

This world and beyond: A Critical Review of John Keats' poetical Skills with special emphasis on his escapist flights

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JOHN KEATS

ENGLISH ROMANTIC POET

(1795-1821)

HERE LIES THE ONE WHOSE NAME IS WRIT ON WATER

Abstract-

John Keats (1795-1821) is known to be the most versatile of all romantic poets. His short sojourn on the earth by no means was a deterrent for his creativity to cease. His poetry is replete with ornate, sensuous imagery which though during his own time was targeted by critics for attacks. Nevertheless the poetry of Keats has through

centuries captivated readers' attention. The reason for the same is the beautiful imagery, spontaneous overflow of emotions and his sense of detachment. Over the centuries Keats' appeal to readers has multiplied. His universal philosophy of the beauty and conflating beauty with truth brings him close to Indian metaphysics. Keats thus becomes a mystic talking about the things unforeseen and holds the readers enthralled by his witty

philosophical ideas, imagination which is unbridled and sensuous description of the phenomena.

Keywords- Negative capability; sensuousness; escapism; criticism of life; poetic diction

Arnold in his essay "A Study of Poetry" shows himself as a votary of poetry. He has a very high conception of poets and poetry. Poetry as he thinks is a means of dealing with the fret and fume of life. Poetry is a medium of providing solace and calm to the aggrieved soul in the busy hum drum of life. Poetry to him is criticism of life; something that enlightens how to move in the world of pure narcissism. Poetry has always been a path-shower for all the men who have taken its shelter. Poetry is a way of dealing with life. It guides our way through this life. Talking about the poetry of romantic age, one pins down certain significant points. It is not didactic but on the contrary touches the heart. Romantic age is thought to have commenced from 1789, when French revolution had its outbreak, or from 1797, when William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge ushered in their collaborative work *Lyrical Ballads*, to the year 1832, when Walter Scott left for the heavenly abode and enriched the world of English literature through the volume of novels that he left for all. It is powerful enough to stir strong emotions in us. It is a poetry replete with energy of nature. It sounds the vigour and vitality of human life. It pulsates with animate love and despair. Blake, the seer, stands above all with his mystic vision to have nuances between innocence and experience. Here we have Wordsworth's pantheism with his concrete

belief that there is a spirit that: "A motion and a spirit, that impels/All thinking things, all objects of all thought/and rolls through all things."¹ Here we also have S.T. Coleridge's supernatural intellect to transmute supernatural into natural. Earlier writing of Gothic literature produced supernaturalism which is as crude as creating ghosts and giving shudder down the spine. Coleridge brought new changes in the world of supernaturalism with his ability to create new material of supernatural environment which is so real that the readers can easily believe them. The willing suspension of disbelief is a term that is coined by him in order to propound his theory of supernaturalism. We also have P.B. Shelley who with his lyrical poetry stood against all forms of injustice in society and stood firm for reforms. His poetry throbs with the revolt. Many of his poems are angry expression against the injustice like "Revolt of Islam", "To the Men of England", "Ode to the West Wind" etc. Nowhere in the history of English literature, the impact of French revolution, is as strong as on the Romantic poetry. But Keats though the youngest of all did not reveal these feelings of anger, protest and social reform.

Keats was born in 1795 in London. He was the son of a stable-keeper of an inn. At the tender age of 26, he was plucked off the branch of life. Though he was last to be born of all the romantic poets, he is generally considered as the greatest poet of the romantic age whose is par excellence in his sensuous and pictorial imagery. He during his childhood as well as teenage age did not show any of the signs that he had capability of being a great poet in the times to come. He

had been very common-place boy who after the sudden death of his parents was apprenticed to an apothecary. But as he started taking keen interest in literary activities, he gave up as doctor. he had an inclination that he would become a famous writer in the future. The world was enriched due to his decision. Had he not withdrawn from the medical line, we would not have been able to relish the wonderful magnum opus that had flown through his pen. He has become synonym with sensuousness such that he once said, "O for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts."²

