

The Medical Student hidden in the Poet

Poisonous flowers in the works of Keats

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1. Introduction

Reading a poem by John Keats can make the reader feel like walking through a garden. The reader is surrounded by nature's beauty, the scent of flowers, and the sight and sound of animals. It should come as no surprise that Keats, the poet of beauty, included an abundance of references to flowers and animals in his writings. But why exactly did he choose these elements of the natural world for his works? We can presume that Keats did not select the specified plants and flowers in his poems by accident, given that he received medical training before becoming a poet. If we take this into account, the complexity of his works can be more fully appreciated and understood. The flowers, which look beautiful, and enticing can be poisonous or, on the contrary, have a beneficial effect on the human body. Moreover, beside the botanical background of flowers, it is important to consider the cultural and literary significance of some flower and other symbols of the works because it can also have a huge effect on the analysis since Keats relied on both the classical and the English tradition in this respect. Hellenism had a significant influence on Keats's works, even though he did not know the Greek language. Greek mythology has numerous myths about flowers and people turning into them that were familiar to Keats. Along with Hellenism, Keats was largely inspired by classical literature, both English and Latin, such as the works of John Milton, Shakespeare, Ovid, Virgil, and Edmund Spenser. The flowers mentioned in his works can also be found in the works of these authors.

In this paper, I would like to interpret and analyse in depth the botanical background and symbolism of the flowers and plants in Keats' selected works, especially the ones in *The Great Odes*. I will pay special attention to the effects of these aspects of nature on human health considering that Keats was a medical student before he became a poet. Ultimately, the goal is to establish an overlapping image of the botanical background and flower symbolism, taking into account the fact that he very probably knew about the effects of these plants on human wellbeing. If he knew the effects of these flowers, why did he choose mostly poisonous ones for his works? Also, are the effects and symbolism of the flowers connected to each other? Studying how Keats's medical knowledge informs and interacts with his poetical technique may enrich our understanding of the flower's usage in *The Great Odes*.

*"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," — that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."*¹

But what is the truth behind the beautiful poisonous flowers in the works of Keats?

¹ Wright, Paul, editor. *The Complete Poems of John Keats*. Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994, pp. 222.

2. Medical Student

John Keats can be considered one of the greatest Romantic poets. His short life was tragic; his parents died early, and the Keats children were left to two guardians, the principal one being Richard Abbey, who was a thriving city figure, an accomplished tea trader, a churchwarden, and a participant in several esteemed organizations within the City of London. He was astute and somewhat spiteful but was fairly diligent, even though lacking creativity in fulfilling his responsibilities as a guardian.²

His brother, George, had agreed to Abbey's request that he enter his counting house, but Keats had other plans. He was engaged in literature from a young age, and translating the *Aeneid* would have suggested a career in education or even anything related to the book trade, such as publishing, but none of these alternatives were pursued. He opted to pursue a medical career. It may be claimed that a certain physical knowledge was part of every gentleman's education, and Keats was only pleasing Abbey by continuing his career until he could determine the true path of his blossoming competencies. Regardless of how closely these ideas align with the experiences of young John Keats, he appears to have taken medicine seriously, as evidenced by the fact that he not only completed his apprenticeship but also went on to Guy's Hospital to get his Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries.³

Before studying in Guy's Hospital, he was aware of what to anticipate and came to terms with it as a necessary evil, a means of easing misery. Keats enrolled at Guy's for a period of one year. This indicated his goal of becoming a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons and achieving Licentiate status with the Society of Apothecaries.⁴ “At the time Keats registered as a student, teaching was split between St Thomas' and Guy's. Anatomy and surgical teaching were the major strengths of St Thomas' whereas midwifery, medicine and therapeutics were taught at Guy's.” Keats participated in classes on anatomy, physiology, and surgery. Henry Cline and the renowned Astley Cooper were the ones who conducted the anatomy and surgery lectures. Keats devoted himself to his studies while also making time to pursue his passion for

² Hillas Smith. “John Keats: Poet, Patient, Physician.” *Reviews of Infectious Diseases*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1984, pp. 390–404. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4453349>. Accessed 23 Sept. 2024.

³ Hillas Smith. “John Keats: Poet, Patient, Physician.” *Reviews of Infectious Diseases*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1984, pp. 390–404. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4453349>. Accessed 23 Sept. 2024.

⁴ Lord Evans of Hungershall. “Keat: The Man, Medicine And Poetry.” *The British Medical Journal*, vol. 3, no. 5661, 1969, pp. 7–11. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20376879>. Accessed 23 Sept. 2024.

poetry. He observed hospital life with the perspective of a poet and later incorporated imagery from his time there into *Endymion* and *Hyperion*.⁵

Being left alone in the year 1816 at St. Thomas's Street, work became of primary importance for Keats. In March, he started working as a dresser in the hospital. "The duties of a dresser included attending rounds with the surgeon, taking notes of patients and operations and carrying the plaster-box. In addition, the dresser would take turns to be resident in hospital a week at a time acting as house surgeon and performing minor operations in emergencies."⁶ Given the state of surgical knowledge at the time, one surgeon at Guy's accomplished all of this with legendary competence. He was Astley Cooper, and 12 of his lectures are preserved in a notebook summarized by Keats.

Astley Cooper became interested in Keats and entrusted him to his own dresser. Keats appreciated Cooper's expertise and surgical work, but he was unable to continue under the influence of the great Cooper. Keats worked as a dresser for William Lucas, a very skilled surgeon's son; however, Lucas Junior only acquired his father's name. "As Robert Gittings writes: *"He put students off surgery, not as has been suggested because he was dull, but because he was dangerous; the person most to appreciate the danger was his own dresser, left to clear up the mess he had made."*⁷ And who was this dresser? John Keats.

The devotion to poetry and literature was already in Keats, but the things he saw as the dresser of William Lucas and how he operated led him away from medicine. Probably the fear of failure was a bigger factor than literature in itself in Keats' decision to quit medical school. As a result, Keats's final session with Abbey took place in the late autumn of 1816. It is easy to imagine how shocked Keats's guardian must have been to learn that he was planning to give up on his medical career. For a young man who had no parents or an older companion to guide him, it was an incredibly lonely time.

