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John Keats - Romantic poet

Shine Thomas

Research Scholar (CMJ University)

Abstract

It is one of the commonplaces of literary criticism to point out that Keats is essentially a poet of the senses woefully deficient in intellectual substance. Keats himself was aware of this and once, in sheer poetic ecstasy cried out, 'Oh, for a life of sensations rather than of thought'. He lived to ponder to his senses in every manner. He drank in the perfume of new-blossomed flowers. The music of the nightingale made him feel raptures that nothing else could give. He feasted his eyes on everything that was beautiful. Beauty intoxicated him wherever it was found-in women or in the gorgeous splendor of Nature. The soft silken feel of a lovely woman's arm of the petal of a new-blown flower thrilled him to the very soul. He loved to pamper his taste with the sweetest fruits and choicest delicacies. He never grudged himself any type of sensory delight. He exulted in sheer physical enjoyment.

Introduction

More than any other poem of his, The Eve of St. Agnes, reveals him as essentially the poet of the five senses. Music's golden tongue is unloosened here. We hear the silver snarling trumpets chiding: the festive clarion, the kettledrum and the far- heard clarinet affray the ears of 'Porphyro'. 'Porphyro' takes up 'Madeline' lute and plays on it an ancient ditty, long since mute

Descriptions and visions of surpassing loveliness fascinate the eye in this poem. The picture of Madeline with her dress slipped to her knees like a mermaid in sea-weed is perhaps unsurpassed for its exquisite charm and suggestiveness. Keats is also unmatched for bringing out vividly the glory and gorgeousness of color as in:

'Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes

As are the tiger –moths' deep damasked wings'

The shielded escutcheon blushing with the blood of queens and kings makes one feel the color come and go. Scientific observation has pointed out that moonlight has not the power to transmit the colors painted on a window but this does not in any way detract from the amazing beauty of the description where Keats speaks of the warm gloves thrown on Madeline's fair breast the rose- bloom that feel on her hand and the glory of the halo that surrounded her.

How susceptible Keats was to sweet smells and perfumes is evident from a study of 'The Eve of St. Agnes'. Delicious perfumes intoxicated his very soul. Madeline's balmy breath fills the room with a delicious fragrance. Her bodice becomes fragrant by contract with her body. The Syrups and the dainties heaped on the table fill the chilly room with a mild perfume. Porphyro melts into Madeline's dream as the rose blended his odor with the violet.

The vividness of the descriptions makes us feel everything that is described. The extreme chill sends a shiver through us. The beadsman's fingers are numb, and the owl for all its feathers is cold. Warmth is easily and as naturally suggested as the cold itself. The warmth of Madeline's chamber is brought into clear contrast with the chill that prevails outside. The delicious warmth of Madeline's body seems transferred to her very jewels.

The gorgeousness of Keats's descriptions is most evident when he describes the rich sweets and choice delicacies that are heaped on the table. He seems to surpass himself here in vividness and suggestiveness. Candied apple, quince, plum, jellies soother than the creamy curd lucent syrups tinct with cinnamon, manna and dates from distant Fez, and spiced dainties from silken Samarkand and cleared Lebanon go to make up the most magnificent banquet ever described in poetry.

Beauty, color, imagination, and verbal magic-all these have gone in to these descriptions. The poet has this supreme advantage over the artist has to content him by giving pleasure to the eyes alone. Descriptions of all the significant features of the chapel, the castle hall, the chamber and the courtyard can be visualized. Thus description balances narrative and we get a fine story finely told.

It was Milton who said that poetry should be simple sensuous and impassioned. Even great poets have not always combined these three elements with uniform effect. Milton laid down in his famous definition the ideal condition rather than what can be easily achieved by every poet. In some poets we find the predominance of one or other of these qualities to the corresponding diminution of the rest. In the case of Keats, we find the sensuous element more strongly pronounced than in many other poets.

Sensuousness is not the same thing as a mere appeal to the senses. Poetry which appeals to the senses, if it stops there merely proves itself of inferior quality, lacking in the power of suggestion or giving renewed pleasure every time it is read. Sensualism suffers from the course of surfeit, recoils on itself and goes about on perpetual hankering and perpetual discontent. But when the appeal goes beyond the senses to the synthetic power of imagination and ideals and feelings are roused to a pitch of pleasurable enjoyment divested of their grosser elements, then we have the intellectual pleasure of the highest kind. It is this power of suggestion combined with a natural love of beauty which we find Keats exploiting with the utmost ease in his poetry. He sees with the mind's eye the enduring element of beauty in all beautiful things in life whether in man or in nature or in art.

Poets are generally liable to warm on impassioned description of the idea of love. It is here that there is scope for descending to low level. Keats's treatment of love may therefore be taken as a test of his power of sensuous appeal. His description of Madeline is notable for its admirable reticence. He helps us to see the kind of thoughts which animated her mind, and there is nothing in them to suggest anything low vulgar or gross. Her personal beauty is described so as to emphasize her spiritual beauty. She rises like a missioned spirit. She is like an angel except for wings. She is the very personification of purity and innocence. She is like a mermaid half-hidden in sea-weed as she is about to get into her bed. As she sleeps, she is like a rose which has become a bud again. Such descriptions give us room for thought in addition to the enjoyment of our pleasure and their appropriateness.

The appeal to our sense of beauty is also made through the sister arts of painting, sculpture and music. These are much more remote from the grossly earthly plane since the medium through which they appeal to us is more difficult of control. Imagination can never tire

of analyzing the composite appeal of the casement of Madeline's chamber. How exquisitely pleasant is the suggestion of going to sleep in the phrase 'popped warmth'! How appearing must have been the notes of the ditty which Porphyro sings close to her ear. Even the dinner which is arranged for the maiden and him does not include anything which may revolt the imagination. It is clear from these that the appeal is made to the power of the mind and imagination and not merely to the senses. A good number of tragedies continuously haunted Keats's life and his family. His father and his brother Tom met with untimely death. Financial problems, hopeless love affair (he was unable to marry Fanny Brawne because of his ill health), professional setbacks ...etc were the notable tragedies he had to face. Moreover, he himself was killed by tuberculosis at the early age of twenty-five.

His poetry was influenced by the events occurred to him and, in fact, most of his poems are imbued with a sense of melancholy, death and mortality. In these moments of need, Keats turned instinctively to poetry, which he conceived as something absolute, his only reason for life "I cannot exist without poetry", and through which he might achieve a kind of divinity. Poetry, he thought, should spring naturally from his inner soul and should reproduce what his Imagination suggested to him; and what struck his Imagination most was Beauty, not the "intellectual beauty" of Shelley, but the one which reveals itself to his senses. Beauty, in fact, became the central theme of all Keats's poems, since it was the only consolation he found in life. The memory of something beautiful brought him joy, as he wrote in the opening lines of *Endymion*: "A thing of beauty is a joy forever". Beauty could be either physical such as women, nature, statues, and paintings or spiritual like friendship, love, poetryetc, though they were to be considered together, since physical beauty was simply the expression of spiritual beauty and, even if the former might be subject to time and decay, the latter was eternal and immortal. Imagination recognizes Beauty in existing things, but also it is the creative force of Beauty. In the letter to his friend Benjamin Bailey he wrote: "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination. What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not". The worship of beauty is the clue to everything in Keats and it is quite usual to find that Beauty and Truth often unite as we see closing lines in "Ode on a Grecian Urn".

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