

## An Ecocritical Reading of Nature as a Living Presence in John Keats

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### Abstract

*This research paper offers an eco-critical reading of John Keats's poetry, examining his representation of nature as a living, sentient, and autonomous presence rather than a passive backdrop for human emotion. While Keats is traditionally celebrated as a Romantic poet of beauty, imagination, and sensuous aesthetics, this study argues that his poetry also anticipates key concerns of contemporary ecocriticism. Through close textual analysis of selected poems such as To Autumn, Ode to a Nightingale, Ode on a Grecian Urn, Endymion, Ode to Melancholy, and relevant sonnets, the paper explores how Keats challenges anthropocentric worldviews and foregrounds ecological harmony, continuity, and interdependence.*

*Drawing upon eco-critical theories proposed by scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell, the study highlights Keats's portrayal of natural elements—seasons, birds, trees, and landscapes—as emotionally expressive and self-regulating entities. Nature in Keats's poetry emerges as a sustaining force that embodies cyclical processes of growth, decay, joy, and suffering, mirroring ecological balance. By dissolving the rigid boundaries between the human and non-human worlds, Keats presents an ethical vision that emphasizes coexistence rather than domination.*

*This eco-critical reinterpretation challenges the notion of Keats's poetry as mere aesthetic escapism and establishes him as a poet of profound environmental awareness whose work remains highly relevant in the context of modern ecological crises.*

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, John Keats, Nature, Romantic Poetry, Human–Nature Relationship, Anthropocentrism

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### I. INTRODUCTION

John Keats really stands out in the second wave of Romantic poets. He wrote at a wild time—factories popping up everywhere, science racing forward, the world shifting so fast it left people dizzy. Sure, all the Romantics loved nature, but Keats took it to another level. Nature, for him, wasn't just a pretty scene or a place to run away. He saw it as something alive and pulsing—connected to us, but not just for us. It had its own rhythm, its own rules. Keats didn't live long. Illness and loss shaped him, and he even spent time studying medicine, so he knew how fragile life really is. That comes through in his poetry. Nature isn't just a stage for people to act out their dramas. It's a force—nurturing, expressive, always growing back. That's where ecocriticism comes in. It's all about how literature and the environment shape each other, and Keats fits right into that conversation. This paper looks at Keats with fresh eyes, through an eco-critical lens. The idea is to show how his poetry pushes against the old idea that humans sit at the center of everything. Instead, he gives nature its own life, its own power. Honestly, Keats was ahead of his time, offering a vision of respect and balance with the natural world that feels surprisingly modern now.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine John Keats's poetry through the theoretical framework of ecocriticism.
2. To analyze Keats's representation of nature as a living, sentient, and self-sustaining presence.
3. To explore how Keats challenges anthropocentric perspectives and emphasizes ecological harmony.
4. To contribute to Keatsian scholarship by offering an expanded eco-critical reinterpretation of his poetry.

### II. ECOCRITICISM: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 2.1 Concept and Scope of Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary critical approach that examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment. It explores how literary texts represent nature, respond to ecological concerns, and influence human attitudes toward the non-human world. Emerging at the intersection of literary studies,

environmental studies, philosophy, and cultural criticism, ecocriticism seeks to understand literature as both a reflection of ecological consciousness and a force that shapes it.

## **2.2 Origin and Development of Ecocriticism**

The term “*ecocriticism*” was first coined by **William Rueckert** in 1978 in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. Rueckert emphasized the capacity of literature to promote environmental awareness and ecological responsibility. He viewed literary texts as reservoirs of ecological energy that can preserve and transmit environmental values across generations. Although ecocriticism gained formal academic recognition in the late twentieth century, ecological awareness has long been present in literary traditions, particularly in nature-centered writing.

## **2.3 Key Ecocritical Thinkers and Definitions**

**Cheryll Glotfelty**, a foundational figure in ecocritical theory, defines ecocriticism as “*the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.*” Her definition highlights the inseparability of cultural production from the material world.

**Lawrence Buell** extends this framework by emphasizing the ethical and practical dimensions of ecocriticism. He argues that ecocriticism operates with a commitment to environmental praxis, suggesting that literature does not merely depict nature but actively shapes environmental ethics and human engagement with the natural world.

## **2.4 Ethical and Political Dimensions of Ecocriticism**

Unlike traditional literary criticism, which often prioritizes aesthetic concerns and human-centered narratives, ecocriticism is deeply ethical, political, and ecological in orientation. It addresses urgent environmental issues and interrogates the ideological frameworks that govern human interactions with nature. Literature is seen as a tool capable of influencing ecological responsibility and environmental justice.