⁵ Banerjee, Arpan K. *John Keats: His Medical Student Years at the United Hospitals of Guy's and St Thomas' 1815-1816*, Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine, vol. 82., October 1989., pp. 620-621. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1292341/pdf/jrsocmed00145-0058.pdf. Accessed 23 Sept. 2024.

⁶ Banerjee, Arpan K. *John Keats: His Medical Student Years at the United Hospitals of Guy's and St Thomas' 1815-1816*, Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine, vol. 82., October 1989., pp. 620-621. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1292341/pdf/jrsocmed00145-0058.pdf. Accessed 23 Sept. 2024.

⁷ Lord Evans of Hungershall. "Keat: The Man, Medicine And Poetry." *The British Medical Journal*, vol. 3, no. 5661, 1969, pp. 7–11. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20376879>. Accessed 1 Oct. 2024.

3. The Odes

The fact that John Keats was a medical student may help us comprehend how he came to be regarded as one of the greatest poets of the Romantic Era. For how is it possible for a young man who witnessed so much suffering and sickness to produce such beauty in his poetry? In his works, he perfectly combines two worlds: the real one he lived in and the idyllic one he wanted to exist in. In his poetry, both worlds contain feelings of love and pain, just as in his life. The reader experiences these emotions while moving between the real and idyllic worlds Keats created for his works.

Beyond Keats's themes of love and death, the reader may be drawn to another aspect that reflects both of his "selves" as a medical student and a poet: "The legacy of his professional training, and he never entirely abandoned thoughts of a medical career can clearly be seen in his poems (in his use of imagery derived from contemporary medical theories and practice, for example in the odes 'On a Grecian Urn' and 'To Psyche'), and in the figure of Apollo, who, he found a god who was both doctor and poet, and through whom he could explore the idea of poetry as alternative therapy..."⁸ Medicine and poetry are two very different professions, but the aforementioned two worlds may have met in his poems in just this way; the horrors of the real world of medicine mixed with the beauty of poetry.

"It was Keats the 'fault finder' who chose not to sit his surgical examinations in February 1817 in order to see through the press his first collection of poems, called *Poems*, which was published in March."⁹ Several of them were composed during Keats's medical school years, and their indulgence in sensual imagination, classical mythology, and a sort of technicolour natural world have often been seen as a naive, if necessary, diversion from Keats's everyday observations. Despite this, just two years later, in 1819, we witness great creative year in Keats's life. This year, he wrote six odes which are his most-regarded poems and are called The Great Odes.¹⁰ These works can be interpreted and analysed in many ways due to their richness in content and imagery. Every ode gives the reader a different perspective on art and life and presents a topic in its own way.

In *Ode to Psyche*, the myth of the goddess comes to life while the reader becomes familiar with the theme of love and the human soul. The *Ode on Melancholy* beautifully shows the darker side of life and that these sad aspects are an inevitable accompaniment to the life of a

⁸ Wright, Paul, editor. *The Complete Poems of John Keats*. Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994, pp. viii.

⁹ Wright, Paul, editor. *The Complete Poems of John Keats*. Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994, pp. x.

¹⁰ VanDoren, George W., "A study of the odes of John Keats" (1971). *Theses and Dissertations*. 3901. <https://preserve.lehigh.edu/etd/3901> Accessed 5 Oct. 2024.

human. *To Autumn* glorifies the season's harvest and abundance, capturing the beauty of the moment, whilst the reader can feel the magic of its passing. Art is the only thing that can give humanity a piece of immortality, so *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, deals with the conundrum of everlasting art, life, and death. *Ode to a Nightingale* presents similar themes in the image of immortality. Even though the bird will pass away (just like humans) its song will remain in eternity.

Keats frequently incorporated aspects of nature into his odes. For instance, he used the appearance of numerous animals, mythological creatures, and most importantly for my paper; flowers. As a result of his studies, we can assume that he knew the effects of these flowers on human health and used them deliberately. Additionally, he was influenced by works in the classical and British poetic tradition, that also included flowers.

In the interpretation of a single poem, all these aspects may be involved which enhances the richness of his poetry. In my view, the theme of death is connected to his medical studies, while the theme of beauty to his artistic side. But if the idyllic world he created in his works is moving around the theme of beauty, why did he use mostly poisonous flowers in them? And how do these flowers fit into the atmosphere created in the poems? Furthermore, how do the toxic plants in each poem change—do they become more poisonous or not? If yes, what would be the reason? The goal is to examine the odes not in chronological order, but in order of the quantity and effects of the poisonous flowers. Moreover, determine the effects of the flowers not only on the human body but also on the poem itself.

"Between the end of April and the beginning of June 1819, John Keats wrote the spring odes that ultimately made his name and fame: and they include, in the common order, *Ode to Psyche*, *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *Ode on Melancholy*, and *Ode on Indolence*."¹¹ Given that the spring odes' compositional sequence changes based on authority, I will begin my analysis with the sixth ode, *To Autumn* because beside its vivid natural imagery, and it has one poisonous flower but it is extremely harmful to the human health.

¹¹ Plumly, Stanley. "The Odes for Their Own Sake." *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2011, pp. 161–66. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41304700>. Accessed 6 Oct. 2024.

3.1. To Autumn

Early in 1815, while working as an apprentice surgeon and apothecary, Keats wrote his first ode. “Addressed to Apollo, it imagines bards singing in the western sky, Shakespeare and Milton among them, their lyres strung with the rays of the setting sun.”¹² He wrote eleven more in the years that followed, five of which are called as The Great Odes of 1819, and he wrote *To Autumn* later in that year. The poem is focused on the season, as the title also implies, and it conjures up an appealing vision of the beauty of nature. Autumn signifies the conclusion of the growing season, which makes its richness acceptable. This time of thriving coexists with the nearing presence of death, as the canopy of the trees will soon drop, and crops will be gathered as the next season, winter's coming. This does not make the beauty of autumn less; instead, it implies that beauty is even more striking in the fleeting moments before it fades away. The beauty of autumn is somewhat concealed by the equal significance of life and death. The poem depicts death as a sort of peaceful repose at the end of a period of great activity. In order to achieve this, the speaker compares the cycle of day turning into night and the more general annual shift into winter to falling asleep.

