

"Sound and Silence in The Poetry of Keats,"

Sarah E. Davies.

I. Introduction. -

number of sounds in Keats' poems.

number of silences in Keats' poems.

Keats love for sound and silence.

II. Endymion. -

(a) musical sounds

(b) sounds of animal life

1. birds

2. beasts

3. human beings

(c) other sounds

1. wind

2. water

3. thunder

4. rain

(d) whispers

(e) silences

III. Eve of St Agnes. -

(a) musical sounds

(b) whispers

(c) other sounds

(d) silences

IV. Hyperion. -

(a) musical sounds.

(b) sounds of birds

(c) loud sounds

(d) human voice

(e) other sounds

(f) silences.

V. Miscellaneous Poems. -

(a) musical sounds

(b) voices of beasts

(c) voices of birds

(d) human voices

(e) silences

VI. Conclusion. -

In reading the poetry of Keats for the first time, I was much impressed by the many passages expressive of sound which he brings into his poems. The instances of silence are also numerous and very significant. Through his entire work we find over three-hundred expressions indicating sound, and over seventy passages expressing a lack of sound.

Keats was undoubtedly, most exquisitely sensitive to the beauty of the things of sense; for his poems show that things from without appealed to him much more strongly than any promptings from within. It seems his ear was ever open to the melody of sound, for in his poems we find many passages bringing to our minds the melodious strains of musical instruments, and the cheering songs of birds. Even the bleating of sheep, the lowing of cattle, and the characteristic sounds of other animals, undoubtedly found a responsive chord in the heart of the poet. He felt beauty also in the sighing of the wind, in the rippling of waters, and in the voices of human beings. He does not however, confine himself to pleasing sounds alone, and we are sure that such sounds as

the roar of wild beasts, sighs and groans of human beings and the howling of tempests, also touched him.

Keats certainly must have had a most wonderfully sensitive ear; for in reading his poems we are impressed with all gradations of sound, from the loud roaring of wild beasts and the clamorous din of howling tempests, to the lowest and softest of sounds dying away into whispers. In fact there are few sounds of which we can conceive, that are not found somewhere in the poetry of Keats.

He must also have been deeply affected by silence, for in many of his descriptions, silence is expressed. In some places, although silence is not specifically mentioned, we still can detect the lack of sound.

The poem "Endymion", one which Keats wrote when but twenty-three years of age, fairly teems with rich expressions of sounds and silence. This poem contains four-thousand-forty lines, and through these we find over one-hundred-sixty thoughts of sound expressed, and over forty expressions denoting silence.

These various sounds seem to fall naturally into about four divisions. — musical sounds,

sounds of animal life, as birds, beasts and human beings, sounds of wind, rain, Thunder, water and trees, and lastly sounds which are merely whispers.

Keats was indeed a lover of music as is shown in the first part of his poem "Endymion", in which he says that the very music of the name has gone into his being. In this same poem, in referring to a merry group of children, the thought is brought in of a faint breath of music reaching their ears. Shortly after, this same music came again in airy swellings.

He compares a crowd of shepherds with sun-burned faces who were on their way to do homage to the God Pan, to shepherds who

"sat listening to Apollo's pipe
When the great deity, for earth too ripe,
Let his divinity overflowing die
In music."

Some of these same shepherds

"Kept up a shrilly mellow sound
With ebony-tipped flutes."

The venerable priest, who had arrived by this time, addresses all classes of people, among whom he addresses those who have just come

"From valleys where the pipe is never dumb."
He speaks also to those

"whose precious charge
Nibble their fill at oceans very marge,
Whose mellow reeds are touch'd with sounds forlorn
By the dim echoes of old Triton's horn."

When the old priest had finished talking and had
made sacrifice to Pan

"a chorus sang:

When the chorus was ended, a mighty shout went
up from all the people, and

"Young companies nimbly began dancing
To the swift treble pipe, and humming string."

Farther on in the poem, Endymion tells
his sister that he will never more feel gloomy and
sad, so long as she is near him, and fondly
closes by saying,

"So be thou cheered, sweet!

And, if Thy lute is here, softly entreat
My soul to keep in its resolved course."

