



Between Grandeur and Intimacy: The Sublime-Pastoral Interplay in John Keats's Poetic Landscapes

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Abstract- John Keats's landscapes are often discussed through either the sublime or the pastoral, a division that obscures how his poetry makes the two modes mutually constitutive. This article examines the formal and philosophical work performed by their interaction in *Hyperion*, "Ode to a Nightingale," and "To Autumn." It addresses a gap between sublime-centred accounts of Keatsian transcendence, pastoral readings of sensuous retreat, and ecocritical approaches that question Romantic nature as an idealised refuge. The study uses a qualitative-dominant comparative design combining close reading, a transparent coding scheme for sublime and pastoral markers, contextual interpretation, and comparison with Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Shelley's "Mont Blanc," and Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." The coded corpus indicates that sublime markers occur at approximately twice the frequency of pastoral markers, while thematic coding identifies transience, mortality, and artistic aspiration as the principal sites at which the modes converge. The numerical pattern is treated as descriptive evidence rather than as a substitute for interpretation. In *Hyperion*, pastoral remnants render cosmic defeat ethically and affectively legible; in "Ode to a Nightingale," sensuous woodland intimacy enables but also limits imaginative flight; and in "To Autumn," pastoral plenitude becomes inseparable from temporal decline. Across the corpus, negative capability operates not merely as a psychological disposition but as a formal ecology of unresolved relations. The article contributes the concept of mediated sublimity: Keats's sublime acquires force through intimate, embodied, and seasonal forms that prevent grandeur from becoming abstract mastery. This framework clarifies Keats's distinctiveness within Romantic landscape poetry and supports an ecocritical reading attentive to vulnerability, temporal interdependence, and the more-than-human world.

Keywords: John Keats; sublime; pastoral; negative capability; Romantic landscape; ecocriticism; close reading

I. Introduction

Landscape is one of the most persistent intellectual forms in Romantic poetry. It is never only scenery. It organises perception, distributes agency between mind and world, and provides a medium through which poets test claims about beauty, mortality, history, and imagination. In John Keats, this work is unusually concentrated. Valleys, forests, harvest fields, skies, ruins, flowers, birds, and seasonal atmospheres do not passively frame lyric speakers or mythological actors. They generate the conditions under which those speakers and actors can think and feel. Keats's landscapes therefore demand analysis not as descriptive settings but as aesthetic structures.

Two traditions have dominated discussion of those structures. The first reads Keats through the sublime: magnitude, obscurity, terror, power, imaginative transcendence, and the mind's encounter with limits. The second reads him through pastoral: sensory abundance, rural repose, classical inheritance, cultivated nature, and the desire for a space insulated from historical pressure. Both approaches illuminate important features of the poetry. Yet their separation creates a critical problem. Keats rarely permits sublime grandeur and pastoral



intimacy to remain discrete. The "shady sadness" of Hyperion is vast but also locally textured; the nightingale's supposedly immortal song is heard from within a densely scented woodland; and the abundance of "To Autumn" derives its emotional authority from the same temporal process that carries the season toward departure. Grandeur becomes perceptible through intimacy, while intimacy becomes philosophically charged because it is exposed to forces beyond possession or permanence.

This article argues that the sublime and the pastoral in Keats are not competing labels applied to different passages. They are relational modes whose interaction produces the philosophical distinctiveness of his poetic landscapes. The sublime names encounters with scale, power, opacity, temporal extension, or imagined transcendence. The pastoral names not simply the countryside but a literary organisation of local habitation, sensuous detail, seasonal labour, repose, and remembered or desired harmony. Keats's originality lies in making each mode revise the other. Pastoral detail gives body and ethical consequence to sublime abstraction. Sublime pressure prevents pastoral scenes from settling into timeless consolation. Their relation is best understood as mediated sublimity: a form of grandeur that is reached, tested, and qualified through embodied intimacy.

The argument matters for three reasons. First, it offers a more integrated account of Keatsian form. The poems do not merely state an attraction to beauty and an awareness of death; they stage those concerns through changes of scale, rhythm, sound, syntax, and focalisation. Second, the integrated account clarifies Keats's place among the major Romantics. Wordsworth commonly converts landscape into reflective continuity, Shelley intensifies nature into philosophical and political force, and Coleridge makes spatial discontinuity the medium of visionary creation. Keats instead sustains the friction between sensuous dwelling and imaginative displacement. Third, the interplay has contemporary ecocritical relevance. To identify ecological value in Keats is not to claim that he anticipated modern environmental science or climate politics. It is to recognise that his poetry repeatedly unsettles fantasies of a stable, external "nature" by presenting human consciousness as dependent on seasonal, material, and more-than-human processes.

Recent scholarship has widened the contexts in which Keats's landscapes can be understood. Wolfson's account of Keats as an active, self-revising reader emphasises the intellectual density of his poetic language rather than treating sensuousness as decorative excess. Fermanis locates his poetry within Enlightenment debates, complicating the conventional opposition between Romantic imagination and eighteenth-century thought. Garner and Roe's collection on Keats and Scotland demonstrates the importance of travel, terrain, ruins, health, and historical memory to his developing sense of place. Ecocritical scholarship has likewise challenged simple accounts of Romantic retreat. Rigby and Nersessian show that Romantic nature writing may be read as a field of formal and ethical tensions rather than either celebrated as proto-environmental wisdom or dismissed as anthropocentric idealisation. Malakshah and Pourqarib's study of wilderness and the sublime in selected Keats poems identifies an ecocentric scepticism attentive to human vulnerability. These approaches create an opportunity for a synthesis focused on how aesthetic modes interact within specific poetic structures.

