

# ***A gordian shape of dazzling hue***

Serpent Symbolism in Keats's Poetry



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## Contents

Acknowledgements . . . . .	7
Introduction . . . . .	9
1. Framing the issue . . . . .	13
1.1 Occurrences and distribution . . . . .	13
1.2 The serpent as ‘living symbol’ . . . . .	16
2. Models of creativity . . . . .	21
2.1 The Romantic conception of creativity . . . . .	21
2.2 Keats’s conception of creativity . . . . .	26
2.2.1 Imagination . . . . .	28
2.2.2 Fancy . . . . .	37
2.2.3 Invention . . . . .	41
2.2.4 Beauty . . . . .	42
2.2.5 Negative Capability . . . . .	44
2.2.6 Spontaneous growth vs deliberate creation . . . . .	45
3. Keats’s serpents . . . . .	49
3.1 Physical characteristics . . . . .	49
3.2 Sources . . . . .	68
4. Textual analyses . . . . .	81
4.1 <i>Endymion</i> . . . . .	81
4.2 Serpents and birds . . . . .	94
4.3 <i>Hyperion</i> . . . . .	96
4.4 <i>Lamia</i> . . . . .	104
Conclusion . . . . .	119

Bibliography . . . . .	123
Primary sources . . . . .	123
Secondary sources . . . . .	124

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## Introduction

Even at first reading, Keats's poetry strikes the reader with the richness of its animal imagery, from the nightingale of the famous ode to the thrush of "O thou whose face hath felt the winter's wind" up to Mrs Reynolds's cat in the less known sonnet. However, no other animal in Keats's whole poetic production shares the serpent's privilege of being at the core of such a long and significant poem as *Lamia*. The fact that a snake is given such prominence comes as no surprise if we agree with Barbara Hannah that "The serpent appears probably more than any other animal in mythology, fairy tales, and primitive religions as well as in the most differentiated faiths" (152). It is, indeed, among the most important as well as most ambiguous symbols that are found across cultures and epochs. If it is true, however, that the centrality of the snake in human imagination has been universally acknowledged and will not be dealt with in the present study, the same does not hold for the important role that the serpent plays in Keats's poems, since its study has been mostly limited to *Lamia* as its most evident instance<sup>1</sup>.

As a matter of fact, the representation of animals in literature has lately received a considerable degree of academic attention, and books such as *Kindred Brutes* (2001) by Christine Kenyon-Jones, *Romanticism and Animal Rights* (2003) by David Perkins and *Animality in British Romanticism* (2012) by Peter Heymans have analysed the issue specifically as far as the Romantic period is concerned. All three texts obviously deal with Keats's depictions of animals, but none of them seems to attach particular importance to the serpent<sup>2</sup>. Conversely,

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1 De Almeida can be considered as an exception, since she is among the few critics to have acknowledged the importance of the serpent also in poems other than *Lamia*. She even devotes to Keats's snakes an entire chapter of her book ("The Ambiguity of Snakes" 182–196), where she interestingly takes into account the influences that classical mythology, medical and naturalist treatises as well as mesmerism may have had on Keats's presentation of serpents.

2 Just as Perkins and Heymans do not even mention the serpent and the former focuses almost

a specific discussion of serpent symbolism in Romantic poetry is found in *Serpent Imagery and Symbolism* (1966) by Lura Nancy and Duilio Pedrini, which has the merit of acknowledging the role of serpent symbolism in the works of the major Romantic poets as well as attempting a classification of it. Even though this taxonomy is undoubtedly useful, as it gathers together almost all the references to snakes in the authors being considered, the extent of its scope tends to smooth over the peculiarities of each writer and, at the same time, to prevent the definition of a somewhat coherent pattern in the serpent imagery of each poet. In other words, the book appears to be a collection rather than an interpretation. As far as Keats is concerned, even the Pedrinis fail to do justice to the actual importance of serpent symbolism in his works as well as to his originality, as they even argue for “the conventionality of many of the serpent images in his poetry” (50).

The present study aims to fill the gap that is produced by the absence of a thorough analysis of serpent symbolism in Keats’s poetry. Its relevance, as will be seen, is evident both on a qualitative level – the snake has been said to be the only animal around which a long narrative poem revolves<sup>3</sup> – and on a quantitative one – critics have failed to point out the fact that the serpent is one of the most often mentioned animals in Keats’s poetry<sup>4</sup>. In order to correct this neglect, I will not resort to the methodological approach of recent studies, such as those of Kenyon-Jones, Perkins and Heymans, which partly draw on ecocriticism and consider Romantic representations of animals as part of the wider problem of the conception of nature. In these works, it is the way the Romantics saw animals and their relationships with humans to be the main interest, so that both literary and non-literary sources of the period are taken into account as proofs of the views of the time. My approach, instead, will be exclusively literary, as I will not focus on the general Romantic conception of animals, but rather on the specificity of the serpent imagery in Keats’s poetry and on its meaning in terms of symbolism.

