



DEPICTION OF BEAUTY VIA DESPAIR IN KEATS'S POETRY

ShailjaChhabra

Associate Prof. Department of English, Govt. P.G. College, Sec-1, Panchkula.

Abstract

This paper aims at identifying the unique ability of Keats to find beauty everywhere; even despair can produce beauty on the hands of Keats who is capable to find joy even in the moments of pain and frustration. He is also distinguishable by the power he mastered to bring life, soul and feeling to the description of these moments of pain in a way brought an immortal existence to his odes as long as the existence of human joy and pain. The tragic tones in his poems together with the little joyful ones are clear indicators for the sad-resistant emotional state of a frustrated lover whose lost love sharpens his ability to detect beauty and even to create it in the moments of pain and suffering. Keats goes on contemplating the nature and the strangeness of human life being doomed to lead a life of woe. He finds immortal life out of mortality. He is able to find ecstasy and happiness out of painful suffering. Thus, Keats is capable of creating beauty not only out of despair but even out of ugliness. Keats was "obsessed by the close juxtaposition of joy and grief, delight and pain and beauty and despair". It is this triumph of the stoic acceptance of life over despair which he attains through a deep spiritual experience in his poetry.

Keywords: Beauty and Despair, Frustration, Immortal Existence, Obsessed, Woe.

John Keats is the finest flower of the Romantic Movement. Deeply revered as one of the greatest word-painters in English poetry, his verses present subtle imagery and a fusion of different sensations that has time and again, produced musical effects, and in that, he was rather a conscious artist. Critics today say that what makes the poetry of Keats the most distinguished among all romantic poets is the fact that his poetic genius blossomed under the romantic breeze, and matured under the sunshine of classicism. The genuine classicism of ancient Greece, which shows the characteristic classical restraint, is very much present in his poems. What more, it is harmoniously blended with the romantic ardor of his poetry, which results in a wonderful fusion of romantic impulse and classical severity. This statement holds much truth when we take into account his more mature Odes, where we notice Keats' sense of form, purity and orderliness. His Odes have all the spontaneity and freedom of imagination that characterize the poetry of the Romantic era.

The Romantic era, as history says, was the time when almost the whole of Europe was intensely shaken by the ideas and ideologies of the French Revolution. Major poets of that period were greatly inspired by the personal and political liberty of the revolution, breaking the bonds of the artistic conventions of the 18th century. Those were the times when these ideas and ideals "awaked the youthful passion of Wordsworth, of Coleridge", "stirred the wrath of Scott" and "worked like yeast on Byron"... However, Keats was distinguished from his contemporary poets and literary figures in the fact that the excitement and the turmoil that gathered round the revolution was not directly represented in his poetry. His poetry, was an embodiment of his vision of beauty that he sees everywhere in nature, in art, in human deeds of chivalry and in the fascinating tales of ancient Greece. This in fact, was the profoundest and the most innermost experience of Keats' soul, which he expresses most emphatically in his 'Ode on a Grecian Urn': Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty', that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. In his 'Ode to a Nightingale', the poet describes the bird's song as the voice of eternity and expresses intense longing to die in the hope of merging with eternity, there is this romantic suggestiveness of sensual delight of the poet in these lines:

The same that oft-times hath/Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam/Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

However, Forlorn! The very word is like a bell/To toll me back from thee to my sole self... is a perfect example of romantic passion fused with classical restraint.

Keats has been identified by the unique ability to find beauty everywhere; even despair can produce beauty on the hands of Keats who is capable to find joy even in the moments of pain and frustration. He is also distinguishable by the power he mastered to bring life, soul and feeling to the description of these moments of pain in a way brought an immortal existence to his odes as long as the existence of human joy and pain. Keats's despair resulted mainly in his hard life, in which both poverty and ill-health conditions combined together to lead him to the failure in love meanwhile it, i.e. despair, strengthens his power to vivify the pain- joy images in his poems in general and his odes in particular. The tragic tones, in these poems, together with the little joyful ones are clear indicators for the sad-resistant emotional state of a frustrated lover whose lost love sharpens his ability to detect beauty and even to create it in the moments of pain and suffering.

Keats' moments of despair are affiliated mainly to his lost love, Fanny Brawn. Consequently, exploring Keats' love poems, that are either addressed to Fanny or written for her, is the best way to explain how Keats manages to create beauty via his



despair. Keats' life was too short to enable him to love more than once. Fanny Brawn was the beginning and the end of his love relations. Their relation started in 1818 and ended by his death in 1821. During that three-year-love period, Keats' poetic creativity reached its highest. The increasing heat of his love being frustrated by both weak health conditions and poor financial situation got his poetic creativity to ripen and mature early in his life.