The research gap is therefore not the absence of scholarship on Keats, the sublime, the pastoral, mortality, or nature. It is the absence of a sufficiently integrated and methodologically explicit account of how sublime and pastoral markers co-occur, transform one another, and generate different effects across a strategically selected corpus. Existing studies frequently privilege one mode, use "nature" as an undifferentiated category, or move from evocative quotation to broad philosophical claim without explaining the formal mechanism that joins them. Digital or quasi-empirical literary methods sometimes correct this weakness by making patterns visible, but they can create another problem when frequency is mistaken for significance. This article combines transparent descriptive coding with close reading so that pattern and interpretation remain mutually accountable.



The study pursues four objectives: to identify the formal mechanisms through which sublime and pastoral elements interact in *Hyperion*, "Ode to a Nightingale," and "To Autumn"; to determine how that interaction organises the recurrent themes of transience, mortality, and artistic aspiration; to compare Keats's landscape poetics with representative poems by Wordsworth, Shelley, and Coleridge; and to evaluate what an ecocritical perspective gains from reading Keats's landscapes as relations rather than stable images of nature. The corresponding research questions are: (1) How do diction, imagery, rhythm, syntax, and scale mediate the sublime-pastoral relation? (2) How does the relation alter across epic fragment, lyric ode, and seasonal ode? (3) What distinguishes Keats's unresolved landscape structures from the dominant resolutions or ideological trajectories of his contemporaries? (4) How can these structures contribute to environmental-humanities debates without anachronistically converting Keats into a modern environmental advocate?

No causal hypothesis is proposed because the object of inquiry is interpretive rather than experimental. The study advances three analytical propositions. First, pastoral intimacy is not an alternative to Keatsian sublimity but its principal medium. Second, the frequency of sublime motifs does not produce sublime dominance because pastoral elements regulate their emotional and philosophical meaning. Third, negative capability is enacted spatially and formally: it is the poem's capacity to keep incompatible scales and values in relation without forcing final reconciliation. The following sections develop these propositions through theory, method, analysis, and comparative discussion.

Table 1: Research questions and analytical propositions

Research question	Analytical focus	Proposition
RQ1	Formal mechanisms joining sublime and pastoral	Pastoral intimacy is a principal medium of Keatsian sublimity.
RQ2	Variation across epic and ode forms	Genre changes the configuration, but each poem sustains relation rather than separation.
RQ3	Comparison with Wordsworth, Shelley, and Coleridge	Keats is distinctive in returning grandeur to vulnerable, sensuous, and temporal conditions.
RQ4	Environmental-humanities relevance	The interplay discloses ecological interdependence without making Keats a modern environmental advocate.

II. Literature Review And Theoretical Framework

The sublime and the pastoral are historically mobile categories. Treating them as fixed opposites would reproduce the critical division this article seeks to overcome. Their value lies instead in the different relations they establish among perceiver, environment, language, and scale.

Burke's account of the sublime associates it with obscurity, privation, vastness, difficulty, and power. Sublime pleasure arises from danger contemplated at a distance, producing an affective mixture that Burke distinguishes from the social and proportionate pleasures of beauty. Kant relocates the decisive event from the object to the subject's faculties. The mathematical sublime emerges when magnitude exceeds sensible comprehension, while the dynamical sublime arises when natural power threatens the imagination but reveals a supersensible capacity not reducible to physical vulnerability. These frameworks remain useful for Keats, but they must be applied cautiously. There is no need to presume that his poems are direct illustrations of either philosopher or that he possessed a documented, systematic engagement with Kant. Burkean and Kantian terms function here as



retrospective analytic lenses for patterns of obscurity, scale, power, limit, and reflective elevation.

Keats criticism has long recognised that his sublime differs from a model of triumphant subjective mastery. Ende's classic study shows how the Keatsian sublime is entangled with vulnerability, poetic ambition, and the difficulty of sustaining elevated forms. Levinson's historicist account makes style socially and materially consequential, resisting the abstraction of Keats into a poet of ahistorical beauty. Fermanis further demonstrates that Keats's intellectual world cannot be understood through a simple rejection of Enlightenment thought. His poetry often tests competing models of knowledge without allowing one to secure final authority. In that respect, the sublime is not a completed ascent but a pressure placed on cognition, embodiment, and language.

The pastoral has an equally complex history. From Theocritus and Virgil onward, it is a mode of mediation rather than transparent rural description. Pastoral selects, arranges, and idealises rural life, frequently constructing distance from court, city, labour conflict, or political crisis. Gifford's influential account emphasises three recurrent forms: retreat, return, and the representation of tension between country and city. Ecocritical scholarship has made clear that the pastoral may conceal labour, property, violence, and environmental transformation. Yet to identify ideological simplification is not to render the mode critically useless. Pastoral can also register threatened habitats, temporal cycles, local attachments, and the inadequacy of fantasies of separation. In Keats, its characteristic materials - fruit, flowers, shade, birdsong, grain, cottages, warmth, scent, and seasonal work - are seldom free from pressure. They appear at the edge of loss, within mythic defeat, or during imaginative departures that cannot be maintained.

The distinction between pastoral and georgic is especially important in "To Autumn." Pastoral convention tends toward repose and idealisation; georgic foregrounds labour, cultivation, and material process. Keats's ode combines them. Autumn is at once atmosphere, personified figure, worker, and temporal force. The poem includes cottages, granaries, hooks, furrows, gleaning, and cider pressing, but it does not become a documentary account of agricultural labour. Instead, labour is aestheticised while still preventing the season from appearing as untouched nature. The scene is cultivated, inhabited, and processual. This complicates readings that describe the poem as a pure pastoral retreat.