Peona immediately took up her lute

"from which there pulsing came
A lively prelude, fashioning the way
In which her voice should wander. 'Twas a lay
More subtle-cadenced, more forest wild

Than Hygieia's lone lulling of her child;
 What a wonderful mixture of melodies Keats gives
 us in a bit of a conversation between Endymion
 and his sister. Endymion says, -

"hush! when the airy stress
 Of music's Kiss impregnates the free winds
 And with a sympathetic touch unbinds
 AEolian magic from their lucid wombs:
 Then old songs waken from enclouded tombs;
 Old ditties sigh above their father's grave;
 Ghosts of melodious prophesyings rave
 Round every spot where trod Apollo's foot;
 Bronze clarions awake, and faintly blurt
 Where long ago a giant battle was.
 And, from the turf, a lullaby doth pass
 On every place where infant Arpheus slept."

How beautiful is the idea of sound in
 the passage regarding Endymion's following the
 butterfly in hopes it would lead him to some
 beautiful maiden. He goes on and on, and

"sinks adown a solitary glen
 Where there never was sound of mortal men,
 Saving, perhaps, some snow light cadences,
 Melting to silence, when upon the breeze
 Some holy bark let forth an anthem sweet

To chew itself to helphi."

In another of Endymion's fairy journeys in search of some beautiful maiden, he hears a sound, -

"he stops - his bosom beats
As plainly in his ear, as the faint charm
Of which the throbs were born. This still alarm
This sleepy music, forced him walk tip-toe,
For it came more softly than the east could blow
Arion's magic to the Atlantic isles;"

He presses forward and comes to a beautiful
myrtle-walled chamber, in which a most beautiful
youth lay on a couch. Near him, the poet says,

"stood serene Cupids, watching silently.
One, kneeling to a lyre, touched the strings,
Muffling to death the pathos with his wings;

One of the cupids spoke to Endymion, telling him,
"I will let thee know

Of all these things around us. He did so
Still brooding o'er the cadence of his lyre."

How evident is Keats' love for the beauty
of sound manifested in many parts of the bit of
narration relative to Endymion and the old man
Glaucus. The old man says, -

"What shall I do? where go,
When I have cast this serpent skin of woe?"

I'll swim to the syrens, and one moment listen
Their melodies."

He tells Endymion the long story of his own life, not forgetting to mention the sound of a lyre which greeted his ear one early morning as he awoke. He goes on telling his life history, and finally tells Endymion what he must do in order to have a happy life in the future. Endymion is enraptured with the thought of future happiness and as he obeys the command to scatter the leaves, he feels his heart ravished by the sound of flutes and viols. Bodies of human beings bound in a powerful sleep lay around them. Endymion was directed to scatter leaves upon these bodies and as this was done the bodies became reanimated,

"There arose

A noise of harmony, pulses and throes
Of gladness in the air."

While the reanimated bodies gazed upon Endymion,
"Delicious symphonies, like any flowers
Budded, and swelled, and, full blown, shed full ^{showers}
Of light, soft, unseen leaves of sounds divine."

The old man ~~blancus~~, then led Endymion
to a beautiful palace, a gift he was giving him

as a reward for his obedience. It was such a beautiful palace,

"They stood in dreams

Till Triton blew his horn. The palace rang;
The Nereids danced; the Sirens faintly sang."

In this way, through the story, Keats has the old man, as well as the young man to hear and appreciate the sound of music which seems to surround them in this fairy-land of nature.

How fitting is the idea of sound, where Keats points to those in high places, who mount
"their thrones

"Amid the fierce intoxicating tones
Of trumpets, shoutings, and blabored drums."

How susceptible Keats must have been to music. In gazing even at the moon in "Endymion" he says, -

"Thou wast the charm of women, lovely Moon!
Oh what a wild and harmonized tune
My spirit struck from all the beautiful."

To Keats, even love had a voice, as is shown in the latter part of the passage where Endymion addresses the beautiful goddess Cytherea who lived in the beautiful palace. Endymion says, -

"Breathe, softly flutes;
 Be tender of your strings, ye soothing lutes;
 Nor be the tempest heard! O rain, A rain!
 Not flowers budding in an April rain
 Nor breath of sleeping dove, or river's flow—
 No, nor the AEolian twang of Love's own bow,
 Can mingle music fit for the soft ear
 Of goddess Cytherea!"

