

## JOHN KEATS AND THE ROMANTIC ELEMENTS IN HIS ODES

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### His Life

John Keats lived between 1795 - 1821. When he was still a child, his father was killed by a fall from a horse and his mother died of tuberculosis which later caused the death of Tom Keats, his brother, and John Keats himself. Even when his health was good, Keats felt a foreboding of early death and applied himself to his art with a desperate urgency. In acute distress and emotional turmoil, in 1819 masterpiece followed masterpiece.

Keats' life, like Beethoven's, served as a pattern for the Romantic artist.

### Keats' Poetry

In Keats' poems we see a concreteness of description of the object he contemplates. All the senses - tactile gustatory, kinetic, organic, as well as visual and auditory - combined to give the total apprehension of his experience. His experiences often accord closely with his personal life and the disasters he had Keats is austere in poetry and yet he keeps high colouring and variety of appeal to the senses and the mind. He believes a simple style is essential. In accordance with Wordsworth, Keats lists as an "axiom" that if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all.

Keats is extraordinarily sensitive to the mingling of pleasure and pain, to the destructiveness of love, and to the erotic quality of the longing for death. His poems have little concern with contemporary social and political events. He is in his glory in the fields. The humming of a bee, the sight of a flower, the glitter of the sun seem to make his soul tremble.

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## **Keats' Odes in General**

Keats' odes are on the irreconcilable conflict in basic human desires. The subjects of these odes show variations, and yet they have common characteristics: each presents an idea, an intellectual determination, and they are all written with the principle of artistic economy - "infinite riches in a little room."

### **Ode on a "Grecian Urn" - The Immortality of Beauty**

Keats uses the Grecian urn to exemplify the immortality of beauty. His aim is to communicate his delight in the shape of a Grecian urn. So, out of his imagination and with the magic of words, he shapes a Grecian urn, etches it with scenes of men and maidens dancing and playing and of a priest leading a procession to an outdoor altar.

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" can be called the embodiment of his ideas about the influence of beauty upon life. To Keats, beauty is not a passing thing but immortal. In this ode, he affirms the immortality of beauty through an urn created centuries ago. The artist has long since died, but the beauty he created has lived on in the scenes he pictured. As with the scenes on the urn, in Keats' view, beauty is permanent as well as being the means of arriving at the truth about life.

In the urn, which captures moments of intense experience and freezes them into marble immortality - Keats finds the perfect correlation for his persistent concern with the longing for permanence in a world of change. He captures the immortal beauty through a 'sylvan historian' which is the urn itself. He likes the idea of something being there, something which cannot be changed forever :

'Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave  
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare.'

### **Keats' Powerful Imagination**

Although Keats cannot hear the sweet melodies of the pipers on the urn, yet he finds delight in them thinking that the soft pipes are not singing to the sensual ear, but to the ear of imagination :

'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter...'

These sweet melodies will forever be singing to the ear of imagination in all generations.

Keats is sent into raptures by the quietness of the pictures on the urn. In the well of his imagination, he feels a passion of ecstasy in the quietness of the peaceful little town with its peaceful citadel. This little town which will be forever empty and thus silent means more to Keats than one which is inhabited. The silence which hangs on the town will forever be there.

Keats is filled with envy at the immortality of the scenes described on the urn, while generations one after the other have been wasting away :

'When old age shall this generation waste,

Thou shalt remain...'

In these lines, we feel the fear of an early death which Keats' father and his brother had already suffered. The poet seems to put an underlying meaning into 'old age' but the suffering from foreboding death restrains him from terming 'old age' as 'tuberculosis'.

### **Vividness in Description**

Keats' description of the pictures on the urn is so vivid that it appeals to all our senses and we can easily visualize the figures. The mysterious priest leading the garland dressed heifer lowing to the skies will embody itself into our imagination even if we are totally stranger to such a scene.

In the treatment of a simple thing, in an urn which is presented to us in an unusual aspect, Keats seems to weep that human beings are not immortal like the men, gods, and maidens on the urn.

### **"Ode to a Nightingale"**

Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" begins with a change of aspect in the natural scene. The poet feels as though he has drunk hemlock or opiate. This serves only as stimulus to raise an emotional problem or personal crisis. At the time when Keats wrote this ode, the personal problem was his brother Tom's early death. He finds consolation when he pours out his feelings called up by the nightingale. The nightingale is regarded to be a source of consolation.

### **Longing for Death**

The predominant mood in the poem is the enjoyment of death. Keats feels the highest intensity of love for the nightingale as an approximation to death or the longing for death. Every stanza has either a direct

reference to death or some term associated with death. In the first stanza, for instance, Keats implies death by longing for hemlock or opiate which will sink him to Lethe, to the waters of forgetfulness. In the lines 18 - 20, there is an almost direct implication of death: he wishes to drink the beaker of wine to leave the world without being seen.

