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**Research Article**



## Passion with Profession: Exploring John Keats as a Poet-Physician

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### Abstract

Poetry has played pivot in healthcare system of the world as an alternative to medicine to heal the mental anguish of the readers.as well as the writers. It has immense impact on healing of the hurts of the readers. The power and potential of the poetry in palliative and hospice care is well proven. It has proven a panacea to both the patient and physicians in an ebullient way. The poetic therapy has been used by the experts in psychiatry to heal the angst, anguish, hurts of the

minds of the people. Through poetry, mental health and peace of mind can be maintained with pace immeasurable. The waves of passion that runs through poet's sensibility, soothes the senses of the readers. Poetry reading, writing and listening casts good therapeutic effects. Poetry provides peace, calmness, and tranquilly to the minds of the readers by elevating mood in distress and duress. Studies show that poetry therapy has proven a boon to patients suffering from serious ailments and to augment their emotional resilience and brings joy in their life. Our brains are electrified with rhyme and rhythm of the poetry to give emotional reaction to joy and sadness both. Like sweet melody of music, poetry heals our emotional hurts. The metaphors embellish the poetic lines with magical brilliance, and they glitter with astute meaning and message. Diction plays a very emphatic role in discerning poet's leanings. Reflection, perception and attachment are interwoven in diction so inextricably that they turn poet's mouthpiece, and roar and rave with perfect resonance to poetic experiences. The paper, however, pinpoints poetry's indefinable role to heal mental stress, trauma, and agony and to maintain good mental health well. We will examine some poetic utterances of great romantic poet and physician John Keats and its therapeutic effects. We will also observe how the John Keats' poetry radiates beams of healing and can play multifaceted role in healthcare.

**Keywords:** Poetry, Poetic Therapy, Therapeutic Use, Medicine, Rhythm, Imagery, Stress, Solitude, Nature, Depression, Emotions

Poetry is the healer of the hurts and emotional wounds. Since time memorial, the world has witnessed humans undergoing mental trauma, and poetry has played a remedial role to cure it. Since ages, literature is serving as a tool to absolve the patients of their mental and psychological disorders. The paper, however, explores the healing and therapeutic potential of John Keats' poetry addressing pain, plight and psychic problems of the people. Art and literature have resolved the issues of solitude, depression, agony, anguish and many issues related with mental health invariably. The poems hovering around the diverse themes like love, serenity of nature and mind, hope, beauty, aspirations, forbearance and redemption etc showed miraculous therapeutic effects on the minds of the readers to combat scathing attack of pain, agony and anguish. Poetry may play a major part in healing process of patients' care suffering from mental agony. It can serve as a catalyst to heal the emotional scars steadfastly. Judith Wright in her sonnet advocates the role of poetry in healing the wounds of the poetry readers. Mark the lines:

Let the long commentary of the brain  
be silent. Evening and the earth  
are one,  
and bird and tree are simple and stand still.  
Now, fragile heart swung in your  
webs of vein,  
and perilous self won hardly out of clay,  
gather the harvest of last light, and reap

the luminous fields of sunset for  
your bread.

the dreams draws on (24).

People believe that poetry reading, writing and listening can have a good healing and therapeutic effect. It has very soothing, quietening, analeptic and redemptive attributes. Soothing words pirouetted in silky rhyme and sweet rhythm diminished depression. Poet can give a vent to inner feelings which is not possible in plain saying. Studies establish that patients suffering from serious ailments improve their emotional imbalance listening to the poetry. Poetry elevates mood during time of dejection and despair. Our minds are very much attuned to rhyme, rhythm and meter of the poems. Like music, it electrifies the hearts of the readers. Melody of the verses stimulates the cerebrum of the readers to find their lost voice of joy again. The melody of the verses heals the hurts of the people fast. Poetry has the power and potential to trounce the trauma of its readers, writers and listeners, poetry can be a remedy to heal readers' mind, heart and soul, to diminish the agony, and end our woes. Brian E. Wakeman in his book "The Poetry as Research and Therapy" (2015) says: "the idea, that there can be a therapeutic power to poem, is at the heart of the poetry pharmacy. But the therapeutic power only exists if you can find the right poem for the right state of mind" (27).