Guided by his youthful fancy, he wrote luxuriously with sensuous delight. Some critics criticized him badly; lashed him with their comments and declared him as the poet who could write nothing great but only sensuous and ornate language. *Edinburg Review* believed Byron rang death bell for him. Undoubtedly Keats' poetry is overflowing with elements sensuousness, ornate language, elements of escapism towering over the poetic collection where there is a strong desire to dart away from this world of ugliness, death and decay. He wants to leave behind all the seamy side of this world and wants to relish a world of love, equality, fraternity and wisdom. And it was his own tragic life that built an atmosphere in which he could only perceive his own share of unhappiness and misery. Quoting Hardy here seems quite apt that "happiness is an occasional episode in the general drama of pain,"³ Keats' life in itself was an epitome of Hardy's vision. Critics have left no stone unturned in blaming him as the poet who could never face the trials and tribulations of

his life. This present paper tries to underline this fallacy. Keats had iron and flint in himself. He was not a mediocre poet capable of no intellectual activity rather his significance in the English literature has been well accepted by Critics like Mathew Arnold, T.S. Eliot and many others.

A fantasy world created in "Ode To Nightingale" represents a world of perennial bliss and eternity. The nightingale becomes a symbol of eternity in Keats' thinking process, "Thou was not made for death, immortal bird/No hungry generations tread thee down."⁴ Nightingale is no ordinary bird in Keats' ode as Nightingale is a divine bird singing full throat. The voice of nightingale was heard throughout the centuries by all. Even Ruth has relished its song when she was returning home. The nightingale's voice was heard by the past kings and even it is being heard in present. "Ode to Nightingale" is imbued with this hidden desire in him. Time and again Keats overflowed his poetry with overdose of escapist flights to imaginary lands. He finds this temporal world as an embodiment of nothing but squalor, morbidity and anguish. Keats perhaps reiterates the same philosophy that great seers of the world including Mahatma Buddha and Guru Nanak had that the world is nothing but a bed of thorns, thus reaching a stage of a mystic. He in these immortal lines presents his conception of what the world seems to him:

Fade far away, dissolve and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, fever, and the fret

Here, where men sit and hear each other
groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray
hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and specter-thin,
and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-
morrow.⁵

Keats tragic life led him to such a life where he craves to forget all the reality of this world where only squalor and anguish reign supreme. But in Keatsian philosophy drugs and intoxications cannot provide any succor as he is of the opinion that these drugs can only help to forget the reality for quite a short stint of time. On the contrary he is of the strong opinion that life should be escaped and can be only escaped through the wings of his poetry which can transport him to high heights so that the reality of the world can never touch him again. But to say that Keats could not realize that the real world was something that must not be overlooked is a blunder. Keats is a man of virtue and he knows to the fullest that one can never fully hoodwink the reality of life and as such he comes to the harsh reality in the ending of the poem when he uses the word forlorn. He falls back into this harsh world announcing that the world however bad it might be, it must be faced. Imagination though can aid to obliterate the trials and tribulations but it has such numbing impact for a short while as: "Adieu! The fancy cannot cheat so well /As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf."⁶ (J. Keats, Ode to Nightingale)

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" dwells on the significance of art over life. Immortality is all he longs for. The world is all seamy and bleak for him. There is nothing in it. On the contrary art seems perennial. The Grecian urn is symbolized form of art as it is engraved with beautiful rustic scenes. This sylvan historian could interpret history better than actual historians can. The poem is all about the pastoral sights and sounds. Keats being a votary of beauty delineates each sight with sensuous imagery; knitting each word with beauty and grandeur. By composing this poem he puts forth his dilemma of inner conflict between the transient and permanence. He announces:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter, therefore ye soft pipes play on,
Not to the sensual ear but more endear'd
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.⁷

Art has significantly greater life than that of life and Keats tries his utmost to prove that point throughout the poem. When he paints any of the scene painted over the urn, he leaves no stone unturned to emphatically proven his point. But here the readers mistake him for being an escapist as he changes his stance midway by calling the urn as cold pastoral which lacks the warmth and beauty of life however permanent it might be. A couple is engaged in the act of kissing. They are at the point of kissing but they would never be able to accomplish their goal. They would always remain the same whereas in real life the couple must have kissed and having saturated with their accomplishment, they must have lost all passion of kissing and probably must have parted away.