In the opening lines of the third stanza, *"Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they? / Think not of them, thou hast thy music too, — / While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,"*¹³ (Keats, lines 23-25) the speaker tells the personalised autumn that do not think about the past, rather appreciate and focus on now. Therefore, the poem implies that a profound appreciation of the past and future also results from accepting the present in a slightly contradictory way. Moreover, the poem celebrates this specific moment; it also acknowledges that fall marks the conclusion of a lengthy journey of development and maturity. This could imply that life follows a similar pattern; one experiences many trials before reaching the final destination. However, despite autumn symbolizing death and the end of nature with fading flowers, why is it still so lovely? Perhaps it is since in nature, it is merely a change, and in the springtime, it comes back to life once again. Or it can be connected to the sole toxic flower, which is also beautiful and mentioned in the poem, the poppy, which has the potential to induce extreme slumber or fatality. Such as autumn; the poppy is also a beautiful phenomenon, but just as autumn is a symbol of death, the poppy can actually be deadly for humans.

¹² Wolfson, Susan J., editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 86.

¹³ Wright, Paul, editor. *The Complete Poems of John Keats*. Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994, pp. 232.

3.1.1. Papaver rhoeas

The practice of using medicinal plants for healing dates to the beginning of humanity. The link between humans and their quest for natural drugs has been present since ancient times, as evidenced by written records, ancient monuments, and traditional plant remedies. “Ever since ancient times, in search for rescue for their disease, the people looked for drugs in nature. In view of the fact that at the time there was not sufficient information either concerning the reasons for the illnesses or concerning which plant and how it could be utilized as a cure, everything was based on experience.”¹⁴ “The oldest written evidence of medicinal plants’ usage for preparation of drugs comprised 12 recipes for drug preparation referring to over 250 various plants, some of them alkaloid such as poppy, henbane, and mandrake.”¹⁵ The beginning of the 19th century marked a pivotal moment in the understanding and utilization of medicinal plants. The initiation of scientific pharmacy started with the identification, validation, and separation of alkaloids from poppy and other plants, followed by the isolation of glycosides.¹⁶ Tea made from poppy (*Papaver rhoeas* L.) was once used to treat coughs. Poisoning symptoms may emerge during tea ingestion, manifesting as fatigue and narcosis. Animals can also suffer from poisoning; toxins are secreted in their milk, so they can cause secondary poisoning.¹⁷ Given the poisonous effects of the poppy, why is this flower in the ode? Keats also used the poppy in another of his works called *The Fall of Hyperion* subtitled *A Dream*. The reader can meet the plant in Canto I. of the work:

“*Stood a cool vessel of transparent juice
Sipp'd by the wander'd bee, the which I took,
And, pledging all the mortals of the world,
And all the dead whose names are on our lips,
Drank. That full draught is parent of my theme.
No Asian poppy nor elixir fine
Of the soon-fading jealous Caliphat;
No poison gender'd in close monkish cell,*”¹⁸ (Keats, lines 42-49)

The text says that the 'transparent juice' is not an Asian poppy or a poison, yet this plant is toxic to the human body. Presumably, not only Keats was aware of this, but also Shakespeare, who had a great influence on the poet, since the poppy is mentioned in one of his works (in *Othello*)

¹⁴ Petrovska, Biljana Bauer. “Historical review of medicinal plants' usage.” *Pharmacognosy reviews* vol. 6,11 (2012): 1-5. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3358962/> Accessed 17 Nov. 2024.

¹⁵ Kelly, Kate, *The History of Medicine - Early Civilizations: Prehistoric Times to 500 C. E.*, New York, Facts On File, Inc., 2009, pp. 29-50.

¹⁶ Petrovska, Biljana Bauer. “Historical review of medicinal plants' usage.” *Pharmacognosy reviews* vol. 6,11 (2012): 1-5. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3358962/> Accessed 17 Nov. 2024.

¹⁷ Marczal, Gabriella. “Izokinolinvázas alkaloidok.” *Mérgező Növények, Növényi Mérgezések*, Semmelweis Kiadó, Budapest, 2008, pp. 100.

¹⁸ Wright, Paul, editor. *The Complete Poems of John Keats*. Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994, pp. 422.

and there is a reference to the flower's effect on a human: "*Not poppy nor mandragora / Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world*" (*Othello*, Act III.). One consequence of consuming poppy is actually drowsiness, which can lead to death when consumed in large amounts. The text also refers to another toxic plant named 'mandragora', which is the same as the lethal mandrake. "Shakespeare may indeed have read some of the herbals that were available before he wrote most of his plays. Banckes' *Herbal* went through 20 known editions between 1525 and 1560, and it was popular in London. Yet Shakespeare's botanical concepts maintain the spirit of the English countryside; he knew folk plant lore from his childhood in Warwickshire."¹⁹ If the harmful characteristics of the poppy were widely recognized, how could it be depicted in a poem celebrating nature's beauty and richness?

"In addition to Keats's poetic imagery, the coma-producing state of the strongly characterised poisonous herbs helped him with his personal self-imagery, differentiating between the creative and the pedantically rationalising intellectual powers."²⁰ Furthermore, the "drowsiness" effect and the deadly quality of the plant fits the concept of the poem: the poppy is both beautiful and deadly - it symbolises the beauty of autumn, but also the temporary death of nature. Since, there is no human being mentioned in the poem, death is only depicted through nature alone. It is placed in a natural setting and portrayed as a result of wealth, plenty, and fulfilment. The poem portrays death as beautiful not just due to these reasons, but also because it happens gradually and without suffering. The term '*soft*' is mentioned three times in the ode, indicating that death will not be harsh towards nature, but rather enhance its beauty.

The speaker tells the season that instead of the faded songs of the past, it should focus on its own attributes and tunes heading towards the end of the ode. Autumn also possesses precious features; even if it is fading away now, for instance, its wildlife is still around, and the melodies and scents of autumn can still be keen on. As a result, the poem suggests to the reader that we can appreciate what we have right now and find beauty in the passing. In this manner, fading will be gentle and soft, and we must embrace it as nature does. Furthermore, the theme of death and passing away is not only about nature, since *To Autumn* is the last of Keats's Great Odes, so not only nature is "over" in a sense, but the Odes also come to an end.