Negative capability supplies a bridge between these aesthetic traditions. Keats's famous letter formulation values the capacity to remain "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts" without impatiently reaching after fact and reason (Rollins, 1958). The concept has sometimes been psychologised into a general tolerance of ambiguity or idealised as passive receptivity. More precise readings treat it as a discipline of imaginative self-displacement. Wolfson shows that Keats's writing creates thought through verbal action and revision, while recent discussions continue to emphasise uncertainty as a formal achievement rather than an absence of argument. In the present study, negative capability describes the organisation of relations that remain active without becoming logically identical: immortality and mortality, plenitude and decline, monumental scale and bodily sensation, refuge and return.

This approach revises an influential contrast between Keats and Wordsworth. Keats's phrase "egotistical sublime" has encouraged a neat opposition between Wordsworthian self-projection and Keatsian self-effacement. The contrast is useful but can become reductive. Wordsworth's landscapes do not simply absorb nature into ego, and Keats's speakers are not without desire, projection, or control. The more defensible distinction concerns the trajectory of form. "Tintern Abbey" moves toward continuity among memory, landscape, moral consciousness, and future relation. Keats's odes more often return the speaker to unresolved division. "Ode to a Nightingale" ends not in secured wisdom but in a question; "To Autumn" reaches composure without cancelling departure; Hyperion remains formally



unfinished and narratively suspended. Keatsian negative capability is thus not a lack of structure but a structure that resists closure.

Comparison with Shelley and Coleridge sharpens the point. Shelley's "Mont Blanc" makes landscape a theatre for the relation between mind, necessity, and power. Its torrents, ravines, glaciers, and inaccessible summit build a philosophical sublime whose ideological energy is difficult to separate from the poem's argument about human thought and the universe. Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" organises space through visionary discontinuity: gardens, caverns, chasm, river, dome, and abyss become figures for imaginative production and instability. Keats shares their interest in obscurity and scale, yet his major landscapes repeatedly return grandeur to the senses and to temporality. His sublime is mediated by fragrance, temperature, texture, bodily fatigue, ripeness, and decay.

Ecocriticism provides a further framework, although it requires historical discipline. Morton criticises the reification of "Nature" as a harmonious external sphere and questions aesthetic forms that conceal ecological entanglement behind idealised scenery. Rigby argues for a critical recovery of Romantic ecological thought that attends to both its limitations and its capacity to imagine more-than-human agency. Nersessian describes recent Romantic ecocriticism as increasingly formalist and phenomenological, examining how poems structure ecological perception rather than simply extracting environmental messages. Malakshah and Pourqarib identify in Keats a conception of nature that is at once ecocentric and sceptical, stressing human precariousness before wilderness and sublime power. Garner and Roe's work on the Scottish tour adds material specificity: terrain, bodily exertion, weather, health, memory, and historical ruin shaped Keats's poetic development.

Historical context adds another layer to the relation between aesthetic modes. Keats wrote during war, post-war economic instability, rapid urban growth, changing agricultural practice, and intensified debates about class, reform, and national culture. It would be reductive to translate every orchard, valley, or ruin into a coded statement about industrialisation. It would be equally reductive to detach those forms from material history. Cox's study of the Cockney School and Levinson's historicist criticism show that Keats's aesthetic decisions were inseparable from contested ideas of taste, social legitimacy, and cultural authority. Pastoral refinement could be praised as timeless beauty while also functioning within classed systems of education and reception. Epic sublimity could promise canonical seriousness to a poet attacked for social and stylistic presumption.

The landscape poems therefore participate in what might be called an aesthetics of precarious legitimacy. Keats repeatedly tests elevated genres and inherited modes while exposing them to fragility. Hyperion takes up epic, classical myth, and Miltonic scale, but it centres the defeated rather than simply celebrating the victorious order. The odes adopt prestigious lyric forms while dwelling on bodily weakness, ordinary sensation, and unresolved endings. Pastoral intimacy is central to this negotiation because it allows the poems to claim sensuous authority without pretending to disembodied universality. The sublime expands that authority while simultaneously revealing its instability.

The history of place is particularly important in light of Garner and Roe's reassessment of Keats's Scottish tour. Walking, weather, fatigue, illness, ruins, mountains, and cultural memory complicate the image of Keats as a poet who encountered nature mainly through literary reverie. The tour writings reveal landscape as an embodied practice involving distance, exertion, discomfort, and historical comparison. Even when the three primary poems are not direct travel records, this expanded context supports a reading of scale as bodily negotiated rather than visually possessed. Keats's sublime is repeatedly experienced from a vulnerable position within terrain.

This historical approach also guards against biographical determinism. The deaths of Keats's parents and brother, his medical training, financial uncertainty, critical hostility, and tuberculosis matter because they formed a life in which bodily and social contingency could not easily be ignored. Yet poems are not symptom lists. Biography enters the argument only



where form makes vulnerability structurally relevant. The goal is not to explain the nightingale by Tom Keats's death or Saturn by the poet's illness. It is to show why Keats's cultural and bodily circumstances made an aesthetic of mediated grandeur both available and urgent.

These perspectives suggest that the ecological importance of Keats's sublime-pastoral interplay lies neither in pastoral harmony nor in sublime domination. It lies in the failure of either mode to secure autonomy. Pastoral places are not sealed refuges; they are porous to time, death, history, and nonhuman agency. Sublime experiences are not pure transcendence; they depend on bodies, voices, habitats, and local forms. The relation can therefore be described as an ecology of scale. Large forces become meaningful through small forms, while small forms become ethically intense because they participate in processes larger than individual consciousness.

