creation: *Hyperion*, an unfinished epic poem retelling the myth of the war between the Greek gods and the Titans; *La Belle Dame sans Merci*; *The Eve of St. Agnes*; *Lamia*; the odes: *To Psyche*, *To a Nightingale*, *On a Grecian Urn*, *To Autumn*, *On Melancholy*. Most of his best poems appeared in 1820 in the greatest single volume of poetry which was to be published in the 19th century. But Keats did not write only verse. In the same period 1818-19 he wrote **numerous letters**, which contain precious information on his development as a poet and the working of his genius, and can be considered a remarkable spiritual autobiography.

Early in 1820 Keats coughed up blood and understood its meaning at once: "the drop of blood is my death warrant". **He travelled to Italy** in the hope of some alleviation with a warmer climate; he reached Rome after a rough journey which robbed him of the last of his waning strength, and remained there until his death, three months later, on February 23, 1821. His remains were buried in the English cemetery in Rome. On his grave stone is carved the following self-written epitaph: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water".

TEXT A

On First Looking into Chapman's Homer

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.

Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes

He star'd at the Pacific - and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise -
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.





TASKS

1. Look up the definition of sonnet in the dossier Poetry and point out the rhyme scheme. Then state what type of sonnet this is and how it can be divided in terms of content.

2. "Realms of gold" in line 1 is clearly a metaphor. What does it mean? In this light, what can the "goodly states and kingdoms" be? And what does the poet mean by the western islands "Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold"?

3. The next two lines are built on the same metaphor; explain its meaning.

4. Underline the verb forms in lines 1, 3, 5, 7. What structure do they have in common?

What does it create in this context? Choose from the following:

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| ☐ suspense | ☐ doubt | ☐ emphasis |
| ☐ expectation | ☐ calm | ☐ irony |
| ☐ solemnity | ☐ swift movement | ☐ energy |

All the octave points to the climax of line : the extraordinary moment when the poet discovered through translation.

5. Now there is the turn. With two powerful similes, the sestet responds to the theme which has been stated in the octave. What do they express?



*La Belle Dame sans
Merci*, by Sir Frank
Dicksee

ail: afflict, trouble.
loitering: lingering.
sedge: plant like
grass, which grows
near the water.

haggard: looking
very tired.
woe-begone: looking
very sad.

moist: moisture, wet.
dew: small drops
which usually form
during the night on
grass or plants.
(poet.) drops of
perspiration.
meads: meadows.
faery's: fairy's. Fairy:
supernatural creature
endowed with
magical powers.
zone: belt.

steed: horse.
sidelong: to one side.

relish: flavour, taste.
manna dew: drops of
manna.

6. What state of mind, or emotion, is the poet trying to convey with this sonnet so beautifully built on the metaphor of voyaging?

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|--|
| ☐ A sense of grandiose discovery | ☐ bliss | ☐ incredibility |
| ☐ the extent of his amazement | ☐ awe | ☐ ecstasy |
| ☐ intense admiration | ☐ emotion | ☐ happiness |
| ☐ excitement | ☐ exaltation | ☐ incredulity |

Choose as many as you consider appropriate. Give reasons for your choice.

TEXT B

La Belle Dame sans Merci

I

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

II

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms!
So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.

III

I see a lily on thy brow,
With anguish moist and fever dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

IV

I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful - a faery's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.

V

I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
she look'd at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan.

VI

I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long,
For sidelong would she bend, and sing
A faery's song.

VII

She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew;
And sure in language strange she said -
"I love thee true".

full sore: in great pain.

woe: distress, sorrow.
betide: happen.

thrall: slavery, captivity.

gloom: twilight, i.e. faint light after sunset.



La Belle Dame sans Merci, by Sir Frank Dicksee (detail)



La Belle Dame sans Merci, by Frank Cadogan Cowper (1926)

VIII

She took me to her elfin grot,
And there she wept, and sigh'd full sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four.