¹⁹ Edward Tabor. "Plant Poisons in Shakespeare." *Economic Botany*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1970, pp. 81–94. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4253115>. Accessed 17 Nov. 2024.

²⁰ Evans, Gareth. "Poison Wine — John Keats and the Botanic Pharmacy." *The Keats-Shelley Review*, 16 (2002): 48.

3.2. Ode to a Nightingale

In the *Ode to a Nightingale*, the narrator starts by conveying his own sadness. He feels indifferent, as though he had only just taken a substance. He recognizes a nightingale chirping in the woods and explains that his sense of fatigue is not from envy of the bird's delight but because he is filled with joy that the nightingale is performing the summer tune from a concealed spot among the trees. As it flies around and rests in a tree, this bird continues to sing its melancholic tune, attaching Keats and the reader to the concepts of immortality. The aspect of the poem that represents death and nature is the nightingale. Keats even compares the bird to a "light-winged Dryad of the trees," creating an atmosphere both supernatural and natural.

A poet who inspired Keats also wrote a poem about the nightingale, who is none other than John Milton. For Milton, the nightingale is a symbol of pure beauty from the divine sphere, unspoiled by earthly impurities, but for Keats, the nightingale is a symbol of everlasting beauty that stands in contrast to the fleeting nature of human life, sparking desire in the speaker. Both poems explore the concept of beauty and art, but Keats focuses more on human experiences such as mortality and the quest for transcendence; on the other hand, Milton's nightingale is portrayed as a more idealized and divine being. Besides the similarities between the two poems, there is a striking difference; Milton does not mention flowers, while Keats does, and they are even poisonous ones.

3.2.1. Conium Maculatum

At the beginning of the first stanza, the theme of oblivion and immortality is introduced, and the first plant is also mentioned. "*My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pain, / My sense, as though of **hemlock** I had drunk,*" (Keats, lines 1-2). The interesting thing about the first two lines is that Keats wrote: "*as though of hemlock I had drunk*", so he did not drink it, but it seems like he knew what it can do to the human body. This is particularly intriguing because the plant is extremely toxic to humans and can cause symptoms like those Keats lists in the opening line. Furthermore, this is not the only work by Keats in which hemlock appears. For instance, he sets the scene where Pan loses Syrinx in *Endymion* by using the distinctive growth of hemlock:

*And through whole solemn hours dost sit, and hearken
The dreary melody of bedded reeds –
In desolate places, where dank moisture breeds
The pipy hemlock to strange overgrowth;
Bethinking thee, how melancholy loth²¹ (Keats, lines 238-242)*

²¹ Wright, Paul, editor. *The Complete Poems of John Keats*. Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994, pp. 67.

The most widely advised use of hemlock by the time of Keats's studies seems to have been as a narcotic, classification that would place it on the same level with opium. "As a medicine the Conium stands in high repute for its sedative and alternative properties, and the effect which it has in lowering the pulse renders it a valuable remedy in certain cases, though too dangerous in its misuse to be administered by and other than the experienced practitioner." Hemlock and 'opiate' are mentioned together in the ode's opening lines, reflecting the numerous similarities between these two drugs in modern literature. The reference is far more literal, though, when the two are physically and textually coupled together.²² Yet, how can the reader more effectively imagine this plant and its impact on human health?

"The Hemlock is a tall plant, sometimes six feet high, and its hollow shining stem is marked with purplish red spots. Its beautiful leaves are finely divided, and on long stalks, and the clusters of flowers are very numerous, expanding in June and July." The root smells just like parsnep, and it has an extremely unpleasant scent, especially when bruised. The leaves and seeds are more potent than the roots, making it a deadly toxin. The plant can be found growing close to walls, in waste grounds, and in hedges. While it is widespread in several areas, it is uncommon in others.²³ And despite its beautiful appearance, it is highly poisonous. At the beginning of *Conium maculatum* L. poisoning, symptoms, a burning sensation develops in the mouth and throat, visual disturbances occur, weakness in the legs and sweating. In the case of ingestion of larger amounts of toxins, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea also occur initially. Then there is the typical, bottom-up paralysis, which starts in the legs and spreads through the arms to the facial muscles. The cause of death is respiratory paralysis. Consciousness remains throughout. In case of survival, muscle weakness and certain paralysis phenomena may remain.²⁴

The illustration in the sixth stanza of the ode about 'easeful Death' and the lines "*To cease upon the midnight with no pain, / While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad / In such an ecstasy!*" (Keats, lines 56-58) are not much different from the mentioned references, especially when it comes to providing relief from chronic pain during sleep. "Although hemlock and opium are offered as alternatives in the poem, the image of pain-free death becomes more literal when hemlock and opium are compounded together. Much has been written on the Romantics

²² Evans, Gareth. "Poison Wine — John Keats and the Botanic Pharmacy." *The Keats-Shelley Review*, 16 (2002): 44-45.

²³ Pratt, Anne. *Poisonous, noxious, and suspected plants, of our fields and woods*, London, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1866, pp. 6.

²⁴ Marczal, Gabriella. "Piridin/Piperidin alkaloidok." *Mérgező Növények, Növényi Mérgezések*, Semmelweis Kiadó, Budapest, 2008, pp. 95-96.

and the use of opium. As a medicinal drug it was readily available. Although it was, and still is (in the form of morphine and diamorphine, or heroin) one of the best of painkillers, problems of its casual use were well known.”²⁵

However, the use of hemlock, not only in a pharmacological way but also in literature, dates back in time. For instance, to the Elizabethan era, it was used by an author who had a big impact on Keats. Shakespeare mentioned hemlock in a few of his works (for instance, *King Lear*; *Macbeth*). In *Macbeth*, the roots of hemlock are used by the witches among other ingredients and animal parts. The text does not explicitly state that hemlock is poisonous, but the context suggests to the experienced reader, despite a medical background, that it is a poison, especially because it is used by witches. “In Shakespeare's presentation of the witches we can naturally trace the influence of Elizabethan belief, since the Elizabethans also regarded witches as men or women who had made the link, the so-called "pact" or "contract," with evil powers.”²⁶