One of the most striking features of poetry is its power to eke out voice. Bound by natural inarticulacy, an exposure to poetry may liberate the patients encouraging them to express their inhibitions, thoughts and doubts. Poetry sets an example to give vent to one's own suppressed feelings. It strengthens the sense of the positivity and hope. At its best, poetry has the potential to substantiate mental health and therapeutic usages. Words, symbols, imagery, rhyme and rhythm can stimulate the senses to sublimate thoughts and emotions with evocation of positive energy. Poetry imparts aesthetic delight purifying the emotions and ultimately giving cure and relief to our trauma. Poetry rejuvenates the mood of the depressed readers to a healing height. Poetry therapy is in vogue these days. Poetry serves two purposes first it purges the angsts, ennui and stress of the writers and also of the readers who are on the same boat of emotions as the poet. Both undergoes through the stage of purgation curing their emotional sickness through catharsis. Metaphors play a significant role in splicing the consciousness of both, the poet and the reader in a remarkable way. The poem with positive message can extend readers a reprieve from agony and anguish. John Timpane and Maureen Watts in "Poetry for Dummies" (2001) espouses the power of poetry to heal the emotional bursts. He advocates the use of poetry therapy in psychiatry. Mark the lines:

And suppose you did something to those words to make them pleasant, beautiful, unforgettable, and moving. Suppose this invention could get people to notice more of their own lives, sharpen their awareness, pay attention to things they'd never considered before. Suppose it could make their lives- and them – better. You'd really have something there... what is this fantastic creation? Poetry (1)

John Keats, the most romantic among romantic poets, was equipped with scientific knowledge. He was initially a physician, a trained apothecary surgeon and practitioner of medicines. He apprenticed and practiced medical profession at the two famous London's

teaching medical institutes Edmonton and Guy's hospital. His sound medical knowledge, sojourn in healing ambience, and having a gurgling spirit to serve the humanity shaped up his poetic imagination. He was very passionate and peculiar in disposition, charmed by healing people's wounds, enjoyed both the studying medicine and composing poetry imbued with the sole purpose to serve humanity. One of his classmates, Henry Stephens, observed keenly his talent and avers: "John Keats was very quick in acquiring anything and excelled at Latin language, the subjects most feared by student" (21). He was favourite of his teachers like Asley Kooper etc who played a major role to shape up his poetic philosophy. He relinquished his much-charmed medical profession, for an illustrious call he heard of the muse and the nature to become healer of woes of humanity's suffrage through poetry. He has become a poetic legend leaving a poetic legacy to assuage the agony and anguish of the people, and giving a healing balm to the wounded souls of the poetry readers. Eager to serve the humanity by the dint of his enchanting poetry, he always endeavoured to get references from his former vocation. It helped him to evolve an interface between poetry and medicine, and to search therapeutic qualities that poetry can afford. He regards poetry along with medicine that enlivens every offshoots of knowledge. He splices spirits of both sagaciously. He opines succinctly in his letter to his friend John Hamilton Reynolds:

Were I to study physic or rather Medicine again,- I feel it wouldn't make the least difference in my Poetry; when the Mind is in its infancy a bias, but when we have acquired more strength, A Bias becomes no Bias. Every department of knowledge we see excellent and calculated towards a great whole. I am so convinced of this, that I am glad at not having given away my medical books, which I shall again look over to keep alive the little I know thitherwards... (Rollins , 277).

In his letters addressed to siblings and friends give a peep into the body of his poetry, and the force giving thrust to his poetic imagination. His idea of preferring poetry to medicines drew criticism from critics but it couldn't hamper his urge to write poetry. He apprises us with his views on poetry, tenets of truth and beauty, the negative capability, poetic imagination and soul making etc. Keats was of the firm belief that poetry can heal the wounds where medicine may not. Despite seeing no financial security in this venture, he preferred the latter over the former. Poetry was the inspirational, guiding and emotive force behind his shortened life. Had he lived for some more years, we would have seen his unsurpassable genius. He was a gifted poet, and knew this well. He sought inspiration from William Shakespeare, John Milton, and Francis Bacon etc. He strived to perfect his poetic skill and to be for the humanity's use. In 1818, he opens his heart to his brother Thomas Keats:

I shall learn poetry here and shall henceforth write more than forever, for the abstract endeavour of being able to add a mite to that mass of beauty which is harvested from these grand materials, by the finest spirits, and put into ethereal existence for the relish of one's fellows. I cannot think with Hazlitt that these scenes make man appear little. I never forgot my stature so completely – I live in the eye; and my imagination, surpassed, is at rest- (Rollins 302).

