

**Melancholy across the Eras of Romanticism and Modernism: the Cases of John Keats
and Franz Kafka**

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Abstract

Melancholy, which perhaps is more frequently referred to as depression in modern days, originated from the Greek word “black bile”. The fashionability of this medical term persisted for centuries, from the ancient Greek period to the Modernist period. This concept gained an indispensable position in literary history, particularly in the Renaissance, the Romantic and the Modern eras. It is also an important aesthetic idea in John Keats’s and Franz Kafka’s literary creation. Living in an era of transition and chaos, both Kafka and Keats led a life inseparable from the notion of melancholy. This essay consists of three sections. The first section investigates the embodiment of melancholy in their works and its source, with emphasis on a biographical approach to establish the interrelationship between the origins of melancholy on the fictional level and on the level of the reality. The second section focuses on the response and remedy of melancholic instances in the works of Keats and Kafka. In the third section of this study, key themes addressed in the previous two sections would be juxtaposed to analyze the significance of melancholy to their literary careers. By comparing the two authors’ attempts to transcend melancholy and their different views on literature, it is hoped that the third part may shed light on the differences and resonance of the notion of melancholy in the Romantic period and the Modernist period.

Reflection

As a student who has studied literature for almost four years, I am very grateful that we were given the chance to work on this independent research project and to try our hands at different research forms and methods in our final year of undergraduate studies. By granting us a high degree of autonomy in almost every aspect of the project, which includes the selection of topic and the research methodology, the design of this course inspires innovation, critical thinking and reflective contemplation on inter-disciplinary issues. It is an opportunity for us to experiment with our wildest ideas and scholarly potential through revisiting, integrating and remodifying what we have learnt in the past. Personally, working on the project allows me to take on the challenge of investigating melancholic literature, which has always been on my mind since my second year of study. It also prompts me to go beyond what I have been doing in the past and to take a more macro perspective when doing literary analysis, which subsequently enables me to further explore and embrace my identity as an English major.