

A Few Lines on the Odes of John Keats

Sanjai Kumar*, Dr. Suman Singh**

* Research Scholar, Singhanian University, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan, India

** Dr. Suman Singh, Asst. Professor (English), P. P. N. College, Kanpur, U. P. India

Abstract- The major six odes upon which Keats's fame as an ode-writer rests were composed in 1810 and may be treated as almost forming a group. One meets images, emotions and ideas which occur and recur in them, echoing and enforcing one another. The three earlier odes stand separated from the 189 group of odes in time period and represent the phase of Keats's experimentation which the odes form and style. The 'Ode to Apollo', composed in February 1815, belongs to the pre-Endymion Phase of Keats's career and has an ostensible immaturity of style. Homer, Virgil, Milton, Shakespeare, Spenser and Tasso are introduced one by one in succession, each singing in his characteristic vein. The song of each poet exhibits the dominant trait of his poetry. Homer's song is remarkable for vigour. Virgil's for sweetness of melody, Milton's for Grandeur, Shakespeare's for passion, Spenser's for its celebration of "Spotless Chastity", i.e. ideal beauty and Tasso's for ardour.

Index Terms- fame, echo, sensitive, situation, passion, imaginary, sympathetic, melancholy.

I. INTRODUCTION

There are five Odes which Keats himself acknowledged as Odes. They are: 1. 'Psyche', 2. 'Nightingale', 3. 'Grecian Urn', 4. Melancholy and 5. Indolence. The first four of which were published by him in the 1820 volume. Apart from them, the present study also includes 'Ode to Apollo', 'On a Lock of Milton's Hair', the fragmentary ode 'To Maria' and 'To Autumn', all of which have been recognized by critics to bear distinctive characteristics of the odes. Robert Gittings¹ observes that Keats wrote four poems to Fanny Browne, none of which were published during his life time and not one of them as a poem is without serious flaws. For determining the order of the odes the basis of either known or tentative date of their composition, the present study has relied on Finney²:

Sl.No.	Name of the Odes	Date of Composition
1.	Ode to Apollo	February, 1815
2.	Lines on Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair	January, 16, 1818
3.	Maiya	May 1, 1818
4.	Ode to Psyche	End of April, 1819
5.	Ode to a Nightingale	May, 1819
6.	Ode on Melancholy	May, 1819
7.	Ode on a Grecian Urn	May, 1819
8.	Ode on Indolence	May, 1819
9.	Ode to Autumn	September 19, 1819

To discuss about the odes properly I think it would be better to have a short glimpse of the poet's biography which is required to suffice the purpose. John Keats, one of the greatest Romantic Revival, was born on October 31, 1795 in London. He was the oldest of five siblings. One of them, Edward died at infancy. He lived a happy childhood in North London. His father Thomas Keats and his mother Frances Jennings had a business called the "Swan and Hoop". John was a very unique boy. He would answer people by rhyming the last word of his answer to the last word to their question. John really enjoyed doing this, which paid off later in his life. Keats loved his mother very much and was very protective of her. Keats' family wasn't rich but they were well off. When Keats was 9 years old, his father fell off his horse on the way home and died several hours later. Jennings' misery didn't last long and she soon married a minor bank clerk named William Rawlings. Rawlings only wanted money and they broke up shortly after. After this, John's mother disappeared. This caused Keats to lose his respect and hope for his mother. The rest of Keats' life became a struggle for money. His mother soon became sick and tired. Keats' whole attitude changed and he focused primarily on pleasing his mother and making her proud. He read all the time and studied very hard. He was awarded the school prize for best literary work of that year. Around this time, Keats had read almost every single book in his school's library. His mother became very proud in him indeed. However, she soon died from tuberculosis. His grandmother granted Richard Abbey as the guardian of the children. It was a terrible decision and because of the vague will, Abbey often deliberately withheld the children's money. He was unsympathetic to the children and once referred to one of Keats' poems as, "a horse that you cannot catch and isn't any good once you catch it."