## **2.5 Critique of Anthropocentrism**

A central concern of ecocriticism is its critique of **anthropocentrism**, the belief that humans occupy a dominant and privileged position in the universe. Ecocritical theory challenges this worldview by advocating an **ecocentric** perspective that recognizes the intrinsic value of all forms of life.

From this standpoint, nature is not merely a resource for human exploitation but a dynamic, interconnected system in which humans are only one component. Rivers, forests, animals, and landscapes possess significance and agency independent of human use or interpretation.

## **2.6 Literature as a Medium of Ecological Awareness**

Ecocriticism views literature as a powerful medium for questioning hierarchical human–nature relationships. Literary texts can foster respect, empathy, and responsibility toward the environment by presenting alternative visions of coexistence between humans and the natural world. Through eco-critical readings, both canonical and non-canonical texts are reinterpreted to uncover implicit ecological concerns embedded within their narratives, even when such concerns were not explicitly articulated by the authors.

## **2.7 Language, Representation, and Ecological Imagination**

Ecocriticism pays close attention to language and representation, examining how metaphors, symbols, and narrative structures shape ecological perception. Literary language can either reinforce exploitative attitudes toward nature or challenge them by imagining sustainable and harmonious relationships between humans and the environment.

## **2.8 Ecocriticism and Romantic Literature**

Romantic poetry provides fertile ground for ecocritical analysis due to its emphasis on nature, organic unity, and emotional engagement with the physical world. Romantic writers often depict nature as a living presence rather than a passive backdrop.

Among the Romantic poets, **John Keats** stands out for his organic, inclusive, and non-hierarchical vision of nature. His poetry presents the natural world as a living, self-regulating presence, emphasizing interconnectedness rather than human dominance.

## **III. NATURE AS A LIVING ENTITY IN KEATS'S POETRY**

John Keats's poetry consistently portrays nature as a living, sentient, and dynamic entity rather than a passive backdrop for human emotion. Natural elements such as the sun, moon, birds, seasons, trees, flowers,

rivers, and even abstract emotions are imbued with life and agency. This organic vision challenges the mechanistic and utilitarian view of nature that became dominant during the Industrial Revolution, where the natural world was increasingly treated as an object for human exploitation. Keats's poetic imagination, instead, aligns closely with the eco-critical emphasis on interconnectedness, ecological balance, and the intrinsic value of the non-human world.

### **3.1 Nature and Seasonal Cycles in *To Autumn***

In *To Autumn*, Keats presents nature not as an abstract temporal concept but as a living presence actively involved in processes of growth, ripening, and decay. The poem opens with a striking personification: "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun."

Autumn is depicted as an intimate companion of the sun, collaboratively nurturing the earth. This relationship reflects ecological cooperation rather than human-centered control. The season is further portrayed as a figure who "sits careless on a granary floor" and patiently observes "the last oozings hours by hours." Such imagery attributes consciousness, patience, and autonomy to nature. Keats celebrates abundance without human intervention, highlighting nature's self-sustaining capacity.

The rhetorical question, "Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?" does not express regret but reinforces the cyclical rhythm of nature. Each season has its own role and music, emphasizing ecological continuity over linear progress. Decay, in this context, is not loss but fulfillment, reinforcing eco-critical ideas of regeneration and balance.

### **3.2 The Eternal Song of Nature in *The Grasshopper and the Cricket***

Keats's sonnet *The Grasshopper and the Cricket* packs a lot into just a few lines. That famous bit—"The poetry of earth is never dead"—really gets at how Keats saw nature: always alive, always singing, no matter what. He turns the earth into a kind of poet, its song carried by different creatures as the seasons shift. In summer, the grasshopper takes the lead. Once winter sets in, the cricket picks up the tune. People hardly show up at all in this scene. Nature just does its thing, with or without us. If you look at it through an eco-critical lens, the poem really shines a light on how tough and self-sufficient the natural world is. Life keeps going, even when the seasons turn harsh.

### **3.3 Birdsong and Immortality in *Ode to a Nightingale***

In *Ode to a Nightingale*, Keats contrasts human mortality with the apparent immortality of the natural world. Addressing the bird, he declares:

"Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!"