### **Away from the Troubles**

Keats cannot find a spiritual home in his own flesh, bone and soul. He is seeking a region which is capable of providing the proper environment for his passionate melancholic and isolated soul. The voyage he longs for in "Ode to a Nightingale" is away from the known, conventional and dull environment - away from the troubles of his own soul - toward an exotic and mysterious place: toward the 'Warm South of France' with its sunburned mirth and provincial songs and dances. He wants to go to a place where his exhausted and troubled soul might discover peace and find a haven. He wishes he would be like the nightingale to disappear in the forest of peace, joy and true beauty, but he cannot fly as the nightingale can, so he urgently needs a beaker of wine with 'beaded bubbles winking at the brim' to disappear and be with his nightingale.

### **Variety of Appeal to the Senses**

All through the ode, we discern a concreteness of description in which all the senses combine to give the total and full expression of the thing he writes about. In the description of a glass of wine:

'... the blushful Hippocrene

With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,

And purple stained mouth...' the poet appeals to our sense of taste, of sight, of smell and even to our sense of hearing with the bubbles dying away one after the other on the edge of the glass. Keats succeeds, in the ease, in conveying profound reflections by pictures and images and these profound reflections would not have been so visible and life-like even in a painting.

### **Pain and Misery - Immortality**

In Keats' world, sadness predominates over happiness and his world is full of misery and heartbreak. Like many Romantics, Keats finds melancholy in delight and pleasure in pain, in "Ode to a Nightingale", in the heart of the moonlight, he sees no light at all. He is so wrapped up

in his dark mood that he cannot see the flowers at his feet. All his senses seem to have failed.

Keats yearns for immortality and immortal beauty. He reveals his envy for the nightingale's immortality in these lines: 'Thou wast not born for death immortal bird' and 'The voice I hear this passing night was heard in the ancient days by the emperor and the clown.' Keats reaches his aim and now both the nightingale pouring out her song and Keats embodying his poetry in lines which will be enjoyed forever are immortal.

### **"Ode on Melancholy" - Melancholy Everywhere**

As mentioned before, Keats believes the world is full of misery, heartbreak, pain and oppression. Like the other Romantics, he rarely laughs. For the Romantics, "there is only one way to be happy, but there are millions of ways to be miserable." But even that 'only way' has hardly ever been experienced by any one member of the Romantic writers. Keats, who is not able to see and enjoy the beauty of the flowers at his feet, is now under an acute emotional sensibility and feels melancholy everywhere. The melancholy pours down like a 'weeping cloud', it fosters 'the droopheaded' flowers, but once the flowers 'hide the green hill' Keats still broods over melancholy and calls the flowers 'April shroud'. For Keats depression exists in the same way as beauty does. Wherever we have delight, we will have melancholy disguised :

'Aye, in the very temple of Delight

Veiled Melancholy has her sov'reign shrine..'

If we search for it, melancholy is there waiting to envelop everybody but only someone who is very sensitive and has a 'keen tongue' will taste melancholy. In other words, melancholy wins over the sentimental person and adds him to her collection as a trophy. It is obvious that Keats himself is such a person, as he tastes the sadness of melancholy when he squashes the grape against his sensitive palate.

### **Longing for Eternal Beauty**

Keats' persistent theme, 'longing for eternal beauty' is reintroduced in "Ode on Melancholy" but only to weep for not being able to stop the inevitable end: "the tragic human destiny that beauty, joy and life itself are transitory and turn into their opposites."

Melancholy dwells with Beauty - 'Beauty that must die.

The grape of joy turns into melancholy when bursted.

## **"To Autumn" - Peace and Comfort in Nature**

The Romantics move out from their private sitting rooms to the fields and hillsides. Keats, for instance, wrote his "Ode to a Nightingale" under a tree and wrote "To Autumn" after a Sunday walk. Because of the significance of nature, Romantic poetry has become almost synonymous with 'nature poetry'. Nature is regarded, by Romantics, to be consoling and morally uplifting. It is a kind of spiritual healer. Keats finds consolation - after his brother's death - in listening to the nightingale in the full moonlight. He finds peace and comfort in the plains with feathered rosy clouds touching the horizon. For the first time, with the Romantics, nature is no longer taken for granted. It is valued as something which might be lost. Everything about nature is taken as an equally fit subject for poetry. The subjects that are the meanest and most unpromising are the best subjects for poetry. Keats is one of the Romantics who experimented in the simple treatment of the simple subjects about nature. "To Autumn" has an abundance of these simple incidents and situations, but they are described with an accuracy of observation: the gourd swelling, the hazel shells plumping, the wheat sitting carelessly on a granery floor with its chaff soft - lifted by the winnowing wind, and the smell of the poppies making the uncut wheat drowsy, obviously need a complete and close observation of nature to be turned into fine poetry.

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