IX

And there she lulled me asleep,
And there I dream'd - Ah! woe betide!
The latest dream I ever dream'd
On the cold hill side.

X

I saw pale kings, and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
They cried - "La Belle Dame sans Merci
Hath thee in thrall!"

XI

I saw they starved lips in the gloom,
With horrid warning gaped wide,
And I awoke and found me here,
On the cold hill's side.

XII

And this is why I sojourn here,
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge has wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

TASKS

1. Find the archaisms and write them down. Could you translate them into equivalent Catalan/Spanish archaisms?

2. A **ballad** is a poem narrative in kind and dramatic in style, which used to be transmitted in oral form, as a song. The metre was simple and repetitions -of words, lines, or stanzas- are its typical feature. The stanza of a ballad consists of four lines, rhyming ABCB.

Can *La Belle Dame sans Merci* be considered a literary ballad? Which elements would characterize it as one?

3. The poem starts with a dialogue and tells a story. Find the stanza where the narrative begins, and complete the cloze below, which is an outline of the story.

One day a knight met a beautiful lady in the meadow. she had beautiful , delicate features and He decorated her with and she gave him a long sweet look of

They rode off together on , the lady singing a soft fairy She showed him sweet delicacies of the forest. In a tongue, she declared her love for him and to her enchanted cave. She and under the tender kisses of the knight, slowly to sleep.

The knight had a dream in which he saw dead princes, kings and warriors who him of the magical spell of *La Belle Dame sans Merci*.

When he, he was alone on a hill where he remains silently waiting and watching.



*La Belle Dame sans
Merci*, by
Waterhouse (1893)



British composer Sir
Charles Villiers
Stanford (1852-1924)



Who is the narrator of this story?

How many narrators are there in this poem?

4. Write down the expressions used to describe the two characters.
What does the description of the knight suggest?
Which features describing the Lady evoke the supernatural?

5. Write the words that suggest each of the five senses.

sight:

hearing:

touch:

taste:

smell:

6. Apparently, this is the story of the tragic love of a mortal man for a supernatural woman in the presence of bleak, indifferent or dead nature ("cold hill's side", "no birds sing"); tragic love because no reunion is possible between them, except through the man's death. However, the knight, the Lady and the cold hill's side can be interpreted as symbols. Discuss with the class their possible meanings, and decide if the poem contains other symbols. Then, state what the final interpretation of the whole poem can be, and the themes emerging here.

7. Write down as many elements evocative of the Middle Ages as you can find; one is given for you.
ballad-like poem

8. Now, consider the period when this poem was written, and list the features that are typical of romanticism.

9. Listen to the setting of the poem by Sir Charles Villiers Stanford. How does the music help to convey all the romantic elements of the poem?

unravish'd: not violated, intact.
bride of: the word bride emphasizes the idea that the urn is joined to silence.
foster-child: a child brought up by people who are not his/her parents. The artist who made the urn died and the urn was 'brought up' by silence and slow time.
Sylvan: decorated with scenes of rural life.
historian: the urn tells a story.
leaf-fring'd: decorated with a fringe of leaves.
haunts about: pervades.
Tempe: valley in Thessaly.
Arcady: area in Peloponnese, Greece.
loth: (loath) not willing.
pursuit: to pursue, i.e. to follow trying to catch.
pipes: musical instruments in the shape of tubes with holes.
timbrels: circular percussion instruments.
play on: continue to play.
more endear'd: made more precious.
ditties: simple songs.
youth: young man.
bare: without their leaves.
winning near the goal: (fig.) almost reaching the girl.
fade: (here) lose her beauty owing to old age.
bliss: perfect happiness, delight.
unwearied: never tired.
panting: (here) full of desire, passionate.
All breathing... far above: [happy love] much superior to living human passions.
cloy'd: over-satiated, wearied.
parching: dried up.