The nightingale stands for something lasting—its song weaves through the ages, outliving all the pain and loss people go through. Where human life gets weighed down by sickness and despair, the bird keeps singing, steady and timeless, a reminder that nature moves on no matter what. Looking at it from an eco-critical angle, the nightingale shows just how tough and adaptable nature really is, always finding a way to start over. Keats doesn't just admire the bird; he wants to join its world. It's more than a wish to escape human problems—it's a deep urge to break out of our own narrow view and belong to something bigger, the whole web of life, not just our own small corner.

### **3.4 Nature and Emotion in *Ode on a Grecian Urn***

Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* further reveals ecological consciousness through its depiction of nature as emotionally expressive. The phrase "happy, happy boughs" assigns joy to trees, suggesting that emotions are not exclusively human but embedded within the natural world. Trees are portrayed as active participants in eternal cycles of renewal.

The frozen scenes on the urn contrast with the living vitality suggested by natural imagery. From an eco-critical perspective, this blending of permanence and life emphasizes nature's enduring presence beyond human temporality. Keats thus blurs the boundary between human emotion and natural existence, reinforcing ecological interconnectedness.

### **3.5 Beauty and Regeneration in *Endymion***

In *Endymion*, Keats famously asserts, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever." Beauty, in Keats's poetic vision, is deeply rooted in nature—moonlight, flowers, rivers, forests, and pastoral landscapes. These elements offer lasting joy because they exist within regenerative ecological cycles.

Unlike human achievements, which are temporary and subject to decay, nature continually renews itself. Keats's emphasis on natural beauty highlights an eco-critical belief in the sustaining power of the environment and its ability to nurture both physical and spiritual well-being.

### 3.6 Ecological Balance and Emotional Duality in *Ode to Melancholy*

*Ode to Melancholy* presents one of the most profound expressions of Keats's ecological philosophy by emphasizing the coexistence of opposites. Joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, are inseparable, just as growth and decay coexist in nature. Keats writes:

“Ay, in the very temple of Delight, Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine.”

This acknowledgment of duality mirrors ecological balance, where opposing forces sustain harmony rather than disrupt it. From an eco-critical perspective, the poem suggests that emotional and ecological health require acceptance of transience and impermanence, lessons that nature continually imparts.

### 3.7 Keats's Eco-Centric Vision

Across his poetry, Keats consistently dissolves the rigid separation between humans and nature. Natural elements are portrayed as autonomous, expressive, and enduring, challenging anthropocentric assumptions of human superiority. Nature is not subordinated to human needs; instead, humans are invited to recognize their place within a larger ecological framework.

Through this eco-centric vision, Keats emerges not merely as a Romantic poet of beauty and imagination but as a poet of profound ecological awareness. His representation of nature as a living entity anticipates contemporary environmental thought and underscores the continued relevance of his poetry in an age of ecological crisis.

## IV. ECOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF KEATS'S POETRY

John Keats didn't just write about nature as a pretty backdrop or a place for human drama. He saw it as alive—its own thing, with its own rights. His poems keep nudging us to rethink how we fit into the natural world. Nature in Keats isn't some tool for us to use, or just scenery. It's more like a neighbor we owe respect and empathy. In his lines, you can sense a quiet challenge to human pride—a push for coexistence and a kind of harmony that feels oddly modern, especially in an age worried about the environment.

### 4.1 Rejection of Anthropocentrism

Keats never acts like humans are the rulers of everything. Over and over, he questions the idea that we're the center of the universe. In his poems, birds, trees, rivers—even the seasons—have their own stories. They matter, whether we're paying attention or not. Nature isn't just here to serve us; it has its own worth. Honestly, that's the same mindset a lot of environmental thinkers have now: every living thing deserves respect. By knocking humans off their high horse, Keats nudges us to be a little more humble and recognize our limits. Even back then, he was already thinking the way people do today—believing that non-human life deserves moral consideration too.

### 4.2 Nature as an Ethical Guide

Keats's poetry presents nature not only as beautiful but also as ethically instructive. Natural processes such as growth, decay, renewal, and balance function as moral lessons for humanity. In poems like *To Autumn* and *Ode to Melancholy*, Keats emphasizes the necessity of accepting change and impermanence. Nature teaches that decay is not destruction but a vital component of renewal.

From an eco-critical perspective, this acceptance of natural cycles promotes sustainability. Keats implicitly critiques human tendencies toward excess, exploitation, and denial of limits. By observing and learning from nature's rhythms, humans are encouraged to adopt more sustainable and balanced ways of living.