Again love's voice is brought to our minds when
 Endymion says to another beautiful maiden,

"There's not a sound,
 Melodious howsoever, can confound
 The heavens and earth in one to such a death
 As does the voice of love:"

Again, Endymion says to the maiden,
 Let me have music dying, and I seek
 No more delight—

In the song that the maiden then sings to him,
 The idea of sound is brought in as she sings
 of the trumpet and the merry din of the silver
 thrills of the kissing cymbals.

Sounds of birds, beasts, insects
 and human beings are plentiful throughout Keats'
 "Endymion." He brings before our minds the

characteristic sounds of various birds, as in the owl's cry, the merry song of the lark, the chuckling of linnets, the love-song of the nightingale, the song of the speckled thrushes, the heavy ditty of the ouzel, the light rustling of the wren, and the warbling of various other birds.

He has a place in his heart for the bleating of sheep, the lowing of heifers, and even the snortings of a whale.

He was most receptive to sounds of the human voice, for in this poem he often speaks of the sighing voice, and tones of sadness. He gives us the sound of man's voice, the songs and sighs of maidens, and the merry sound of children's voices. We hear the sound of sudden voices, voices of solemn joy, faint fare-the-wells, and sigh shrilled adieus. Again we hear the chattering of a maiden, then the laughing and railing of the wizard and brute; sound comes also in the agony of a sepulchral moan, in shrieks, and yells and groans, and in the war song of defiance sung by despair.

The sounds of the elements also, appealed most strongly to him, for he presents them

most vividly in this poem. How vividly is the thought of thunder brought to us, when Keats represents it as "dying rolls of abrupt thunder," and "the rumble of earth-thunder." The various sounds of the wind come to us when we read of "the zephyr's sigh," the "breeze most softly lulling," "a mountain wind that blusters," and the "storm and tempest mad."

The poet's ear was ever ready to catch the music of falling waters. He speaks of the "sobbing rain," the "splashing fountain" and the "silver ramble of a little brook gurgling blithe adieu." We read of "the streamlets falling with mingled bubblings and a gentle rush into a clear river," of the "murmuring surge of a hundred waterfalls," of the "wide sea that one continuous murmur breeds," and of "the subterranean streams that tease their granite beds."

This sensitive ear caught also the echoes; "faint echoes," "echoes that sing," and sounds from "echoing grottoes." We seem to hear "light footsteps," "hollow sounds," and "undescribed sounds." The "rush of garments," the "whizzing of a shaft," the "dull twanging of a bow-string," the "leaves"

crackle and rustle" and the bradded reeds giving a dreary and melancholy sound, - all these make us realize how much there is around us that touches a true poet's heart. Among the whispers in this poem, we have "whispering trees", "whispering footsteps", "honeyed whispers" and "eternal whispers".

The instances of silence in "Endymion", are not so numerous as that of sound; still, they are found and serve their purpose well. We feel the peace and quiet, near the beginning of the poem, when Keats, in speaking of a thing of beauty, says, -

"it will never

Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep

Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing." Keats indicates silence when he speaks of the "silent workings of the dawn", the "many quiet hours", "summer's silent fingering", "deemest meditation", "silence dead" and "apalling silence". We recognize the lack of sound in several passages descriptive of some solitary spot where man never went and voice was never heard.

In many parts of the poem, Endymion is said to be silent in a dream. There was no sound when he "curtained up his eye-lids" and swooned off to sleep. He lay "dead still as a marble man." We are again impressed by silence when we reach the quiet bower to which Pona, Endymion's sister then led him. She sat silently beside him while he held her finger-tips in tender pressure.

"And as a willow keeps
A patient watch over the stream that creeps
Windingly by it, so the quiet maid
Held her in peace."

How fittingly expressive of the silence of the beautiful moon are these lines. —

"She unobserved steals into her throne,
And there she sits most meek and most alone"
"Thou dost bless everywhere, with silver lip,
Kissing dead things to life. The sleeping river
Louched in thy brightness, dream of fields divine."

The "Eve of St. Agnes", one of Keats' most artistic master-pieces, is a poem of forty-two verses, each verse containing nine lines.

Some very beautiful expressions of musical

sounds are given us in this poem. A responsive chord is touched in us when we read of the "prelude soft," "music yearning like a God in pain," and the "sound of merriment and chorus bland."