John Keats hailed Wordsworth for his treatise on poetry *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), and concurred his view that poetry should possess spontaneity. Keats toed the line of Wordsworth, and emphasized: “That if Poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.” (Gittings70). His relinquishing the lustrous medical career for the sake of poetry, shows Keats’s abysmal love for poetry. After getting a degree and being fully capable in medical practice, he prioritised depiction of thoughts and feelings and serve the humanity through halo of his writings, for he knew that the mental hurts harm much and hamper the emotional growth. He is of the view that poetry can heal distressed soul and depressed mind where as a physician deals with physical states. Like a good mentor, a poet prescribes different poetic prescriptions seeing the intensity of agony of mentees. Seeing the situation, he becomes a sage and philosophises life, sometimes he assays the role of a humanist to give balm to distressed and depressed souls and at occasions, turns out to be a physician to heal the mental scars of the readers. His poetry instils a hope in dreary life of people to lead a very joyous life. His poetry has the potential to trounce the devil of despair and duress. He is of firm conviction that pain is universal and strikes all at one pretext or the other. The chief aim of poetry is to serve the ailing mankind. What a poet has to do, just to guide and goad his readers and heal their woes. In his famous poetic treatise “*The Fall of Hyperion*” (1819), he defines the objectives and goals of a poet in following alchemy of words<sup>7</sup>:

In sickness not ignoble, I rejoice,  
Ay, and could weep for love of such award.’  
So answered I, continuing, ‘If it please,  
Majestic shadows, tell me: sure not all  
Those melodies sung into the world’s ear  
Are useless: sure a poet is a Sage;  
A humanist, Physician to all men (The Poems of John Keats, 357).

John Keats illustrates his poetic creed and the role of a poet in the world in his treatise “*Hyperion*” (1819). The poem presents a panacea for human sufferings in the abstractions of poetry. The poem is weaved around the theme of war between Titans and Olympians- two dynasties of Greek gods, the defeat of son-god Hyperion and usurpation of the throne by Apollo. The warfare between Hyperion and Apollo symbolises the role of the poet to heal human pain. In “*The Fall of Hyperion: A Vision*”, Canto I, John Keats refer Greek goddess Mnemosyne as Moneta, and shows her to safeguard the Saturn’s temple. The protagonist of the poem comes to Moneta’s temple to heal his dilemma, she exhorts him that his ailment can be cured by empathizing with the pains of humans. Those who are gifted with this notion are blessed in the temple to be transformed into a poet, poetry can end human miseries. Keats in the poem predicts that free souls can dream but power lies in the mind of the poet who can transfix his imagination into an enthralling piece of verse, and thereby sublimating fumes of furies. The following lines ensconce the poet’s proactive role in healing the wounds of sufferers:

Art thou not of the dreamer tribe?  
The poet and the dreamer are distinct,

Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes.

The one pours out a balm upon the world,

The other vexes it (The Poems of John Keats 356).

In the poem, he presents a testament on functions of poetry, and leaves onus on the poet to balm human's sufferings. Moneta, the priestess, mother of muses, charms the protagonist with her spells and exhorts to get blessings only through his resolve to end the human predicament. The true obeisance to her is to share the grief with one another, and troubleshooting the problems and plight of the fellow humans. She emphasises that poets should give shoulders to the pain of sufferers through verses. He endeavours to build an interface between art and life. Keats draws an analogy in the poem between active and passive dreamy mind; and between creative potential of the poet and the inert dreamer. Mark the melody of the lines reminding the duty of a poet:

My power, which to me is still a curse,  
Shall be to thee a wonder, for the scenes  
Still swooning vivid through my globed brain,  
With an electrical changing misery,  
Thou shalt with these dull mortal eyes behold  
Free from all pain (The Poems of John Keats 357).