The conceptual model guiding the analysis has four linked levels. The first is the level of textual markers: sublime markers include magnitude, darkness, height or depth, power, silence, ruin, infinity, and temporal extension; pastoral markers include vegetation, seasonal abundance, rural habitation, sensory warmth, labour, repose, and local sound. The second level is formal mediation: shifts in rhythm, syntax, stanza, focal distance, address, and sonic texture bring the markers into relation. The third level is thematic production: transience, mortality, artistic aspiration, vulnerability, and incomplete consolation emerge from that relation. The fourth level is critical implication: negative capability, Romantic distinctiveness, and ecological interdependence. This layered model avoids treating individual words as self-evidently sublime or pastoral. A marker acquires significance through position, pattern, and transformation within the poem.

The scholarly contribution of this model is twofold. It joins aesthetic theory to formal analysis, and it creates a place for descriptive coding without confusing numerical recurrence with literary value. A single image may be more structurally decisive than numerous lexical items. Conversely, recurring patterns may expose a relation that isolated close reading overlooks. The methodological challenge is to move repeatedly between pattern and passage. That movement defines the procedure described below.

Table 2: Conceptual model of sublime-pastoral mediation

Textual markers	Formal mediation	Thematic production	Critical implication
Vastness, obscurity, ruin, power; vegetation, cultivation, warmth, repose, local sound	Scale shifts, syntax, stanzaic progression, rhythm, address, focal distance, sensory redistribution	Transience, mortality, artistic aspiration, vulnerability, incomplete consolation	Negative capability, mediated sublimity, Romantic distinctiveness, ecological interdependence

III. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design for comparative literary analysis. The method combines close reading, descriptive content coding, contextual interpretation, and controlled comparison. The purpose of the quantitative component is limited: it identifies recurrent distributions and co-occurrences that can guide interpretation. It does not claim that aesthetic force is reducible to frequency.

The primary Keats corpus comprises *Hyperion*, "Ode to a Nightingale," and "To Autumn," read in Barnard's edition. These poems were selected purposively because they represent different genres and scales: unfinished mythological epic, meditative lyric ode, and seasonal ode. They also provide contrasting configurations of the central modes. *Hyperion* makes



sublime ruin overt and pastoral memory recessive; "Ode to a Nightingale" stages rapid movement between embodied locality and imagined transcendence; "To Autumn" begins with pastoral and georgic plenitude but progressively reveals sublime temporality. The secondary comparative corpus comprises Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," Shelley's "Mont Blanc," and Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." The comparison is illustrative rather than exhaustive. Each poem was chosen because it is a major Romantic landscape text with a distinctive relation among mind, environment, and poetic form.

A coding framework was developed from the theoretical literature and refined through iterative reading. Sublime codes included vastness or depth, obscurity or darkness, overwhelming power, ruin, silence, transcendence, infinity, and temporal immensity. Pastoral codes included rural vegetation, fertility, habitation, localised sound, warmth, repose, seasonal abundance, cultivation, and agricultural labour. A third category, interplay, marked passages in which the modes were syntactically, rhythmically, or thematically inseparable. Examples include a pastoral image transformed by temporal decline, an intimate sensory setting enabling imagined transcendence, or a sublime scene humanised by remembered fertility.

The unit of coding was the meaningful poetic segment, usually a phrase, line, or closely connected group of lines. Coding at this level reduced the distortion that would result from treating every lexical item independently. Segments could receive more than one code when the relation itself was analytically important. The thesis-based coding record reports an approximate two-to-one ratio of sublime to pastoral markers across the three Keats texts. It also reports thematic prevalence of transience in 70% of coded thematic segments, mortality in 60%, and artistic aspiration in 50%. Because thematic segments could carry multiple codes, these percentages are overlapping rather than mutually exclusive. A secondary coding pass on 20% of the corpus produced a reported Cohen's kappa of .85. These values are retained as descriptive indicators, but the article does not treat them as inferential statistics or as proof of interpretation.

Analysis proceeded in five stages. First, each poem was read without coding to identify its dominant spatial and tonal movement. Second, textual segments were coded and analytic memos recorded the reason for each classification. Third, code patterns were compared with formal features including stanzaic progression, enjambment, caesura, repetition, address, verb tense, and changes of focal scale. Fourth, thematic interpretations were tested against the coded pattern and against counterexamples. Fifth, the Keats poems were compared with the three Romantic comparators using the same conceptual questions: What type of scale is produced? How is the perceiving subject positioned? Does the poem move toward resolution, ideological assertion, visionary rupture, or sustained ambiguity? What role does pastoral locality play in the sublime structure?

Reliability in literary interpretation cannot mean elimination of judgement. It requires transparency, textual accountability, and openness to alternative readings. Three safeguards were therefore used. Code definitions were kept explicit; numerical patterns were subordinated to passage-level interpretation; and contextual claims were distinguished from claims of direct influence. For example, Burke and Kant are used as analytic frameworks, not as evidence that Keats systematically read both philosophers. Similarly, industrial and agrarian transformation is treated as a historical horizon, not as a single cause mechanically encoded in each landscape.

The study uses public-domain literary texts and published scholarship and therefore involves no personal or sensitive data. The secondary coding process concerned textual classification rather than human-subject research. Ethical responsibility nevertheless includes accurate quotation, acknowledgement of interpretive limits, avoidance of fabricated authorial intention, and clear differentiation between source evidence and contemporary critical inference.



Table 3: Coding framework

Category	Operational indicators	Typical formal function	Interpretive caution
Sublime	Magnitude, depth, obscurity, overwhelming force, ruin, silence, infinity, temporal extension	Expands scale or tests perceptual and conceptual limits	Not every dark or large image is structurally sublime.
Pastoral	Vegetation, fertility, rural habitation, warmth, repose, cultivation, labour, local sound	Localises perception and organises habitation or desired harmony	Pastoral is a literary mode, not transparent rural reality.
Interplay	Co-coded or transformed passages in which one mode modifies the other	Mediates grandeur through intimacy or exposes intimacy to loss	Structural position may matter more than frequency.
Theme	Transience, mortality, aspiration, vulnerability, consolation	Records philosophical effects generated by formal relations	Theme codes overlap and are not mutually exclusive.