Young Porphyro, Madeline's lover, while gazing at her when asleep in her chamber, stood and looked at her, and listened to the sound of her quiet breathing whenever

"it chanced

"to wake into a slumbrous tenderness."

Porphyro seems oblivious to all around him, save the entrancing loveliness of Madeline, still,

"The boisterous midnight festive clarion,

The Kettle-drum - and far-heard clarionet"

affray his ears, as in a dying tone the sound comes from the distant hall where mirth and revelry supremely reign. Watching by her bed-side he whispered sweet words to her, and finally

"he took up her hollow lute, -

Tumultuous, - and in chords that tenderest be,

He played an ancient ditty."

In this poem we find a few passages expressive of whispering sounds. Young Porphyro

who stood without the great palace longing for a sight of Madeline finally ventures in, though the palace is full of his enemies. As he passes in, the poet says, -

"let no buzzed whisper tell:"

He was careful to keep in the shadow so no one would see him. He finally saw an old dame whom he had known before. He took her into his confidence and they together arranged the stratagem in regard to Madeline. The old dame was at first shocked, but Porphyro says to her, -

"O may I never find grace

When my weak voice shall whisper its last prayer,

If one of her soft ringlets I displace."

The old dame then left him for a few moments and returning

"whispered in his ear

To follow her."

Thus we see that though the expressions of silence are few in this poem, they are very suggestive.

Other sounds are dropped in here and there in this poem. The poet says that Madeline sighs just before leaving the

gay assembly for the quietness of her own room; that as she enters her chamber she pants; that as she prepares for retiring, the rustle of her rich garments is heard, and that after sleeping, Porphyro's music awakens her, and she

"begins to weep,

And moan forth witless words with many a sigh."

"Ah, Porphyro! said she, but even now
Thy voice was at a sweet tremble in mine ear,
Made tuneable with every sweetest vow;"

While Porphyro was planning with the old dame, who seemed a little backward about helping him at first, he said to her, believe me

"As I will, even in a moment's space,

Awake with hoarse shout my for-mein's ears"

The idea of the sound of the wind and sleet is brought in while Porphyro and Madeline are conversing in the chamber. The poet writes. —

"meantime the frost-wind blows

Like Louis' alarm pattering the sharp sleet
Against the window panes."

While they are escaping from the house, we can with the poet, hear the sound of the "bolts full

easy slide," The key turn, and The door upon its hinges groan.

At the opening of the poem, silence is indicated in the description of St. Agnes' Eve. The night was bitter cold

"And silent was the flock in woolly fold."
In the description of the old chapel, we can feel the solemn silence when the poet pictures the old Beadsmen passing slowly down the aisles, while

"The sculptured dead, on each side seem to freeze,
Emprisoned in black, purgatorial rails;
Knights and ladies, praying in dumb oratories,
He passeth by;"

We feel silence again in the description of the little room to which the old dame led Porphyro in order that he might not be seen.

"He found himself in a little moonlight room,
Pale, latticed, chill and silent as a tomb."

The peaceful quiet of Madeline's chamber is beautifully pictured when the poet describes it as, — "silken, hushed and chaste." As Madeline entered it from the crowded room beyond she "uttered not a syllable." At

another time, while Porphyro gazed lovingly upon Madeline sleeping on her snowy bed, the silence of the room is only heightened by the faint and distant sound of music coming from the hall where the dance was going on. Later in the night when they both were making their escape,

"In all the house was heard no human sound."

In the poem "Hyperion", another of Keats' masterpieces, we are impressed with the many beautiful expressions of musical sounds. He brings to our minds "a solemn tenor," "deep organ note," "a soft warble from the Eolian flute," a "harp that waileth," a "trumpet blown," "sweet and wandering sounds and low-breathed melodies." We read of a "lyre that pants with bliss," and in one place the whole vast universe is pictured as listening in pain and pleasure to the music of a lyre. The music of birds voices are referred to only twice, where we hear the song of the nightingale and "calm throated Thrush."

Among the loud noises we have

expressions denoting the voice of thunder, in a few places. We read of "The ocean with its solemn noise," of "all the everlasting cataracts," and of "The voice of chasms hoarse with loud tormented streams." A softer sound greets our ears when we read of "the murmuring sound of waves." We hear the weird sound of the wind when we read of the "roaring in the bleak-grown pines."