John Keats' preoccupation with medical science enables him to evolve mastery over the use of medical terms to size up the ecstasy and agony of the people. His medical profession arms him with a force to enrich his poetic language like prescriptions, idioms, metaphors and symbols to show the intensity of the disease and mental state of the readers. A very famous critic Hermione De Almeida in her treatise "Romantic Medicine and John Keats" (1991) describes a correlation between Keats' poetry and medicine. She opines that Keats' poetry is studded with medical metaphors and "are outnumbered only by metaphors of disease (Almida 138)". The aim lying behind using these medical metaphors is to measure the intensity of disease and extend cure. In the poem "Hyperion", he uses the term 'fever' thrice much talked about word in medical field. His allusion by using the term 'fever' is to denote the mental anguish of Saturn by tasting the defeat by Jupiter. The same strategy, he applies in "The Fall of Hyperion" to show the spectacle of miseries and psychological state of the fallen Titans. He employs the medical words "clod", "palsied chill", "spleen", "nest of woe", "appetite", "flesh", "bones", "sickness", "globed brain", "medicine", "fear", "despair", "convulsion", "pain of feebleness" etc. In the second book of "Hyperion", Keats uses medical metaphors to show the physical and mental state of the defeated god Saturn. Like an adept poet-physician, he tells his readers that fever which is the most occurring diseases may increase the temperature of the body causing physical effects, but negative thought pillages the calmness of the mind. Hyperion's tender spouse Thea consoles her husband telling him that Saturn's precarious position is due to his mental turmoil and forbids him not succumb to negative thoughts. Mark the following lines of poem "Hyperion" (Book II) extending comfort to fury of the mind:

Thea spread abroad her trembling arms  
Upon the precincts of this nest pain,

And sidelong fixed her eye on Saturn's face:  
 There saw she direst strife; the supreme God  
 At war with all the frailty of grief,  
 Of rage, of fear, anxiety, revenge,  
 Remorse, spleen, hope, but most of all despair.  
 Against these plagues he strove in vain (The Poems of John Keats 248).

John Keats prescribes that poetry can act like medicine. Keats saw through his own eyes the tragedies occurring in his family, he understood and felt the pain, physical sickness and mental anguish stemming from their sufferings. Nicholas Roe in his book "John Keats and the Medical Imagination" (2017) establishes a relation between John Keats' poetry, personal grief and his medical imagination. He avers: "images of sickness and illness contributed to his poetic imagination" (Roe 27). In "Ode to Nightingale", he showcases the power of poetry to heal the woes, and feel its therapeutic effects. The poem was composed by Keats just after the loss of his loving brother Thomas. The poem draws an analogy between the ecstasy, mirth and buoyance of the bird and the pangs of human sufferings and sorrows. When he hears the song of the garden of his friend Brown, he feels sedated by charm of the voice as the intoxication of hemlock. He uses the name of a medicine 'opiate' that was used as a pain reliever at that time. The poem illustrates the mortality of humans and the temporariness of joy, youth and beauty, and, moreover, the immortality of art and poetry. He injects a dulcet dose of beauty in art. Mark the following lines of the poem "Ode to Nightingale" "offer some significant therapeutic effect:

The voice I hear this passing night was heard  
 In ancient days by emperor and clown:  
 Perhaps the self- same song that found a path  
 Through the sad heart of Ruth, when sick for home,  
 She stood in tears amid the alien corn (The Poems of John Keats 223).

"Lamia" is a beautiful poem demonstrating a serpent who transforms into a beautiful woman "full of silver moons" and "eyed like peacock", showcases poet's preoccupation with chemistry. She is blessed to have love of an Athenian youth, but is disgruntled at marriage feast by bald headed and ferocious philosopher. She is a sorcerer and also the victim of sorcery. She builds a pristine palace by her magic for her lover, but their bliss is blotted by the philosopher. Her transformation is not full of jocundity but with thorns, pains and paleness of human mortality. Keats describes her pain scarlet and her transition painful. The poem is inundated with medical metaphors like "mouth foamed, "flashed phosphor", "convulsed", "scarlet pain" etc. His poems are full of healing vigour and act as a medicine to assuage the sufferings of Homo sapiens. Mark the therapeutic effect of the following lines of the poem "Lamia":

God fostering her chilled hand,  
 She felt the warmth, her eyelids opened bland,  
 And, like new flowers at morning song of bees,  
 Bloomed, and gave up her honey to the lees (The Poems of John Keats 178).