IV. Results and Thematic Analysis

The results support the central claim that Keats's sublime is mediated through pastoral intimacy. Sublime markers are more numerous, but their force depends on local, sensuous, and temporal forms that prevent them from becoming autonomous spectacles. The three poems achieve this relation differently.

1. Hyperion: Monumental Ruin And The Memory Of Habitation

Hyperion opens not with triumphant elevation but with descent: "Deep in the shady sadness of a vale." The spatial movement matters. A conventional sublime might direct the eye upward toward mountain, storm, or infinity. Keats begins below, in depth, shadow, and arrested time. The fallen Saturn is "quiet as a stone," but the simile does not stabilise him into monument. It renders divine power inert, materially present, and vulnerable. The valley's obscurity is Burkean, while the scale of Titan defeat approaches the dynamical sublime; yet the emotional effect arises from the compression of cosmic history into bodily stillness.

Pastoral elements enter as traces rather than secure alternatives. The landscape contains shade, vegetation, fragrance, and remembered fertility, but these forms no longer establish harmony. They measure what has been lost. Pastoral here is elegiac and archaeological: it survives as a residue within ruin. The result is not a simple contrast between terrible present and idyllic past. The pastoral remainder changes the meaning of sublime defeat. Without the memory of habitation and fecundity, the Titans' fall might remain an abstract myth of dynastic succession. With it, defeat becomes the destruction of a lived world.

This transformation is visible in Keats's handling of scale. Saturn's body is enormous, but the poem repeatedly attends to gesture, posture, voice, and touch. The epic is therefore drawn toward intimacy. Thea's presence and address turn cosmic displacement into an encounter between suffering beings. The sublime scale of historical change is mediated through care, recognition, and failed consolation. The poem does not allow grandeur to erase pathos.



The blank verse contributes to this mediation. Miltonic inversions and extended syntax promise epic elevation, but pauses, heavy stresses, and delayed movement repeatedly impede narrative momentum. The verse performs fallen magnitude. Sublimity persists as weight rather than ascent. Pastoral softness and epic harshness are not allocated to separate sections; they alternate within the same rhythmic field. This is one reason the fragmentary status of *Hyperion* is aesthetically consequential. The poem's incompleteness corresponds to its refusal of a stable relation between old and new orders. Apollo's prospective emergence does not retroactively justify Titan suffering.

The dominant thematic convergence is transience. Mythological immortals are exposed to historical succession; power becomes contingent; landscape records dispossession. Mortality appears not as literal human death alone but as the susceptibility of forms, regimes, and aesthetic orders to replacement. Artistic aspiration is equally present. Keats tests whether epic grandeur can remain ethically responsive to suffering. The pastoral remainder functions as a critique of pure monumentality, insisting that poetic greatness must register the local worlds destroyed by historical change.

A biographical reading can deepen but should not govern this interpretation. Keats's bereavements, financial insecurity, and awareness of illness make the themes of decline and vulnerability resonant. Yet Saturn should not be reduced to a disguised self-portrait. The more significant point is formal: Keats constructs an epic landscape in which power is understood from the position of the displaced. That position differentiates his sublime from a confident model of subjective or civilisational triumph.

2. "ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE": Sensuous Locality And The Failed Geography Of Escape

The ode begins inside the body: aching heart, drowsy numbness, and the pharmacological language of hemlock and opiate. Before the landscape appears, perception is already unstable. This opening complicates the common description of the poem as a movement from reality into imaginative nature. The speaker is not securely located in a rational world from which he later departs. Bodily sensation is the first landscape.

The pastoral scene emerges through wine, flora, country green, dance, song, sunburnt mirth, and the "warm South." These images are culturally mediated and sensuously excessive. They are not documentary details of a specific woodland; they assemble a desired ecology of warmth, fertility, and communal pleasure. The pastoral is therefore an imaginative technology of relocation. It allows the speaker to formulate escape in embodied terms.

The nightingale's song introduces sublime extension. It seems detached from the individual bird and distributed across time: "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!" The claim is rhetorically powerful but philosophically unstable. The biological bird is not immortal. What persists is song as type, recurrence, tradition, or imaginative effect. Sublimity here depends on a category mistake that the poem both desires and exposes. The speaker turns a local sound into transhistorical continuity because mortal consciousness needs an object beyond decay.

Crucially, the sublime flight is enabled by pastoral intimacy. The speaker cannot see the flowers at his feet but "guesses each sweet" through scent, season, and atmosphere. Darkness removes visual mastery and intensifies nonvisual perception. The result is not disembodiment but a redistribution of the senses. The "embalmed darkness" is both intimate and obscure, pastoral and sublime. The woodland becomes a medium in which local fragrance supports an imagined movement beyond the local.

The ode's rhythm repeatedly interrupts escape. Exclamations and imperatives generate lift, while caesurae and altered pacing return the speaker to bodily limitation. "Away! away!" is followed by the qualification that Bacchus and his leopards will not provide the route; the "viewless wings of Poesy" promise a more elevated vehicle, yet the "dull brain" perplexes



and retards. Imagination is neither dismissed nor granted sovereign power. Its movement is real as poetic experience but temporary as habitation.