All these elements can be associated with the ode as it brings together the supernatural and the natural world. The witches and nightingales are both most active during the night, linking the two works through their connection to darkness. It is important to remember that the first line of the fifth stanza in the ode, “*I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,*” (Keats, lines 41) alludes to “blindness” (thus reintroducing darkness in the poem), which could also indicate hemlock poisoning. The turning point of the poem comes when the nightingale flies away. This is the beginning of a certain “blindness” that is not only the result of darkness (or possible hemlock poisoning), but also of the absence of the nightingale and the fear of being forgotten. The speaker would fade away with his nightingale: “*And with thee fade away into the forest dim: / Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget.*” (Keats, lines 20-21) he even thinks that this time would be perfect for Death to come for him: “*Now more than ever seems it rich to die, / To cease upon the midnight with no pain,*” (Keats, lines 64-65). The expression “with no pain” holds significance as the speaker mentions feeling ‘drowsy numbness’ at the start of the poem and expresses a strong desire for alcohol in the second stanza. Alcohol, similar to hemlock, is a type of drug that can cause a person to lose consciousness, linking to the theme of ‘fading away’ in the ode. However, the speaker is not interested in becoming intoxicated; rather, he seeks purity and beauty, and it is this desire that drives his fascination with the nightingale's enchanting melody.

²⁵ Evans, Gareth. “Poison Wine — John Keats and the Botanic Pharmacy.” *The Keats-Shelley Review*, 16 (2002): 45.

²⁶ Tonge, Mildred. “Black Magic and Miracles in Macbeth.” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1932, pp. 234–46. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27703622>. Accessed 17 Nov. 2024.

All in all, *Ode to a Nightingale* delves into the connection between two distinct forms of beauty: the artistic creations of humans and the diverse life forms found in nature. The poem wonders if nature, symbolized by the nightingale and its song, embodies a beauty superior to anything created by humans, a beauty that is somehow more pristine and everlasting. The question is pondered by the speaker throughout the poem, yet no clear solution is discovered in the end. The poet, along with his poem and its story, resembles the nightingale; he has crafted a beauty and a tale that is eternal, similar to the nightingale's song. But then why would a plant as poisonous as hemlock be included in the poem?

The 'drowsy numbness' and craving for alcohol at the beginning of the poem is related to the 'blurred vision' from hemlock poisoning, but at the end of the poem the speaker seems to regain consciousness: "*Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music: - Do I wake or sleep?*" (Keats, lines 79-80). As he did not consume alcohol or hemlock poison, it can be assumed that what really intoxicated the speaker was the nightingale's song and the pleasure and happiness it gave him. He seems to believe that he could only feel such happiness and beauty in his dreams, but he discovered he could also experience it through nature and its gifts such as nightingales. This could also apply to his medical education, as he refused to consume hemlock due to knowing its effects, and to Keats' artistic side, as creating art brought him joy instead of drinking alcohol. Thus, in this poem, the themes of beauty and death intertwine once more through two sides of Keats: the death, which he learned and saw during his medical studies (hemlock poisoning), and which poetry offered him in the beauty and happiness he found when he became a poet.

"The attention-grabbing opening of the Nightingale ode has been referenced to Keats's contemporary reading of Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). Not that precisely though, as a section of fourteen pages covers the cures of wine and opium to deaden 'painful melancholy' in this erudite book. In fact, Burton's 'natural history' of melancholy has a considerable amount of 'Pharmaceutice' within it. His lists of 'seeds, spices, herbs, roots' would have reminded Keats of his apprenticeship, and it give witness to us of the historic use of henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*), mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*) and deadly nightshade to procure sleep."²⁷ In addition to the fact that these plants can be found in other works of Keats, they also make cultural references, as they were used in ancient times, and also appear in works that influenced the poet.

²⁷ Evans, Gareth. "Poison Wine — John Keats and the Botanic Pharmacy." *The Keats-Shelley Review*, 16 (2002): 46.

3.3. Ode on Melancholy

The last ode in this paper is *Ode on Melancholy* because, in contrast to its short length, this one is the richest in terms of the quantity and intensity of the poisonous flowers. There are flowers that are harmful for human health, even in the first stanza. Some examples include wolf's-bane, yew berries, and the "ruby grape of Proserpine." Moreover, the poem stands out for its dark atmosphere compared to the rest, touching upon themes of melancholy, intoxication, and beauty, as the presence of toxic flowers intensifies this grim atmosphere. Melancholy, as a condition, is a form of sadness (depression nowadays) and Keats wrote several times about it in his letters, but I would like to highlight one of the most important, which suggests that he himself suffered from it: *"I have been writing a little now and then lately: but nothing to speak of—being discontented and as it were moulting. Yet I do not think I shall ever come to the rope or the Pistol, for after a day or two's melancholy, although I smoke more and more my own insufficiency—I see by little and little more of what is to be done, and how it is to be done, should I ever be able to do it."*²⁸ As Keats wrote in the letter, even if he is in this state, he will not commit any final reckless: *"Yet I do not think I shall ever come to the rope or the Pistol"*. This echoes in the first stanza of the poem, when the speaker says: *"No, no! go not to Lethe, neither twist / Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;"*²⁹ (Keats, lines 1-2). No matter how sad and desperate a person can be, do not resort to harmful things or escape into oblivion (this is connected to the river Lethe, which in Greek mythology is a river of the Underworld and would cause oblivion if a person would drink from its water). Additionally, the first flower is mentioned in these lines, with Keats explicitly stating that it is toxic.

3.3.1. Aconitum napellus

The first flower that appears in the poem is wolf's-bane and Keats refers to its poisonousness in the poem: *"neither twist Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine"* (Keats, lines 1-2). Wolf's-bane have numerous names and species during the ages and most of them are poisonous. The plant goes by the names of monkshood or wolf's bane in English. "This is the most virulent of all native plants; all parts being poisonous. Even the scent of its flowers is unwholesome, and the dust on its anthers will, if it touches the eyes, cause pain and inflammation, while any portion of the Monkshood, if handled when the skin is torn, causes pain in the limbs and fainting. Illness has arisen from eating but a small piece of the leaf; and

²⁸ John Keats' letter to Benjamin Robert Haydon, Wentworth Place, between January 7 and 14, 1819. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/35698/35698-h/35698-h.htm#LXXXVIII> Accessed 18 Nov. 2024.