For this purpose, my chief strategy will be to combine three methodological approaches: a Jungian perspective, a cognitive one, and formal analysis. I will resort to Jung’s works for two main reasons. First of all, his definition of ‘living symbol’ will allow me to specify the terms under which the notion of symbol will

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exclusively on Keats’s birds, which, as will be seen, are the other main component of his animal imagery, so Kenyon-Jones deals with it only as far as *Lamia* is concerned (180–181).

3 As the Pedrinis point out, “Serpent imagery in *Lamia* is organic; there would not be a poem without it” (73).

4 Although the Pedrinis aim to gather together all the images of serpents of the major Romantic poets and have the merit of widening the range of Keatsian references beyond *Lamia*, they still fail to mention all snake occurrences in Keats’s poems and limit themselves to *Endymion* III 237–240, 490–502, *Hyperion* I 259–263, *Otho the Great* III ii 152–155, V ii 6–8, several passages from *Lamia* and a rejected stanza of “Ode on Melancholy”, where Medusa is mentioned.

be applied to Keats's snakes. This will be discussed in the first chapter, after a statistical survey of all Keats's mentions of serpents, which has never been done before and will point out their quantitative importance. In Keats's poems, the serpent is not presented as a static symbol, as something *standing for* something else that can be identified once and for all. Conversely, it consists in a dynamic symbol which does not possess a fixed referent, but is generated by a constant tension between two opposites, so that their opposition, together with the corresponding significance of the symbol itself, continues to transform while remaining inside the same paradigm, which will be identified as a metapoetic one.

The tension between the two opposites which produces the symbol of the serpent will be shown to parallel precisely the one between the divergent and convergent aspects of the creative process. These two terms are drawn from cognitive studies on creativity, such as *Explaining Creativity* (2006) by Sawyer and *Creativity* (2005) by Pope, which I will refer to in order to derive a descriptive language for the different elements or moments of poetic creation which come into play as far as the snake is concerned. As the metapoetic significance of the serpent obviously depends on Keats's own ideas about the process of poetic composition, the second chapter will be devoted to outlining the main aspects of Keats's conception of creativity, together with the Romantic one, with which Keats has to come to terms in order to develop his own. This overview precedes the actual analysis of the serpent due to its preliminary function: the reader has to be made familiar with Keats's ideas about the creative process as well as the Romantic ones in order to understand their relevance when it comes to the symbol of the snake.

The metapoetic interpretation of serpent symbolism will be accounted for through the second recourse to Jung. The third chapter will focus on physical descriptions of snakes by highlighting their recurring features – a task that has never been carried out systematically before, though this approach has the merit of making it possible to identify some fundamental points for the interpretation of the symbol. At the same time, Keats's characterisation of the serpent will be compared with the archetypal one that is found throughout Jung's production and that has been systematised by Hannah. From their works I will draw some interpretative starting points that will help the task of detecting some correspondences between Keats's representations of the serpent and of imagination. In any case, my perspective will be cultural rather than archetypal: the recurrent attributes that are ascribed to snakes will be considered not as depending on the universal structures of the human mind but as being culturally determined. This means that Keats is confronted with this model of serpent as represented in cultural texts and, in particular, as he was a poet, in literary sources, to whose analysis the second part of the chapter is devoted. Both the comparison with Jung's depiction of the snake and the analysis of the sources show that the

elements that Keats innovatively adds, or upon which he lays a greater emphasis, can all be easily traced to a metapoetic significance within Keats's poetic system.

Lastly, after identifying the most frequently recurring characteristics of Keatsian snakes – such as hypnotic eyes, a contorted shape, convulsions and a sense of suffocation – as well as the general frame of reference for their interpretation, in the fourth chapter I will apply these general notions to the most significant occurrences of serpents in Keats's whole poetic production, that is, the episode of Glaucus in Book 3 of *Endymion*, a passage from Book 1 of *Hyperion* and *Lamia*. I will pay particular attention to the formal – for instance, phonosymbolic, metrical and syntactic – aspects of the poems in order to find proofs of my assumptions, and to show how all the levels of the text contribute to conveying the same meaning about snakes. The analysis of the symbol of the serpent in these compositions will then be connected with passages from contemporary letters where Keats expresses his views on the creative process. It will thus be seen how the image of the snake succeeds in expressing some of Keats's most important ideas, as well as his anxieties, about poetic creation – in particular, about the role of imagination and the communication of its insights to the reader – and how the symbol continues to change as it follows the development of his conception of creativity.