Mortality becomes explicit in the desire for "easeful Death." The temptation is not simply suicide or romantic escapism. It is the fantasy that the self might convert temporal ending into aesthetic completion while the song continues. The poem refuses the fantasy by allowing "forlorn" to operate as a bell that returns the speaker to the "sole self." The word is structurally decisive because it belongs to both pastoral romance and abandonment. "Faery lands forlorn" offers remote imaginative beauty, but the repetition of "forlorn" undoes the distance it creates. The pastoral threshold becomes the mechanism of return.

The final questions - "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music: - Do I wake or sleep?" - are exemplary negative capability. They do not ask for information that the poem expects to receive. They preserve incompatible accounts of the event. The song has fled, yet its formal and emotional effect remains. The landscape has been imagined, sensed, and lost. Sublime transcendence is therefore neither true nor false in a simple sense; it is a temporary reorganisation of perception made possible by a pastoral sensorium.

The coding pattern identifies mortality and artistic aspiration as strongly overlapping in this poem. That overlap is more important than the frequency of either theme. Art aspires to continuity, but its continuity depends on repeated mortal acts of hearing, remembering, and writing. The nightingale is not an emblem of art because it escapes nature. It is powerful because natural recurrence is transformed into cultural memory. Keats's mediated sublime thus emerges from relation among bird, habitat, body, poetic tradition, and historical listener.

3. "TO AUTUMN": Pastoral Plenitude As Temporal Sublimity

"To Autumn" appears at first to offer the purest pastoral landscape in the corpus. Its opening accumulates ripeness: mists, fruitfulness, vines, apples, gourds, hazel shells, flowers, bees. The syntax expands through coordinated infinitives and clauses, generating the impression that fertility exceeds containment. Yet excess already introduces sublime pressure. The season conspires with the sun "to load and bless" until cells are "o'er-brimm'd." Plenitude approaches a limit. Ripeness is not a stable condition but the point at which growth turns toward decline.

The poem's pastoral is inseparable from cultivation. Cottage trees, thatch, granary, furrow, hook, gleaning, and cider press place the season in a humanly worked landscape. This is not untouched wilderness. Nor is labour represented in social-realist detail. Autumn is personified as worker and sovereign presence, absorbing distinct agricultural activities into a single aesthetic figure. The idealisation should be acknowledged: the poem does not foreground property relations, hardship, or unequal labour. Nevertheless, the georgic materials prevent "nature" from appearing wholly external to human practice.

The second stanza changes the mode of attention. Instead of cataloguing produce, it asks, "Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?" Autumn becomes visible in postures of suspension: sitting careless, sleeping on a half-reaped furrow, steadying a laden head, watching the last oozings. These images create intimacy through slowed time. Yet the slowing is not timelessness. "Last" and "hours by hours" make duration palpable. The cider press is a pastoral object and an instrument of temporal extraction. Sweetness is produced through pressure, depletion, and waiting.

The third stanza openly confronts departure by asking where the songs of spring are. The answer does not restore spring or lament its absence in purely elegiac terms: "Think not of them, thou hast thy music too." Autumn's music consists of gnats, lambs, crickets, robin, and swallows. The catalogue moves through different species, locations, and sound ranges, creating a more-than-human acoustic community. None of these sounds is permanent. The



gnats mourn in the river shallows, lambs bleat from hilly bounds, and swallows gather before migration. Music is generated by transition.

The sublime in this stanza is not terror but temporal and atmospheric magnitude. The "soft-dying day" and "barred clouds" extend local harvest into a sky marked by ending. The scale expands, but it does not abandon intimate sound. Keats's characteristic movement is therefore maintained: grandeur is audible through small lives. The swallows' final movement opens the poem beyond the field and beyond England, implying migratory routes that exceed the scene's apparent enclosure.

Negative capability in "To Autumn" differs from the anxious uncertainty of the nightingale ode. It takes the form of noncompetitive coexistence. Abundance and decline, work and rest, ripeness and death, human cultivation and nonhuman activity are held together without an argumentative hierarchy. The poem achieves composure, but composure is not resolution. Winter remains unrepresented, and the final image is oriented toward departure.

The coding record's high prevalence of transience is especially persuasive here because temporality structures every stanza. However, frequency alone would miss the poem's central achievement: transience is not merely a theme added to pastoral beauty. It is the condition of beauty's form. Fruitfulness is moving, sound is fading, labour is incomplete, and species are changing position. The ode therefore revises the pastoral dream of permanent repose. Its intimacy is seasonal and contingent.

4. Comparative Patterns Across The Keats Corpus

Across the three poems, sublime markers appear approximately twice as often as pastoral markers, but this does not mean that pastoral is secondary. Pastoral markers occupy mediating positions. In *Hyperion* they provide memory and ethical scale; in "Ode to a Nightingale" they generate the sensory conditions of flight and return; in "To Autumn" they form the material body of temporal sublimity. The mode with fewer coded instances can therefore possess greater structural leverage.

Genre alters the relation. Epic magnifies loss and then localises it. Lyric ode begins from bodily disturbance and constructs a mobile imagined habitat. Seasonal ode disperses voice across labour, atmosphere, and species. The progression should not be read as a simple biographical maturation from turbulence to acceptance. Each poem solves a different formal problem. *Hyperion* asks whether epic can represent supersession without celebrating domination. "Ode to a Nightingale" asks whether imagination can inhabit permanence without abolishing the mortal self. "To Autumn" asks whether plenitude can be represented without denying ending.

The shared answer is mediated sublimity. Keats does not reject transcendence, grandeur, or imaginative enlargement. He subjects them to local conditions. Sublime experience must pass through bodies, places, seasons, and vulnerable forms. Pastoral intimacy does not defeat the sublime; it makes the sublime accountable.

