KEATS-SHELLEY HOUSE – TREASURE OF THE MONTH (SEPTEMBER)

An Autographed letter from Oscar Wilde to Emma Speed (Keats’ niece) dated 1882, accompanied by a manuscript of his poem ‘The Grave of Keats’ (1877).

Oscar Wilde was always an ardent admirer of Keats, indeed he considered Keats to be the greatest English poet of the century. At the age of 22 Wilde visited Rome in April 1877 where he was granted a private audience with Pope Pius IX, and later on in the day found himself near the Protestant Cemetery. Once he realised he was near the burial place of his poetic hero, John Keats, he insisted on visiting the grave and prostrated himself on the grass for the next half an hour, proclaiming it ‘the holiest place in Rome’ with a touch of his characteristic irony.

The poem inspired by this experience, ‘The Grave of Keats’, continues Wilde’s religious sentiments. In his account of his trip to Rome (*The Tomb of Keats* in *The Irish Monthly,* July 1877) Wilde refers to Keats as ‘this divine boy’ and characterises him as ‘a Priest of Beauty’ before likening him to Guido Reni’s painting of St. Sebastian, an image which is at the heart of this poem and appears in line 4.[[1]](#footnote-1) For Wilde, a devout believer in the Cult of Beauty, Keats was a kind of saint and so in this poem he imbues him with a sense of divinity. There is a possibility that the ending reference to a ‘Basil-tree’ alludes to the European tradition of placing basil in the hands of the dead to ensure a safe journey, so perhaps with this reference Wilde is wishing Keats luck in his journey to ‘God’s veil of blue’. Certainly, Wilde’s ‘Basil tree’ points to Keats’s poem ‘Isabella, or the Pot of Basil’, which in turn produced famous artistic interpretations by Pre-Raphaelite painters William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais. Indeed Wilde’s description of Keats in his sonnet as ‘*poet-painter* of our Eenglish Land’ refers to the deeply visual qualities of his poetry, which inspired artists to offer new interpretations of some of his most famous poems.

Also important is the Italian influence present in this poem, as Wilde uses the Italian (or Petrarchan) sonnet form. The Italian sonnet is divided into two sections by two different groups of rhyming sounds. The first 8 lines is called the *octave* with a rhyme scheme of: *abbaabba*. The remaining 6 lines is called the *sestet*, but the rhyme scheme is flexible, unlike in the octave. Of the possible options Wilde has chosen a rhyming pattern of *cdeedc,* pointedly avoiding the English practice of ending in a rhyming couplet which is used in both the Spenserian and Shakespearian sonnet forms. The change in the rhyme schemes between the octave and the sestet signifies a change in tone or subject matter, which is known as the *volta*. The volta is clear in Wilde’s sonnet, which transitions from a peaceful acceptance of Keats’ passing in the octave to a mournful outcry for the loss this great English poet in the sestet.

The autographed manuscript of this poem that resides in the museum today was presented to Emma Speed, Keats’ niece, along with a letter thanking her for her gift of the original manuscript of Keats’ sonnet on ‘Blue’. The chance encounter of these two is narrated in Wilde’s essay on ‘Keats’ Sonnet on “Blue”’: ‘During my tour in America I happened one evening to find myself in Louisville, Kentucky … in the course of my lecture I had occasion to quote Keats’ sonnet on ‘Blue’ as an example of the poet’s delicate sense of colour harmonies. When my lecture was concluded there came round to see me a lady of middle age, with a sweet gentle manner and a most musical voice. She introduced herself to me as Mrs Speed, the daughter of George Keats, and invited me to come and examine the Keats manuscripts in her possession. I spent most of the next day with her, reading the letters of Keats to her father… Some months afterwards I received a letter from Mrs Speed asking my acceptance of the original manuscript of the sonnet which I had quoted in my lecture’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Wilde was extremely grateful for Mrs Speed’s kind offer and his letter thanking her, which we have here in our collection, reads: ‘What you have given me is more golden than gold, more precious than any treasure this great country could yield me......I am half enamoured of the paper that touched his hand, and the ink that did his bidding, grown fond of the sweet comeliness of his character, for since my boyhood I have loved none better than your marvellous kinsman, that godlike boy, the real Adonis[[3]](#footnote-3) of our age.... In my heaven he walks eternally with Shakespeare and the Greeks....’

Tragically, when Wilde was imprisoned in 1895 for homosexuality his house was ransacked and his belongings were auctioned off cheaply; included in the sale was a lot listed as 'a Manuscript Poem by Keats, framed' which was sold off for 38 shillings. This was most likely the original manuscript of ‘Sonnet on Blue’ given to Wilde by Emma Speed, and unfortunately the present whereabouts of this treasured item is unknown.

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1. Guido Reni painted the *Saint Sebastian* subject several times and the version Oscar Wilde refers to is the one in the Palazzo Ducale at Genoa, which is also the first. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.oscarwildeinamerica.org/Resources/Keats%20Sonnet%20on%20Blue%20-%20Wilde%20.pdf>

This is Oscar Wilde’s 'Keats’ Sonnet on Blue' that appeared in *The Hobby Horse*, a quarterly periodical published in England by the Century Guild of Artists. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The reference to the Greek mythological figure Adonis is a clear homage to Percy Bysshe Shelley’s elegy *Adonais*, which he composed after Keats’s death. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)