²⁹ Wright, Paul, editor. *The Complete Poems of John Keats*. Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994, pp. 233.

several persons have died by mistaking the root for horseradish.”³⁰ “According to modern studies, consumption of only 2mg of pure aconitine, or 1g of the plant itself, is enough to lead to a life-threatening condition. Moreover, the activation of aconitine poisoning appears not only after consumption, but also after dermal contact. In this case, it may impair the functioning of the nervous system, though this is unlikely to be fatal.”³¹

Considering the influence of Hellenism on Keats, it is not surprising that this plant can be drawn back to ancient times, for example to Greece, where they used this flower's poison for hunting. Furthermore, this plant also makes an appearance in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* book VI, where the three-headed hound Cerberus - the Underworld's guardian - makes an appearance. Wolf's bane is described as a toxic plant in this text as well, causing: “*wandering delusions, the oblivion of a clouded mind, wickedness, weeping, mad rage, and a love of slaughter, all these in a compound mix.*”³² This is interesting because the effects of monkshood poisoning are similar to those of a person can experience during a melancholic state. But the poisonous properties of the plant are not only revealed in Ovid's work, but again Shakespeare used this flower for his works. It is referenced in *Henry IV*, but the key point is the potential poisoning of Hamlet with this plant. Hamlet passes away in just "half an hour" and that is sufficient time for the poison to take effect and cause death. “Gerarde describes the symptoms of oral ingestion of Aconite arrow poison, as a conceivably similar to the symptoms of the sword poison: *The symptoms that followe those that do eate of these deadly herbes are these; their lips and toongs swell forthwith, their eies hang out, their thighs are stiffe, and their wits are taken from them... if the point of darts or arrows be touched with the same, it bringeth deadly hurt to those that be wounded therewith.*”³³ In this regard, Keats was well aware of the wolf's bane's toxic and lethal qualities due to his experience as a medical student as well as his literary reads.

Interestingly, Keats did not first use this plant for his ode, but another equally poisonous plant: "it was not Keats's first choice as the original manuscript of the ode survives. From this we can see that Keats had in mind the poisonous medicines, as he begins the second line with 'henbane'. Henbane has had a history of attempted anaesthesia intermittently for centuries... Mixed with the juices of mandrake and opium, it either put you into death-like sleep or a sleep

³⁰ Pratt, Anne. *Poisonous, noxious, and suspected plants, of our fields and woods*, London, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1866, pp. 2.

³¹ Jagusiak, Krzysztof and Konrad Tadaajczyk. “Aconite – a Poison, or a Medicine? Ancient and Early Byzantine Testimonies.” *Studia Ceranea. Journal of the Waldemar Ceran Research Centre for the History and Culture of the Mediterranean Area and South-East Europe*, 2022, pp. 120.

³² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by Johnston, Ian, Canada, Vancouver Island University, 2011, 128.

³³ Edward Tabor. “Plant Poisons in Shakespeare.” *Economic Botany*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1970, pp. 81–94. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4253115>. Accessed 18 Nov. 2024.

that was in fact death. However, appealing the images of henbane were to Keats, poetry is about words. We see in the manuscript that henbane is struck out in favour of 'wolfs-bane', having a more suitable resonance."³⁴ But what could be behind this exchange? This would not have changed the mood of the poem, because the original plant would be also poisonous. According to Salisbury, the term came from the deaths of wolves that consumed it while searching for more succulent roots. Keats appears to notice this and concentrates on a trait unique to this species. The Latin word's adjective "napellus" refers to a small turnip, an illusion of its root's shape, and an otherwise obscure characteristic that the poet reveals to us he was familiar with—or at least with its Linnaean name.³⁵ As for the origin of the name of the flower, it fits into the world Keats created in his Great Odes because in these poems he mixes, among other things, the elements of the natural and supernatural worlds, the relationship between beauty and death, and also makes cultural references.

3.3.2. *Atropa belladonna*

Not long after, another flower appears called *nightshade* in the poem: "*Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd / By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;*"³⁶ (Keats, lines 3-4). The name *Atropa belladonna*³⁷, which describes this species, comes from the women who enjoyed using the plant's extract to make their eyes appear lovely and wide-pupiled throughout the Middle Ages.³⁸ "This plant is not common; it grows in some hedges and on waste places. It is as tall as a shrub but has not a woody stem. Its leaves are very large and generally in pairs, one of each pair being smaller than the other. The juicy glossy fruits ripen in September. They are about as large as cherries and have a sweetish flavour. Three or four of these berries will cause a sleep which is succeeded by death, and many children have died from eating them. Every part of the plant is poisonous, and it should never be used as a remedy in any way, but by medical advice."³⁹

Again, this flower reappears in the case of Shakespeare because there is a potential that in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Atropa belladonna*, often known as "The Sleeping Nightshade," was an

³⁴ Evans, Gareth. "Poison Wine — John Keats and the Botanic Pharmacy." *The Keats-Shelley Review*, 16 (2002): 51-52.

³⁵ Evans, Gareth. "Poison Wine — John Keats and the Botanic Pharmacy." *The Keats-Shelley Review*, 16 (2002): 52.

³⁶ Wright, Paul, editor. *The Complete Poems of John Keats*. Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994, pp. 233.

³⁷ It means *beautiful woman* in Italian.

³⁸ Marczał, Gabriella. "Tropán-Alkaloidok." *Mérgező Növények, Növényi Mérgezések*, Semmelweis Kiadó, Budapest, 2008, pp. 89–90.

³⁹ Pratt, Anne. *Poisonous, noxious, and suspected plants, of our fields and woods*, London, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1866, pp. 1.

ingredient in Juliet's potion.⁴⁰ This may be possible due to its effect, as 5–6 berries can be fatal for children, but for adults, drowsiness and stupor occur⁴¹ so it is the perfect ingredient for faking death. Furthermore, the effects of nightshade on the health of humans are highly toxic. “Nightshades, certainly those native to Europe, could rightfully be considered edgy plants: not only are they plants of the hedgerows and waste places, but are also powerful medicines and poisons, high in tropane alkaloids that affect the central nervous system to cause hallucinations, delirium, coma, and sometimes death.”⁴² Poisoning is mainly caused by berries in the case of children, but poisoning has also occurred in connection with tea made from the leaves. But it is not only dangerous for humans, but for animals too: horses, hogs and cattle are also at risk, so their meat and milk can also be toxic to humans, as atropine is enriched in them.⁴³ Moreover, there is a similarity between the association of nightshade and the previous flower, wolf's bane: “*belladonna*, *mandrake*, and *henbane* along with *aconite* and *hemlock*, have long been associated with witchcraft, although it is less clear how common this knowledge was throughout Europe before the latter part of the Victorian period.”⁴⁴ What certainly links the two flowers to each other and to the poem is that both are highly toxic and can cause death. Moreover, these facts were possibly well-known, since Shakespeare was aware of this information a century before Keats.