### 4.3 Ecological Interconnectedness and Coexistence

A central ecological implication of Keats's poetry is the idea of interconnectedness. Keats dissolves the boundaries between the human and non-human worlds, presenting existence as an intricate web of relationships. Humans, animals, plants, and natural forces coexist within the same ecological framework, each contributing to the continuity of life.

This vision resonates with eco-critical thought, which emphasizes interdependence rather than hierarchy. Keats's portrayal of nature as self-regulating and cooperative challenges the exploitative models promoted by industrial and capitalist ideologies. His poetry suggests that survival and fulfillment depend on coexistence rather than domination.

#### **4.4 Sensory Engagement and Environmental Empathy**

Keats's emphasis on sensory experience plays a crucial role in fostering ecological awareness. His poetry appeals vividly to sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, creating immersive encounters with the natural world. Through sensuous imagery, readers are invited to experience nature intimately rather than observe it from a distance.

This sensory engagement nurtures environmental empathy. By feeling nature rather than merely seeing it, readers develop emotional connections that encourage care and responsibility. From an eco-critical perspective, such emotional bonds are essential for cultivating sustainable attitudes toward the environment.

#### **4.5 Critique of Industrial Modernity**

Although Keats does not explicitly address industrialization, his poetic vision implicitly critiques the mechanization and commodification of nature prevalent during his time. By emphasizing organic unity and natural rhythms, Keats resists the reduction of nature to an object of exploitation. His poetry offers an alternative worldview rooted in harmony and balance. This resistance aligns with eco-critical critiques of modernity that highlight the environmental consequences of unchecked industrial progress. Keats's celebration of nature's autonomy serves as a counter-narrative to industrial ideologies of control and domination.

#### **4.6 Nature and Human Identity**

Keats looks at people differently. In his poems, we're not lords over nature—we're part of it, tangled up in everything else that lives and dies. That shift forces us to step back, get humble, and really see ourselves. He doesn't let us forget we're fragile, that we live and die like everything else out there. Instead of pretending we're above it all, Keats ties our lives to the same natural cycles shaping everything around us. If you read this through an eco-critical lens, it punches a hole in the old idea that humans sit at the top of the pyramid. Keats pushes us to take responsibility. He makes it clear: if nature suffers, so do we. Our survival depends on the health of the world we live in—there's no getting around that.

#### **4.7 Contemporary Relevance of Keats's Ecological Vision**

The ecological implications of Keats's poetry remain highly relevant in the context of modern environmental crises. Issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and ecological degradation underscore the urgency of rethinking human–nature relationships. Keats's poetry offers a visionary model rooted in respect, balance, and coexistence.

By presenting nature as a living presence and emphasizing ethical engagement with the environment, Keats anticipates contemporary sustainability discourse. His work reminds readers that ecological harmony is not merely a scientific or political concern but also a cultural and ethical imperative.

### **V. CONCLUSION**

Looking at John Keats through an eco-critical lens, you see a poet who goes way beyond the usual Romantic ideas about nature. Keats doesn't just treat nature as a pretty backdrop or an escape from life. He gives it a real presence—alive, aware, and existing on its own terms, not just as something for people to control or admire. His images, his use of personification, the way he draws you in with the senses—all of it pushes back against the idea that humans are at the center of everything. He cares about balance, harmony, and the deep connections that run through the world.

Take poems like To Autumn, Ode to a Nightingale, Ode on a Grecian Urn, Endymion, Ode to Melancholy, or The Grasshopper and the Cricket. In these works, the line between people and nature gets blurry. Nature isn't just a passive setting or a thing to be used; it acts, it feels, it keeps going no matter what. Keats captures the cycles—growth, decay, renewal—that shape everything. He shows nature's own value, not just what it can do for us, which fits right in with what ecocriticism is all about.

Keats also leans hard into sensory experience. He wants you to see, hear, touch, taste, and smell the world he writes about. That kind of vivid detail makes you feel closer to nature, almost like you're standing in it. It's more than just pretty description—it asks you to care, to notice, to act responsibly. In a way, Keats was ahead of his time, already thinking about nature as something that needs protecting, not just enjoying.

With today's environmental crises in mind, Keats's poems still hit home. His vision pushes for humility and respect, not dominance. He offers a model of how people might live better with the natural world, side by side instead of on top. Rereading him this way doesn't just give you a new angle on his poetry—it reminds you how powerful literature can be in shaping how we think about the environment. In the end, Keats stands out as a poet

who still inspires us to imagine a life that's more in tune with the earth and everything living on it.

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