An example for Keats' beauty via despair can be found in his famous ballad *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. It seems logical to maintain that the poem is really about Keats's confused feelings for, his fiancée, Fanny Brawne; to whom he could not commit fully. The *La Belle Dame* or the beautiful woman who has no mercy upon her lovers is Fanny Brawne with whom Keats felt in love but still uncertain of matching her because his friends disapproved the possibility of such match. Her beauty enslaved him just as the beauty of the mysterious woman, *La Belle Dame*, enslaved the knight in the story of the poem, as well as kings, princes, and warriors. For him, the beauty of Fanny is as mysterious and merciless as the beauty of that woman in the story of the poem:

I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful - a faery's child,
...I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
...And sure in language strange she said -
'I love thee true'.

Though the knight, as well as Keats, did not know the beautiful woman well, they are both deadly enslaved by her beauty and charm to an extent got them to lose their consciousness. But that deadly- like condition enabled them to discover the sorrowful and reality of being enslaved to her:

And there she lulled me asleep
And there I dreamed - Ah! woe betide! -
...They cried - 'La Belle Dame sans Merci
Hath thee in thrall!'

When the knight, together with Keats, wakened up they discovered that what happened was a nightmare then they both realized their miserable condition:

I saw their starved lips in the gloam,
With horrid warning gaped wide,...
And this is why I sojourn here
Alone and palely loitering,
...And no birds sing.

Lamia is another allegory in which Keats finds identification between his love story and the story in it. It is a long narrative poem its main theme is the love-episodes of Lycius and *Lamia*. *Lamia* is a serpent immortal goddess who falls in love with a mortal young handsome man, Lycius. She has the ability to change her form. In order to win Lycius's love, she changes herself into a beautiful girl and waits by the roadside for him to pass by. When he comes, she accosts him who falls headlong in love with her at first sight. *Lamia* gives up her immortality for his sake.

When Lycius decides to marry *Lamia* in a social manner and fixes a day of wedding, Apollonius arrives there and warns Lycius in the big feast that he has been deceived by the woman he loves as she is not a mortal woman but a serpent one. For Lycius, it is too difficult to believe but soon the revelation takes place and *Lamia* begins to dissolve into a serpent and vanishes altogether. Being unable to bear the shocking pain, Lycius dies of the shock. This poem is an allegory to sing out Keats' love for Fanny and her response to his love. It is a contradiction between dream and reality. So like *Lamia* and Lycius, Fanny and Keats also remain in pure love, lost in the ecstasy of passion, forgetful of the social world, the dream stays. But the moment, when Keats like Lycius tries to give this dream a social shape of marriage it vanishes. There is a suitable suggestion that *Lamia* represents Fanny, Lycius represents Keats and Apollonius represents the bitter reality into which the sweet dream dissolves:

Then *Lamia* breath'd death breath; the sophist's eye,
Like a sharp spear, went through her utterly,
...He look'd and look'd again a level - No!
"A Serpent!" echoed he; no sooner said,
Than with a frightful scream she vanished:
And Lycius' arms were empty of delight...



This poem foresees the end of his love relation with Fanny: he will die before he could achieve his dream i.e. before being able to marry Fanny. These poems are all overwhelmed with the feeling of despair and frustration. Keats' despair strengthens his poetic creativity to produce many of his aesthetic imagery. His love poems prove Keats' unique ability to find beauty via despair everywhere. Many of the images concerning death for instance the end of a lover's embrace, the images on an ancient urn, the reaping of grain in autumn all of these are not only symbols of death, but examples of it. The instances of great beauty and art also caused Keats to ponder mortality. Hovering near this dream, however, was a morbid sense that death might intervene and terminate his projects; he expresses these concerns in the mournful sonnet "When I have fears that I may cease to be." (6)

In his poetry, Keats proposed the contemplation of beauty as a way of delaying the inevitability of death. Unlike mortal beings, beautiful things will never die; but will keep demonstrating their beauty for all time. The speaker in Ode on a Grecian Urn envies the immortality of the lute players and trees inscribed on the ancient vessel because they shall never cease playing their songs, nor will they ever shed their leaves. He reassures young lovers by telling them that even though they shall never catch their mistresses, these women shall always stay beautiful. The people on the urn, unlike the speaker, shall never stop having experiences. They shall remain permanently depicted while the speaker changes, grows old, and eventually dies. (7)

In Ode to Autumn, Keats who is aware of his soon mortality, celebrates autumn the season precedes winter which is the season of coldness and symbol of death. Autumn "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness!" and "Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun". After glorifying the special beauty of autumn, Keats comes back to the constant mortality of this world "Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?" The songs and beauty of youth have gone; but autumn being, personified into a lady, should not be bothered by the mortality of the world. Keats tells us to enjoy the present beauty and not to spoil it by being involved in the past sorrow or thinking of the eventual death of the mortal world:

Think not of them, thou hast thy music too, -
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
...Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies.