TEXT B

Ode on a Grecian Urn

I

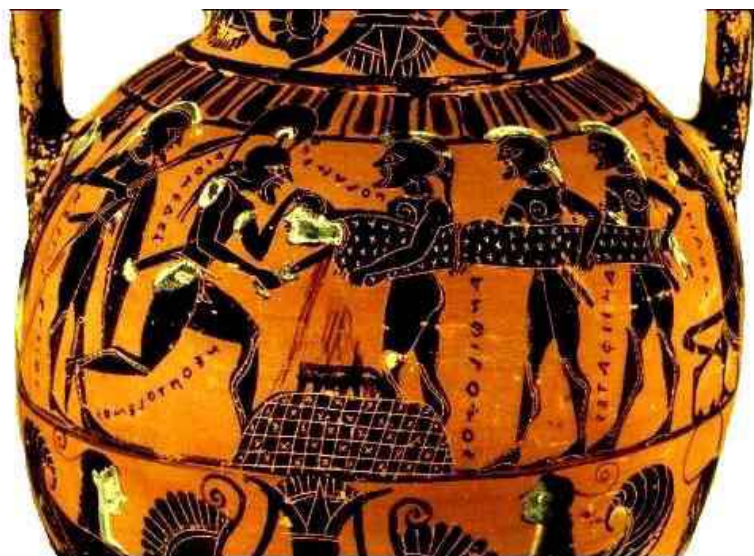
Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
 Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
 What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
 What mad pursuit? What struggles to escape?
 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

II

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
 Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
 Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
 Bold love, never, never canst thou kiss,
 Though winning near the goal –yet, do not grieve;
 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

III

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
 Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
 And, happy melodist, unwearied
 For ever piping songs for ever new;
 More happy love! more happy, happy love!
 For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
 For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
 That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.



heifer: young cow.
lowing: mooing.
with garlands drest: decorated with garlands (drest = dressed).
folk: people.
morn: (poet.) morning.
Fair attitude: (here) beautiful form.
brede: embellishment, ornament.
overwrought: decorated.
trodden weed: plants crushed under the feet.
tease us... eternity: we feel attracted but also dismayed and lost, as when we think of eternity, because the human mind cannot conceive the concept of eternity.



Townley Urn (ca. 2nd century AD) inspired Keats for the poem.

IV

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
 To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
 Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
 And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
 What little town by rive or sea shore,
 Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
 Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
 And, little town, thy streets for evermore
 Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
 Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

V

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! With brede
 Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
 With forest branches and the trodden weed;
 Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
 When old age shall this generation waste,
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
 Beauty is truth, truth beauty, -that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

TASKS

1. In this poem the author is looking at a beautifully decorated urn. The urn is Greek and ancient, so you expect the scenes of the decoration to be set in ancient Greece. Read the poem and underline the expressions supporting this.

2. Find the archaisms and circle them. Make sure you understand what they refer to.

3. Look up the definition of ode in the dossier Poetry and point out the elements typical of an ode in this poem.

4. Read carefully stanzas 2 and 4, relative to the scenes decorating the urn. What do they describe?

5. Consider the questions in stanzas 1 and 4, and discuss what they may suggest.

- ☐ interest in ancient rituals
- ☐ impossibility to discover who those people really were
- ☐ wish to give a realistic description
- ☐ awe
- ☐ surprise
- ☐ impossibility to revive the past
- ☐ other: ...

Choose as many as you consider suitable; add more if you wish.



Drawing by John Keats.



Silhouette of Keats by Marianne Hunt. It was made in 1820 while the poet was recuperated at Leigh and Marianne's Hunt's house.

6. In lines 3 and 4 the poet calls the urn "Sylvan historian, who canst thus express a flowery tales more sweetly than our rhyme". Consider the canons of the romantic movement, and discuss what he means by this.

- ☐ exaltation of visual arts, considered superior to poetry
- ☐ the story of the urn is interpreted -and created- by the imagination, thus becoming more beautiful than any real story
- ☐ the urn belongs to the mythical world of the past
- ☐ the decoration is of indescribable beauty
- ☐ other: ...

In this light, how do you interpret "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter"?