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal — yet, do not
grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy
bliss,
Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!⁸

But the artificial lovers have no zeal and enthusiasm of the real world. That is why he says that the world presented over the urn is artificial and there is no use of preferring this world to the world of hard realities. He prophetically announces in the end:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty, — that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.⁹

“To Autumn” asserts that life in all its ugliness must be enjoyed. One needs to make the meaning of life out of nothing. Even if there is death and decay, still one has to face it boldly without grumbling as only then the life is complete because joys and sorrows are a part and parcel of life. Keats in this ode celebrates life to the full. He can find sights and sounds even in autumn. This season helps the sun in ripening the fruits. With what a beautiful insight he gives a full description of the mellow fruit in the first stanza!

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round thatch eves
run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel
shells.

Very truly “Ode on Melancholy” drives home the philosophy of John Keats that joys and sorrows are part and parcel of human existence. No matter how depressing adversity is, it is followed by prosperity. The obvious reply is no, not at all. God is all powerful and perfect. Sorrows and joys complete the circle of life. Prosperity and adversity follow each other, no one is eternal that's the magic of life. Keats too does not oppose it as he in “Ode on Melancholy” views life in the same perception. To him, Melancholy follows beauty that brings joy:

She dwells with beauty, beauty that must die,
And joy whose hand is ever at his lips
Biding adieu!¹¹

No where Keats here asserts that life should be devoid of all pains of troubles rather the poem is a perennial celebration of life. There is no element of escapism. Even if in the other odes there are elements of escapism still Keats cannot be termed as a fully escapist poet as he never concludes that one must be away from the anguish of life rather he hammers the final nail by summing up that it is not wise nor feasible to evade it. The escapism in Keats is something that hits any one whose life becomes a bed of thorns instead of being a smooth sailing, as soon as it enters him, after a short stint deserts him. He does not remain a pessimist finding faults with life and looking at it through very dark glasses. He is rather the one who has positive attitude and is quite sanguine to face the brunt of it.

Apart from the Odes for which Keats enjoys a great and permanent place in the history of English Literature, his other poems abound in

the escapist elements. So much smitten by the arrows of pain; arrows of the sudden and premature demise of his parents at the age of fourteen leaving him in the lurch in this world to fend for himself and for his family the sole protector being the eldest sibling, the arrow of the demise of his brother Tom, who got attacked by the then incurable disease Tuberculosis, whom he loved more than his own life, the arrow of George's desertion of him and going to America leaving him all alone without anyone whom he could say his own, and finally to hammer the last nail the pain that set his heart ablaze of the rejection of Fanny Brawne whom he loved a lot but she could never repay his love on the account of his being poor and feeble. All this constructed a world for him, a world having nothing but pain and suffering. Hence no doubt he would like to go away from this world which has given him nothing but pain and anguish.

In the ode on Indolence, Keats is again in a mood of indolence or inertia enjoying a sense of numbness as in the Ode to Nightingale. He is in no mood to stir up his emotions as he keeps on sitting ravishing the morning day with its blessings of sunbeam and bird songs which are enough for a poet like Keats to let him in a state of sloth where he could reject each and every other consideration. Three figures of maidens pass on before him which are symbolic references to love, ambition and poetry. He does not first pay heed to these figures as he does not want to experience the pains caused by love, ambition and poetry which are all temporal realities of life. He is not stirred up by these figures. He enjoys his own indolent mood.

Benumb'd my eyes; my pulse grew less and less;

Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower:

O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense
Unhaunted quite of all but –nothingness?¹²

Though a cursory glimpse on the poem affirms the view that Keats is in indolent mood and being an escapist he wants to reject the three figures of love, ambition and poetry as the poem ends on a note of denial of these three. Keats' art is a complex one whereby much of what he means has to be implied and never explicit. In all the five great Odes the idea is never explicit. One has to read between the lines again and again in order to get the full understanding of what he says. It is quite applicable in this poem also where though apparently he rejects the three figures but there is indication that he will eventually follow these figures. As he in the poem rises up in order to pursue and chase these figures.

The main thrust of my paper is to project the elements of escapism in Keats' poetry which is a dominant theme in Keats while on the other hand to nullify the view that Keats was an escapist. There is a profusion of escapist tendency in Keats as but natural for him being beset with untold problems. But to believe that he was a true escapist is to misjudge the poetry of Keats as the conclusion of his great odes affirms firmly that he overcomes his sense of being escapist after a short stint. He opines that it is neither feasible nor desirable to avoid the reality of life however harsh may be. If one is born with the problems that Keats was born every

one of us would tend to be pessimist and would wish to escape these problems.

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