John Keats conscientiously endeavours to evolve a relation between pain, relief and identity through the entity soul. In the poem "Ode to Psyche", he expresses his devotion to

Psyche, a king's daughter was united with her lover, Cupid, the god, after bearing the slings of fortunes. Keats like to worship as he finds to approach to immortality through the most striking entity of human soul, the imagination. Psyche was the by-product of imagination to replenish the gap between the mortal and immortal. In the charming poem "The Eve of St. Agnes", Porphyro's desire to cure the pain of his soul by drowsing in lap of lady, Madeline. In "Isabella", the poet finds a correlation between pain and soul by depicting the pain of the soul of slain Lorenzo finding solace in freedom from loneliness. The very popular poem is treatise on the relation of soul and pain. Keats read Robert Burton's book "The Anatomy of Melancholy" and was highly influenced with the notions inscribed therein. The message the poem affords is that melancholy in an inherent malady in us. The poem elucidates that pleasure and pain are intertwined together and tethered with the awakening anguish of the soul. He exerts emphasis on soul making. He elaborates extensively the relation between soul and pain in letter written to George and Georgiana Keats:

I will call the world's a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read-I will call the Child able to read to read, the Soul made from that school and its hornbook Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways! Not merely is Heart a Hornbook, it is the Minds Bible, it is Minds experience; it is; teat from which the Mind or intelligence sucks its identity- As various as the lives of men are- so various become their souls, and thus does God make individuals beings, Souls, Identical Souls of the Sparks of his own essence (Selected Letters of John Keats 290)

John Keats' poetry fills the readers with love for life and to ensconce positive attitude towards life. The famous poetry therapist Geri Giebel Chavis avers in his essay "Poetry's Special Healing and Inspirational Role" that the poetry of the romantic poets like Keats "affirmed poetry's power to guide, illuminate and heal" (21). When the readers go through his poems, they feel their despair and depression diminishing. Geri Giebel further writes: "When Keats decided to devote himself to poetry instead of medicine, he ended up becoming a poet-healer. He realized that he needed to incorporate into his work and transform it through the alchemy of his artistry, into beauty that is truth" (21). John Keats, a poet-physician underlined the role of poetry to balm the sufferings of humanity. "Sleep and Poetry" is a scintillating early poem of Keats wherein he says poetry must uplift the moods and soothe our souls. The poem is imbued with symbols and images weaved around Greek myth. He wants to drown in the charm of natural beauty but he must forsake it to probe reasons behind the agony and strife of human hearts, and anoint the balm of healing on the brow of their aching souls. Mark the lines of the poem and its therapeutic effects:

Like two pearls up curled,  
In the recesses of a pearly shell,  
And Can I ever bid these joys farewell?  
Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,  
Where I may find the agonies, the strife



Of human hearts: for lo! I see afar (The Poems of John Keats 178).

Poetry has the power to cherish and chisel life. It is an elixir with miraculous effects that can spring back the phoenix from ashes of doldrums if few drops of it are engulfed. It can assuage the pains of sufferings of the readers, fortify their resolve to enjoy life, and to trounce scourge of negativity and misfortunes with light of smiles. In his poem “Think not of it Sweet One”, he forbids to repent on loss but exhorts to move on. Another poem” On the Grasshopper and Cricket”, he lays emphasis to be happy and contented in life. He enthuses verve in the veins of his readers to enjoy all the stages of life like the four seasons of a year. The poem gives panoramic view of nature, the beauty and bounty of the autumn season, and gets drowned in the music and melody of the lyric and finest imagery and felicity of diction to soothe and serenade the senses. The poet physician unbosoms his heart before lady love Fanny Brawne in a letter written in August, 1820. His creed and craving to pour balm on humanity is evident in the following words: “If my health would bear it, I could write a Poem which I have in my head, which would be consolation for some people in such a situation as mine (Buxton, 17)”.

In conclusion, we may assert that John Keats was a poet-physician who nursed and nourished the suffering humanity. He extended relief, relaxation and recovery to the bruises of depressed and distressed minds. His poetry diminishes and devours our sorrows, sadness and severity. He was of the firm conviction that poetry reading, writing, listening is a panacea for the emotional losses of the people. He wrote poetry to improve and elevate human conditions. His preoccupation with medical profession gave him a force to heal the mental anguish of the people. He employs miraculous medical metaphors to depict negativity and mental disorders. He lets his readers to identify their problems with anguish of his characters of the poems, and thus creating therapeutic effects on their ailments. The mental agony was spliced and comprehended within the corporal of physical pain emanated from feelings and emotions ensconced during illness. By melting his medical knowledge into the ice of poetry, he evolves drops of frost to soothe the feeble senses. The great romantic poet P.B. Shelley too found his poetry capable of healing wounds. When Shelley died, he had some of his poems written on a piece of paper in his pocket. In his famous elegy “Adonais” (1821), Shelley pays undying tribute to this great poet-physician:

Died Adonais; till the Future dares  
Forget the Past, his fate and fame  
shall be  
An echo and light unto eternity! (100).

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