Among the sounds of voices, we read of "sighs as mournful as that of Memnon's harp." We read of "songs of misery," and in contrast with these we read of "rapturous and hurried notes." A horrible sound is pictured to us in the few lines referring to the entrance of the God, into Hyperion's magnificent palace.

"He entered, but he entered full of wrath,
His flaming robes streamed out beyond his heels,
And gave a roar, as if of earthly fire,
That scared away the meek ethereal hours
And made their dove-wings tremble."

In "Hyperion," various other sounds are indicated, as the sound of "sweeping vestments over fallen leaves," the "dull echo of shells," while here and there the poet speaks of noises that

reach the pitch of a roar, a shout or a yell.

The expressions of silence in this poem are few. In the description of old Saturn sitting almost lifeless in that quiet vale, we feel the silence when we read the expressions "no stir of air" and "a brook went voiceless by." In another part of the poem we read of "the voiceless chasms and gulfs." Hyperion is pictured in one place as standing in silence with his hands pressed together.

Keats' miscellaneous poems, also, go to prove that he was indeed a lover of sound. Among the expressions of musical sounds, we find in his poem "A Prophecy" a passage predicting that a little child would come, who, with his fingers on the strings of a lyre would "paddle a little tune." Keats was sensitive to different varieties of music. In these miscellaneous poems we read of "dancing music," "music sad," "music that dies and swells," music in a "song of love," and words so musical that they seem to come through bubbling honey. There is a "soft lute," "the thrill of trumpets," "the clear trumpet's blow," and "clamors that ring from every spire." He

seem to hear "the sound of bells," and "little harps touched," as we read these short poems.

In Keats' sonnet, "To Byron," he writes, —
 "how sweetly sad Thy melody." In this same poem we find the expression, — "Still warble, dying swan!" In the sonnet, "To Chatterton," Keats refers to him thus, —

"How soon that voice, majestic and elate,
 Melted in dying numbers!"

Again in the same sonnet, the passage, —

"Thou sweetly suggest; nought Thy hymning ^{mares}
 Above the ingrate world and human fears."

In the poem, "On Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair," Keats must have been touched by the sight as is shown in the part of the poem, where he speaks of sounds melodious, being offered up to this loved, poet. —

"Who to Thy sacred and ennobled hearse,
 Would offer a burnt sacrifice of verse
 And melody."

How melodious are the first few lines of the next verse, —

"How heavenward Thou soundest!
 Live Temple of sweet noise,
 And discord unconfoundest,

Giving delight new joys."

In other poems we read of the sounds of shrill pipes and clarions, of "plaintive anthems," "haunting music," and "faery song." He tells us of "the music of autumn," of "shadows numberless singing of summer."

In Keats' short poems, we find his appreciation of animal voices no less, than in his longer poems. We read of "the flocks a-bleating," "the lambs loud bleat," and "the heifers lows," The "tiger's yell" and the "serpents hissing."

He does not forget the birds in his short poems for "The swallows twitter," the hedge-cricket sing and the lark raises its voice at the dawn of day.

Human voices are heard in "a sweet moan," "an oath," "a giggle" and a "merry laugh." We hear "shuffling feet" and the "still foot fall;" a "sleety whistle," the "bubbling of a brook" and the "muttering of a tempest."

The expressions of silence in these shorter poems are few; but how significant are the following quotations from various poems. "low voices that are not heard," "all was gloomy

and silent," "The sounds fled," "the bells had ceased,"
 "no birds sing" and "the rocks were silent."

In reading of the urn in Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn," one can not but realize the significant silence of the urn throughout the entire poem. The urn is thus described in the opening lines of the poem, —

"Thou still unravished 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."

— — — — —
 "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
 Are sweeter; therefore ye soft lutes play on;
 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone."

— — — — —
 "And little town, thy streets forever more
 Will silent be; and not a sound to tell
 Why thou art desolate, can ever return."

— — — — —
 "Thou silent form!

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou sayest,
 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' — That is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

It is difficult to conceive of a poet of nature, whose eyes and ears are not ever open to the beauty of her sounds, and the power of her silence; and now after careful study we believe it would be difficult to find among the long list of English poets, one who has given us through his poetry, such a large number and variety of sounds and silence as the great English poet, John Keats.