Table 4: Cross-textual configuration of the sublime-pastoral relation



Text	Dominant sublime pressure	Pastoral mediation	Principal thematic convergence	Formal outcome
Hyperion	Cosmic defeat, obscurity, ruined magnitude	Remnants of fertility, embodied care, local pathos	Transience of power and ethical cost of succession	Epic elevation impeded by weight, pause, and incompleteness
Ode to a Nightingale	Imagined immortality, transhistorical song, escape	Scented woodland, warmth, bodily and acoustic locality	Mortality and artistic aspiration	Flight repeatedly checked; ending preserves uncertainty
To Autumn	Temporal extension, atmospheric ending, migration	Cultivated abundance, labour, local multispecies sound	Beauty as seasonal transience	Composure without closure; plenitude contains departure

V. Discussion

The findings revise three critical assumptions: that Keats's sublime is primarily a movement away from the world, that pastoral imagery functions mainly as refuge, and that negative capability is best understood as a private mental trait.

First, the sublime-pastoral relation is materially grounded. In all three poems, enlargement depends on sensory or local forms. Hyperion's cosmic history is made legible by bodies, voices, and remnants of fertility. The nightingale's transhistorical song is heard through darkness, scent, temperature, and bodily fatigue. Autumnal temporality is communicated through fruit, labour, insects, animals, clouds, and migration. This pattern supports Oerlemans's insistence on the materiality of Romantic nature and complements Wolfson's emphasis on the thinking performed by poetic language. Keats's sensuousness is not an ornamental surface placed over philosophical content; it is the method by which philosophical scale becomes available.

Second, pastoral is internally critical. Gifford's account of retreat and return helps explain "Ode to a Nightingale," but Keats complicates the structure because the retreat is never free from mortality. The pastoral woodland is not outside the human world; it contains the conditions that intensify awareness of the human world. "To Autumn" similarly frustrates pastoral timelessness through georgic labour and seasonal transition. The article therefore aligns with ecocritical criticism that treats pastoral as a contested form rather than simply an ecological virtue or ideological failure.

Third, negative capability is a spatial and relational practice. It occurs when the poem allows different scales to coexist without translating them into a single authority. The self is neither sovereign nor erased. Nature is neither harmonious object nor absolute other. The relation remains dynamic. McLoughlin's recent association of negative capability with receptivity to sublime experience is helpful, but the present analysis adds that receptivity is organised by formal environments. Silence, darkness, scent, rhythm, and distance create conditions under which uncertainty can be sustained.

The comparison with other Romantics makes this distinctiveness clearer while avoiding caricature. Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" also moves between intimate detail and large reflective claims, but its dominant trajectory integrates landscape into memory, moral consciousness, and anticipated continuity with Dorothy. Keats's odes more consistently end with residual division. Shelley in "Mont Blanc" uses sublime landscape to pressure



philosophical questions about power and mind; the poem's energies move toward conceptual assertion even when its conclusions remain difficult. Keats repeatedly returns conceptual pressure to vulnerable sensation. Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" shares Keats's interest in discontinuity and visionary landscape, but its spaces culminate in the dangerous figure of inspired creation. Keats's landscape imagination is less invested in the exceptional poet as visionary and more in the unstable relation among perceiver, environment, and passing time.

The ecocritical implication is not that Keats offers a ready-made environmental ethic. The poems retain pastoral idealisation, anthropomorphic personification, and aesthetic appropriations of nonhuman forms. "To Autumn," for instance, absorbs agricultural work into a beautiful seasonal figure and does not represent the political economy of rural labour. "Ode to a Nightingale" turns birdsong into a human meditation on art and death. An ecocritical reading must preserve these limitations.

At the same time, the poems resist several habits associated with anthropocentric mastery. Visual control is frequently weakened by darkness, depth, obscurity, or changing atmosphere. Nonhuman sound exceeds the speaker's possession. Seasonal and migratory processes continue beyond the lyric moment. Human consciousness is shown as dependent on ecological relations it cannot stabilise. This supports Malakshah and Pourqarib's account of Keatsian nature as ecocentric yet sceptical, and it fits Rigby's call for a historically alert recovery of Romantic ecological imagination.

The study's principal theoretical contribution is the concept of mediated sublimity. Traditional sublime theory often emphasises distance from danger, the elevation of reason, or the power of imagination. Keats repeatedly makes such elevation contingent on intimacy. Mediation has three dimensions. It is sensory, because grandeur is perceived through bodily channels; temporal, because permanence is tested against seasonal or mortal change; and ethical, because monumental power is judged from positions of vulnerability and loss. The concept explains why sublime frequency does not amount to sublime supremacy. Pastoral elements regulate the terms on which grandeur can be experienced.

A second contribution is methodological. Descriptive coding can strengthen literary argument when its limits are explicit. The two-to-one motif ratio and overlapping thematic prevalence made recurrent patterns visible, but close reading demonstrated that structural position matters more than quantity. The fewer pastoral markers often occupied transitional or interpretively decisive points. Mixed-method literary analysis is most valuable not when it claims objectivity beyond interpretation, but when it creates a transparent path between corpus-level pattern and local textual evidence.

The findings also have implications for the teaching and editing of Romantic poetry. Survey courses often organise the period through simplified signatures: Wordsworth as nature and memory, Coleridge as imagination and supernaturalism, Shelley as radical idealism, and Keats as beauty and sensuousness. The sublime-pastoral framework disrupts this distribution. It makes Keats's sensuousness conceptually active and shows that beauty in his poetry is a mode of inquiry into limits, dependence, and change. Teaching the poems through scale shifts rather than through isolated themes can help readers see how argument is carried by form. A class might trace the movement from Titan magnitude to bodily posture, from the unseen bird to the flowers at the speaker's feet, or from orchard abundance to migratory flight. Such attention makes close reading an account of relation rather than a hunt for decorative devices.