- ☐ it is not important which melody is played
- ☐ exaltation of music, which is considered the best form of art
- ☐ music remains in the memory even when it has stopped
- ☐ The music that we imagine is better than any real piece of music, because the imaginations enters into contact with the absolute, the essence of all reality.
- ☐ as soon as artistic inspiration finds material shape and becomes apparent it loses its perfection
- ☐ music is an imperfect form of art
- ☐ the imaginative vision creates things which are more beautiful than reality.
- ☐ what the imagination creates is more beautiful than what an artist can express
- ☐ other: ...

7. Focus on stanzas 2 and 3, and find the expressions related to the idea of eternity or to universal situations. Distinguish between affirmative and negative statements, then complete the table below.

Affirmative	Negative
for ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!	thou canst not leave Thy song...

The affirmative statements are related to the idea of permanence.
The negative statements refer to actions that will never take place in the world of the urn but happen in

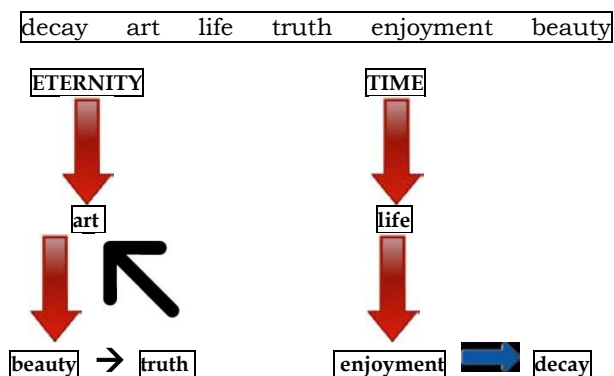
The contrast between the world of the urn and real life can be considered the expression of a fundamental contrast, which is
..... - time



8. In the last stanza the poet speaks of “marble men and maidens”. What significance does this add to the questions of stanzas 1 and 4?

9. When addressing the urn Keats uses the term “Cold Pastoral”. It is cold because it is made of marble and as such will not decay. It is a work of art. The artist has captured the best moment and has stopped it on the marble, making it eternal. This is why those leaves will never fall, the song will never end, the girl will always be young and beautiful, but her lover will never kiss her. Art gives eternity at the expense of life; life means decay but also enjoyment; art means renouncing to life, but achieving eternal beauty, i.e. truth.

On the basis of these considerations, and focusing on the last two lines of the poem, complete the flow chart using the items from the following list. Give reasons for your choices.



Now read the whole poem again, and define the ideas that the poet wants to convey.

10. Consider the stylistic features typical of Keat’s poetry, and point out those which are present in the ode on a Grecian urn.



Another silhouette of Keats by Marianne Hunt.



The earliest surviving portrait of John Keats, by his friend Joseph Severn in 1816.



Ambrotype of Fanny Browne, taken in the 1850s. Fanny was the great love of Keats's life.



This sketch was made by Severn while Keats as he watched over the dying poet at 26 Piazza di Spagna, Roma.

CRITICAL NOTES

Keats's creative life lasted **only five years**, and his achievements in such a short period can be called miraculous. He ardently responded to great art: Spenser, Homer, Milton, greatly stimulated the young poet.

The best of his early compositions, the sonnet *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer* (1816) was written straight off under the dazzling impression he received from the reading of Chapman's translation of Homer. With **magnificent similes** related to the exploration of the earth and the heavens he conveyed his excitement at the 'discovery' of such a 'wide expanse' in the golden realm of poetry.

The Middle Ages also fascinated Keats. *Isabella, or the Poet of Basil*, a narrative poem in ottava rima, was based on a tale from Boccaccio's *Decameron*; the horror of the story is matched by the great beauty of the carefully chosen images. The style of this poem, with its attention to beautiful details and its **stylized primitivism**, seems to anticipate the Pre-Raphaelites.