3.3.3. *Taxus baccata*

The last flower in the first stanza is 'yew-berries' which appears in the fifth line of the ode: “*Make not your rosary of yew-berries.*”⁴⁵ Once more, this plant is extremely poisonous, but because of the beauty of its fruit, it has a tempting influence on both people, (especially children), and animals. “Yew tree extracts stimulate smooth and striated muscles but have a paralyzing effect on the heart muscle. The compounds stimulate the respiratory center and later paralyze it. The initially fast heart rate slows down, blood pressure drops, breathing is rapid at

⁴⁰ Edward Tabor. “Plant Poisons in Shakespeare.” *Economic Botany*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1970, pp. 81–94. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4253115>. Accessed 18 Nov. 2024.

⁴¹ Marczal, Gabriella. “Tropán-Alkaloidok.” *Mérgező Növények, Növényi Mérgezések*, Semmelweis Kiadó, Budapest, 2008, pp. 90.

⁴² Campbell, Elizabeth A. “Don’t Say It with Nightshades: Sentimental Botany and the Natural History of ‘Atropa Belladonna.’” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2007, pp. 607–15. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40347177>. Accessed 18 Nov. 2024.

⁴³ Marczal, Gabriella. “Tropán-Alkaloidok.” *Mérgező Növények, Növényi Mérgezések*, Semmelweis Kiadó, Budapest, 2008, pp. 90.

⁴⁴ Campbell, Elizabeth A. “Don’t Say It with Nightshades: Sentimental Botany and the Natural History of ‘Atropa Belladonna.’” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2007, pp. 607–15. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40347177>. Accessed 18 Nov. 2024.

⁴⁵ Wright, Paul, editor. *The Complete Poems of John Keats*. Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994, pp. 233.

first, then slows down, and the kidneys and uterus are also stimulated. After consuming the berries, circulatory failure occurs, but the most common cause of death is heart and respiratory paralysis. A warning sign could be that the pupils dilate during poisoning. The conifers of the plant have caused fatal poisoning in animals, including horses.”⁴⁶ “The dark green Yew-tree, so often to be seen in churchyards, grows wild also in several parts of the kingdom, attaining a very great age. The leaves contain poison, and, in cases in which they have been unwisely given to children as a medicine, have produced very serious consequences. The beautiful coral-like juicy berries which grow on this tree should not be eaten by little children; for although their scarlet pulp is not unwholesome, yet the bitter seed contained by them is noxious, and might, if swallowed in large numbers, produce very painful illness.”⁴⁷ *Taxus baccata* L., commonly known as yew berries, played a major role in ancient mortuary culture. It was believed to protect against demons, but a prolonged stay under the yew tree was considered harmful. Its extracts were used as arrow poison, to commit murders, and even to commit suicide. In folk medicine, it was used as an anthelmintic and externally for wound treatment.⁴⁸ As an evergreen, *Taxus baccata* L., symbolizes both death and immortality.⁴⁹

The odes competently incorporate powerful plant imagery with the vividness and confidence of Shakespeare, utilizing Keats's botanical knowledge and modern training as a pharmacist.⁵⁰ The Keats type comparison between death and beauty is revived in this ode, as all the plants mentioned so far are beautiful and eye-catching, but their effects are deadly. In addition, all three plants are closely associated with 'drowsiness', so the melancholy and dark atmosphere of the ode is only reinforced.

3.3.4. The droop-headed flowers

The second stanza contains a possible mystery because Keats did not name the specific flower he was thinking about, only the characteristic of it. “*Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud, / That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,*”⁵¹ (Keats, lines 12-13). What kind of flowers are ‘droop-headed’ flowers? Many flowers can be droop-headed, and numerous of them

⁴⁶ Marczal, Gabriella. “Diterpének.” *Mérgező Növények, Növényi Mérgezések*, Semmelweis Kiadó, Budapest, 2008, pp. 56–57.

⁴⁷ Pratt, Anne. *Poisonous, noxious, and suspected plants, of our fields and woods*, London, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1866, pp. 20.

⁴⁸ Marczal, Gabriella. “Diterpének.” *Mérgező Növények, Növényi Mérgezések*, Semmelweis Kiadó, Budapest, 2008, pp. 58.

⁴⁹ Lee, M R. “The yew tree (*taxus baccata*) in mythology and medicine.” *Proceedings of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh* vol. 28,4 (1998): 569-75.

⁵⁰ Evans, Gareth. “Poison Wine — John Keats and the Botanic Pharmacy.” *The Keats-Shelley Review*, 16 (2002): 54.

⁵¹ Wright, Paul, editor. *The Complete Poems of John Keats*. Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994, pp. 233.

are poisonous too. For instance: foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*), snake's head (*Fritillaria meleagris* L.), lily of the valley (*Convallaria majalis*), etc. These flowers are all appear beautiful like the previous ones, but even touching one of them can cause poisoning. The 'droop-headed' flowers can be also interpreted in another way. A flower becomes droop-headed when it is thirsty or dying. If one uses the phrase as an adjective, it can describe the mood or even the feeling of melancholy itself that the ode creates. This is further reinforced by the context with phrases such as "*melancholy fit shall fall*", "*weeping cloud*" and "*hides the green hill in an April shroud*" referred to rain which can make a flower's head heavy becoming 'droop-headed'.