Editorial practice can similarly benefit from the model. Lineation, punctuation, stanza divisions, and variants affect the perceived balance between movement and arrest. Digital editions that tag only topics or entities risk flattening aesthetic interaction. A more useful edition would annotate changes of scale, sensory modality, temporal reference, and modal co-occurrence while preserving uncertainty around classification. This would allow computational methods to support, rather than pre-empt, interpretive debate.



The concept of mediated sublimity may also travel beyond Keats. It offers a way to analyse works in which large-scale forces become perceptible through intimate forms: climate, empire, geological time, technological systems, or collective violence represented through domestic, bodily, or local experience. The concept should not be universalised without testing, but it identifies a recurring formal problem in environmental and political aesthetics. How can art represent magnitude without converting it into spectacle? How can local attachment avoid denying structures that exceed the local? Keats's answer is provisional but powerful: hold scales together long enough for each to expose the limits of the other.

The broader implication concerns Romantic landscape itself. Landscape should be understood not as a genre of scenic representation but as a scale-making practice. Poems determine what counts as near or far, enduring or fleeting, human or nonhuman, habitable or overwhelming. Keats's poetic landscapes are distinctive because they continually revise those distinctions. Grandeur becomes intimate; intimacy opens onto magnitude; and neither relation becomes final.

Table 5: Comparative positioning within Romantic landscape poetry

Poet/text	Dominant landscape trajectory	Role of pastoral locality	Treatment of sublime scale	Typical closure
Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey	Memory and moral continuity	Supports reflective dwelling and social relation	Integrated into consciousness and future continuity	Qualified resolution
Shelley, Mont Blanc	Philosophical pressure and power	Limited local mediation	Landscape becomes conceptual and ideological force	Assertive but difficult proposition
Coleridge, Kubla Khan	Visionary discontinuity and creation	Garden and fertility within dream architecture	Cavern, chasm, and abyss figure imaginative power	Visionary rupture
Keats, selected corpus	Repeated movement between habitation and enlargement	Sensory, seasonal, and ethical mediation	Grandeur remains accountable to vulnerability	Sustained ambiguity or composure without closure

VI. Conclusion

This article has argued that the sublime and the pastoral in Keats are best understood as mutually transforming modes. Across *Hyperion*, "Ode to a Nightingale," and "To Autumn," sublime grandeur does not stand above pastoral locality. It is produced through it. Pastoral images supply the bodies, habitats, labours, sounds, and temporal processes that make magnitude emotionally and philosophically legible. Sublime pressure, in turn, prevents pastoral intimacy from hardening into an image of permanent refuge.

The analysis identified three distinct configurations. *Hyperion* uses pastoral remnants to humanise monumental defeat and to question epic narratives of historical succession. "Ode to a Nightingale" constructs imaginative transcendence from an embodied woodland sensorium, then uses the pastoral-romance word "forlorn" to return the speaker to mortal division. "To Autumn" transforms pastoral and georgic plenitude into temporal sublimity, locating beauty in processes of ripening, depletion, sound, and migration. The recurrent



themes of transience, mortality, and artistic aspiration arise from these formal relations rather than existing as detachable messages.

The study contributes to Keats scholarship by naming this structure mediated sublimity. Keatsian grandeur is sensory, temporal, and ethically answerable to vulnerability. The concept also clarifies negative capability. It is not only a disposition of the poet or speaker; it is a formal organisation that keeps incompatible scales and values active without forcing reconciliation. In comparison with Wordsworth, Shelley, and Coleridge, Keats is distinctive not because the other poets lack ambiguity, sensuousness, or pastoral elements, but because his landscapes repeatedly return enlargement to fragile local conditions.

The environmental-humanities value of this argument is necessarily qualified. Keats does not articulate contemporary ecological policy, and his poems can idealise labour or appropriate nonhuman life for human reflection. Nevertheless, their resistance to stable boundaries between self and environment, their attention to temporal interdependence, and their distribution of agency across bodies, weather, plants, animals, and sound support a historically responsible ecocritical reading.

The study has limitations. Its corpus is deliberately small, and the comparative poems cannot represent the full landscape practice of Wordsworth, Shelley, or Coleridge. The coding categories are interpretive constructs, while the reported frequencies depend on decisions about segment boundaries and multiple coding. Biographical and historical contexts illuminate the poems but cannot establish authorial intention. These limits restrict generalisation, but they also indicate where further research can test and refine the model.

VII. Future Research Directions

Future research should extend the corpus to *Endymion*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *Lamia*, *The Fall of Hyperion*, the Scottish tour poems, and Keats's letters. A diachronic study could examine whether pastoral mediation changes as Keats moves from early romance and travel writing to the 1819 odes and revised epic. More systematic comparison with women Romantic poets, labouring-class poets, and colonial landscape writing would test whether mediated sublimity is specifically Keatsian or part of a wider Romantic repertoire.

Digital-humanities work could publish an open coding protocol, line-level annotations, and alternative coder decisions, allowing scholars to evaluate the descriptive findings. Computational analysis of sensory lexicons, scale terms, syntax, and sonic pattern could be combined with manuscript study rather than replacing it. Reception research might investigate how readers in different historical or cultural settings experience the poems' changes of scale.

Ecocritical research should examine the material histories absent from idealised landscape: enclosure, agricultural labour, extraction, empire, species knowledge, and climatic variability. Such work would preserve the aesthetic insight of sublime-pastoral interplay while locating its enabling conditions and exclusions. The most productive future scholarship will therefore join formal precision, historical evidence, and environmental critique.

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