The poet rapidly developed his **imaginative power, intellectual vigour and technical mastery**. The poems that he wrote from the autumn of 1818 to that of 1819 -his annus mirabilis- show extraordinary craving for beauty and sensuous splendour.

The critic George Sampson wrote: "he was, like Shakespeare, a strongly 'physical' poet, rejoicing in sounds, colours, textures, odours, and his physical ardour gives to the poems of his time an extraordinary richness". The poet not only believed in the importance of sensation and its pleasures, but **attributed cognitive power to sensation**, in the sense that it helped to apprehend reality. Keats shared this view with Wordsworth, but extended it to all the five senses, "so that in all his response to the physical world there is an impression of testing things by the palate and of feeling their texture as well as the Wordsworthian reactions to sight and sound." (D. Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature*).

La Belle Dame sans Merci is a very famous example of literary ballad, i.e. a ballad written in imitation of the traditional mediaeval ballad. Again, it suggests the mediaeval world (the knight who carries away his Lady on his horse, etc.) but there is an **element of gothic** in the figure of the mysterious and cruel Lady - seen by some critics as a female counterpart of the gothic villain -and, above all, in the atmosphere of terror. Here terror does not really come from the nightmare, but rather from the cold world of reality. The sensuous and decorative quality of this poem, the symbolic flowers, the sense of enchanting and painful mystery, together with the romantic taste for the Middle Ages, prefigure the Pre-Raphaelites, who had a special predilection for this poem.

The greatest achievement of John Keats is represented by his great ode. Their themes are the themes that haunted the poet most: **beauty, permanence and transience, art and life, imagination and reality**.

The *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is centred on the relation between art, death and life. The figures on the Greek urn are eternal; human activity has been frozen capturing and immortalizing moments of happiness but at a price: the loss of life itself. The young man will never kiss the maiden; the crowd will never return to their little town. They have escaped into the world of unchanging art and have become pure beauty, but they are 'cold', they are 'marble men and maidens'.

The urn watches the course of human events, generation after generation, and gives a message: beauty is eternal, and truth is eternal, so **beauty is truth and truth is beauty**. But the message can also be read: beauty is total acceptance of life, and the pursuit and devotion to this beauty gives life its deepest meaning.

The emphasis on the contrast art-life, the relish of sensation, the capacity to imagine pictorially, and above all the ardour with which he pursued beauty led critics to consider Keats the forerunner of the Aesthetic Movement. But Keats was not a mere aesthete; his poetic creed has a moral basis: beauty is not an end in to itself, but

**Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all
Ye know on earth and all ye need to know.**

Keats's signature



*In *Paradise Lost*, by **John Milton**, Adam dreams that Eve has been created, and when he awakes he really finds her.

**By sensation the poet also means the intuitive apprehension of truths which cannot be achieved by reason alone.

CONCLUDING TASKS

In a letter to Benjamin Bailey, one of his closest friends, Keats wrote:

"... I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination – What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed or not – for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty - ..."

"...The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream* - he awoke and found it truth..."

"...O for a Life of Sensations** rather than of Thoughts!..."

"...have you never by being surprised with an old Melody – in a delicious place – by a delicious voice, felt over again your very speculations and surmises at the time it first operated on your soul – do you not remember forming to yourself the singer's face more beautiful than [than] it was possible and yet with the elevation of the Moment you did not think so – even then you were mounted on the Wings of Imagination so high – that the Prototype must be here after – that delicious face you will see - ..."

The text reproduces the letter so faithfully that the reader is aware of the effort Keats makes to keep up with the pressing flow of his thoughts regardless of grammar and spelling.

Underline words or expressions that you find relevant, and discuss if they find correspondence in the poems that you have read.

2. Keat's style is often defined sensuous, rich, lofty, luxuriant, figurative, and refined. State which devices justify this definition.

3. Discuss which elements in Keat's poetry reflect the romantic trend.

4. It is commonly agreed that the thought of Plato lies behind English Romanticism. Discuss and point out which aspects of the romantic creed reveal this influence.