In *Ode to a Nightingale*, Keats' loss of sensation, that is normally caused by severe pain and aching, leads him to awareness where happiness can be immortal. He says:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
...Singing of summer in full-throated ease.

Keats finds in the feelings of pain, suffering and numbness a hidden ecstasy, a spiritual joy and an eternal pleasure. He is happy for the happiness of the nightingale and his happiness brings the numbness he feels. The desire for death is clear enough in his ode. Death which is the source of pain, suffering and sadness; for Keats, it is easeful and source of relief. He is half in love with death which is always hated by all creatures:

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!

Keats' spirit seeks escape from pain and change via death and yearns for immortality via the eternal song of the nightingale. Keats skillfully mastered handling the contradictions by exploring the complexities of sorrow and joy, numbness and heightened sensitivity, life and death and by trying to hold these oppositions in balance. Keats proposed the contemplation of beauty as a way of delaying the inevitability of death. Death seems to mystify Keats who tries to give it a common form so as to change its ugly horrible reality. Dying seems to be the medium to reach the ideal state. In his poem *On Death*, he inquires whether it is possible to regard death as a sleep since life seems to be a dream and beautiful events look like phantom and pleasures as visions; but unfortunately we still think that death is the greatest pain:

Can death be sleep, when life is but a dream,
And scenes of bliss pass as a phantom by?
The transient pleasures as a vision seem,



And yet we think the greatest pain's to die.
How strange it is that man on earth should roam,
And lead a life of woe, but not forsake
His rugged path... .

Keats goes on contemplating the nature and the strangeness of human life being doomed to lead a life of woe. He finds immortal life out of mortality. He is able to find ecstasy and happiness out of painful suffering. Thus, Keats is capable of creating beauty not only out of despair but even out of ugliness. Keats was “obsessed by the close juxtaposition of joy and grief, delight and pain and beauty and despair”. He strived to harmonize ‘the life of sensation with life of thought’. His later poems reflected strong yearning to subject himself persistently and unflinchingly, to the joy and beauty of life, that is accompanied by the inevitable pain, hopelessness and despair of life. Hence, the lines: “Joy whose hand is ever at his lips/Bidding adieu”. Keats knew that joy and beauty on this earth are transient, and from this transience, the melancholy originates. Melancholy, he says, “dwells with beauty/Beauty that must die”.

As he expresses in his ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, ‘When old age shall this generation waste/Thou shall remain in midst of other woe than ours’. It is this triumph of the stoic acceptance of life over despair which he attains through a deep spiritual experience. He was purely a thinker profoundly concerned with the mystery of life. As Stopford A. Brooke rightly comments on this ability as a mark of Keats’ genius:

The life in the moment, and in the momentary joy and movement in all things in nature, was the source of his directness in description. This joy in the present, this absorption in the beauty of the hour, this making of it a divine possession, and losing in its loveliness the pain of life is one of the chief marks of his genius. (4)

Works Cited

1. H. Ghosh & K. N. Khandelwal, eds., *Narian's John Keats: Selected Poems* (Agra: Lakshmi Narian Agarwal), p. 57.
2. Ed Friedlander, *Enjoying La Belle Dame Sans Merci by John Keats*. <http://www.pathguy.com/lbdsdm.htm>, Fri. Mach 25 2011.
3. H. Ghosh & K. N. Khandelwal, p. 58.
4. John Stone, “The Poet-Physician: Keats and Medical Science”, *The New England Journal of Medicine*. November 8, 1984 (England: Massachusetts Medical Society, 2011), Wed. Feb. 23 2011.
5. Hermione De Almeida, *Romantic Medicine and John Keats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.3.
6. Coles Editorial Board, *Keats' Poetry: Notes* (Rama Brothers, 2003), p. 80.
7. Zool., “Vampire Bat: A Vampire, 3”, Webster (1913) in *The Collaborative International Dictionary of English*, Vol.0.48, <http://onlinedictionary.datasegment.com/word/vampire+bat> Sun. Apr. 3 2011.
8. “The Serpent-Vampire in Keats's *Lamia*”, *123HelpMe.com* (2000-2011), <http://www.123helpme.com/preview.asp?id=10619>, Sun. Apr. 3 2011. H. Ghosh & K. N. Khandelwal, p. 318.
9. “Keats' Negative Capability”, *BBC*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A813962> Thur. Apr. 7 2011.
10. “Negative Capability”, *Keats' Kingdom*, <http://www.keatsian.co.uk/negativecapability>. Apr. 7 2011.
11. The Barry, *Ode to a Nightingale*, <http://playitoffcool.blogspot.com/2009/04/ode-to-nightingale-and-negative.html>, Sat. Apr. 9 2011.
12. Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 413.
13. Robert Gittings, *John Keats* (London: Heinemann, 1968), p. 314.