To sum up, the possible origin of *Ode on Melancholy* can be found in the metaphor of mortals searching for an illusory ideal, such as joy, pleasure, or delight mentioned in the poem. It seems like he thought that suffering was the only way to achieve transcendence and redemption. The intertwining of joy and sorrow in *Ode on Melancholy* illustrates this concept. As symbolized by the image of the "*temple of delight*" that also houses a shrine to melancholy and despair, Keats asserts that one cannot exist without the other. The poem is rich in vivid natural images and metaphors connected to the topic of melancholy. Some examples: 'beetle', 'death-moth' and 'downy owl'. All these creatures have negative connotations, and, on some level, they can be connected to death as a symbol. The lines "*But when the melancholy fit shall fall / Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,*" (Keats, lines 11-12) from the beginning of the second stanza can be a metaphor for thunderbolt which hits as sudden as sadness/melancholy to a person.

4. Conclusion

"Of Flowers, so much has been said and sung... They have been called *"the joy of the shrubs which bear them;"* - *"the stars of the earth;"* an the *"alphabet of the angels;"* and, indeed, as says Mr. Howitt, "of all minor creations of God, they seem to be most completely the effusions of his love of beauty, grace, and joy." Beauty and fragrance are poured abroad over the earth in blossoms of endless varieties, radiant evidence of the boundless benevolence of the Deity. They are made solely to gladden the heart of man, for a light to his eyes, for a living inspiration of grace to his spirit, for a perpetual admiration."⁵² This is definitely true of Keats, since he incorporated numerous flower images in his works, enhancing their aesthetic appeal. Moreover, in the case of the poisonous plants that he chose for his poems, despite their deadly effects, they are still beautiful on the outside.

The atmosphere that Keats created in his odes is far unique. His works are extremely rich in their visual world; you can almost smell the scent of flowers while reading, hear the movement of animals, but most of all, he introduces the reader to the world of nature and its functioning in a way that no one else can. Due to the fact that, before becoming a poet, Keats was a medical student, there is a strong possibility that he was aware of the effects of the flowers he used in his works. This possibility becomes more interesting because most of the flowers have been poisonous so far in the analysed odes. Moreover, the effect of these selected flowers is related to the odes and their content. Also, the relationship in Keats's works between beauty and death holds a mirror to the beautiful, but poisonous plants. Furthermore, the mentioned flowers in this paper also appear in the works of authors who had a great influence on Keats, and they are a part of Greek culture and mythology, too.

The concept of death and beauty is in tune with the effects of the poppy and the "life" of nature in the first poem examined, *To Autumn*. Similar to the effects of the poppy to a human, nature "dies" or goes into a "long sleep" in the fall. In ancient societies, poppies were even placed on tombs as a sign of everlasting sleep. We can therefore draw a connection between the plant's effects and the theme of beauty and death since, although it is a lovely flower, its effect can be fatal. *Ode to a Nightingale*, is the most obvious 'evidence' from my research, as it specifically mentions the consumption of the poisonous plant, and the symptoms of poisoning can also be found in the poem. In this poem, in addition to the themes of beauty and death, the concept of immortality and its opposite, oblivion, appear. This also creates a similarity between

⁵² Osgood, Frances Sargent. *The poetry of flowers and flowers of poetry: to which are added, a simple treatise on botany, with familiar examples, and a copious floral dictionary*, New York: Derby & Jackson, 1858, pp. 7.

the context of the poem and the plant mentioned in it, as hemlock, in addition to its lethal effects, was also used as a drug similar to opium, which can also lead to memory loss. The last ode of this paper, *Ode on Melancholy* is the richest in content of poisonous flowers and these plants are the most poisonous ones. This ode shows the most that even though something is beautiful, it can have a poisonous effect on a person. All the flowers can make a person hallucinate and cause symptoms similar to melancholy. According to the botanical background and symbolism of the plants, a connection with the poems can be discovered, so it is possible that Keats directly mentioned these plants in the works.

However, what I found most interesting in my analysis is that, despite the fact that Keats used poisonous plants in his poems, the poisonous effects of the flowers are not literally present in the works (or not in every case). In all these poems, even the negative and the bad connotated symbolic ones, the poet preferred to celebrate beauty, that is, *life* itself. In my opinion, I think it is also true because these plants, for example, in Shakespeare's works, caused death, but Keats has nothing like that in his works; he only mentioned them. It is precisely to show that beauty can be found in everything, even in plants that have deadly effects on humans.

There is another ode outside of the Great Ones titled *Ode to Fanny*, the analysis of which I did not include in my paper; however, it is important to mention this poem because, in my opinion, it is also a great piece of evidence of Keats's medical student side, hidden in his poetry. The speaker starts the poem with a request towards "*Physician Nature!*" addressing it as a healer or doctor who can end his suffering. This is both interesting and logical, as my research has focused on poisonous plants, but there are also many plants – including some in Keats' works – that have beneficial effects on the human body. So, in this case, nature can be a concrete healer. What is more interesting in this poem is the third and fourth lines: "*Throw my upon thy Tripod, till the flood / Of stifling numbers ebbs from my full breast.*"⁵³ These lines are suggesting that the narrator has problems with normal breathing, i.e., he is in a suffocating state. The word "tripod" is due to this, becoming more important because in medical terms there is a position called the same, which is used when someone is having respiratory distress or simply out of breath. In this sense, can the poem's meaning be that he wants to be in this "tripod position" because he is drowning in poetry? Furthermore, the other assumption is that Keats had tuberculosis, which can also make a person breathless. Since he was a medical student in his early years, we can assume by the context of these lines that the word 'tripod' has a hidden medical background.

⁵³ Wright, Paul, editor. *The Complete Poems of John Keats*. Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994, pp. 325.

Furthermore, Hellenism had a huge influence on Keats' works, and almost every flower in the odes can be connected to the Greeks in different ways, from myths to medical use, etc. Also, the usage of medicinal herbs goes back to ancient times. Many things are connected to each other not only in the poems, but in Keats' life, so the assumption that he consciously wrote these plants into the poems can be proven true.

Lastly, the themes of beauty and death create a perfect mix in his poetry, as he found beauty in poetry, and he experienced death in his medical studies. Being ill himself, Keats, despite not wanting to die, seemed to discover beauty in death, which is reflected in his poems. For even though he used poisonous plants in his works, they did not cause death. He presented these plants to the reader so that they would be seen as beautiful, not deadly, while being aware of their effects. He almost shields his readers from the medical world he experienced, instead leading them into the beauty of poetry and nature can offer. But who else could depict death beautifully if not the poet of beauty?

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