II. KEATSEAN ODES' LITERATURE

John Keats grew to be a poet in the atmosphere of romanticism dominated by Wordsworth and Coleridge. The traditions of the great romantic poets were carried forward by Keats. These traditions reached their culminating point in his poems. John Keats wrote his first poem at 19 years old just before his grandmother died. Keats wanted to be a poet but he knew that poetry is a privilege to the wealthy who do not have to work and can afford to indulge in word play. This was a very hard decision for Keats and to make it even worse, Abbey withdrew John and one of his brothers George from school and apprenticed John as an apothecary. John was part of the beginning of the Romantic period of poetry. Technique and common sense was in the past prized higher than inspiration and passion. Romantic poets began to spring up but their works were still disliked and thus it was very hard to make a decent living. There was also another popular form of poetry that tried to be

romantic by glorifying things that weren't so great. Keats took his work after a minor poet named Leigh Hunt whom he admired. Cowden Clark, a friend of John Keats, had read some of Keats' work and was impressed by it. He then took some of John's poems that he owned and brought them to a friend of his, who just happened to be Leigh Hunt. Hunt loved it and immediately asked Clark to bring him over to meet with Keats. Hunt and Keats became friends and Hunt would later prove very influential to Keats' writing, for Hunt became a devoted critic. John Keats then decided to end his medical career. He also had a friend name Benjamin Bailey with whom he went to stay at Oxford. Bailey was very well off and Keats enjoyed his stay. The campus was a quiet and peaceful place, where he could write poems and then take long walks with Bailey, discussing his works. Bailey was deep into studying theology and often had religious talks with Keats. Also, evidence shows that while at Oxford, Keats may have contracted a venereal disease. He began to take mercury (which had many terrible side effects) to try and cure it. Later, Keats regretfully moved back to London with his two brothers George and Tom. Tom then became very ill and soon died of tuberculosis. George met a woman and planned to marry her in America. John was lonely and all the rest of his family was gone. John Keats' and his neighbor Fanny Brawne fell deeply in love and got engaged in 1819. However, the previous year on a trip to Scotland, signs of sickness started growing in Keats. They then moved to Italy, in September 1820 while still keeping secretly engaged. In February 1821, John Keats died peacefully in Rome of tuberculosis.

John Keats' poem 'Robin Hood' was actually a letter to his friend John H. Reynolds. It's a sad and melancholy poem comparing the days of Robin Hood and his band of outlaws to the days Keats lived in. Legend says that Robin Hood was an outlaw and a thief who stole from the wealthy. But to the villagers and peasants, he was a hero. Keats expresses how Robin Hood is almost like a hero to him also because of his lack of money throughout his entire life. Keats goes into telling about the medieval times and how honorable they were. He then talks about how if Robin and his crew were alive now, they would despair for things had drastically changed since their times. It sorrowfully explains how Robin would find all of his oaks cut down and used for industrial purposes. The industrial revolution was also going on during Keats' life. Keats describes how the poor have no choice but to live a terrible life whereas in the Middle Ages you could grow things for yourself and live in the peaceful forest with Robin and his band. In the poem, Keats shows skill at rhyming every line. He got a lot of practice during his childhood where he would rhyme his answer with the question anybody asked him. Keats is also a very descriptive writer and he uses metaphors in the line, "Of the forest's whispering fleeces," and in, "Many times have winter's shears". They describe how the leaves on a tree form a coat and the sound of the wind going through that coat. The other describes how winter "shears" away plants and life like a shepherd cutting wool. When winter comes, all the green is drawn away to leave white and brown.

The poem 'On Death' is one of Keats' shortest and most meaningful poems. It asks that what if death is really sleep and life is just a dream. The great times of our lives may just be imaginary like a phantom. We think that it is painful to die, but

what if it is just the end of a dream. Keats shows how we all live great our lives while poisoning them with our immense fear of death. But would it be so terrible still, if you were only waking up?

Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale' was written in early May, 1819. It is the longest of the odes, but, as described by Charles Browne, the composition in the first draft lasted only 'two or three hours, written in the garden behind Browne's house in Hampstead. In the first stanza the poet moves with heavy inertia towards oblivion. The poet is not envious of the bird's happiness through wine. He wants to escape from the world of sorrow and misery to an ideal world of the bird. Escape from that world, however, cannot be achieved through wine, through the senses; only the poetic imagination seems to have the power. Now the poet's imagination carries him to join the bird in forest. Escape has been accomplished and the poet enjoys for the moment positive beauty. In the sixth stanza the lush darkness makes the poet regress again and we learn that he has been 'half in love with easeful Death. In the next stanza he develops the idea that the nightingale is immortal. The individual nightingale dies; but the bird has become a symbol of continuity.

The idea that Keats is conveying, is probably something that he truly believed in. This theory reassured Keats when most of his family died while he was still very young. When his father died when Keats was only 9 years old, he was only able to cope with the shock by imagining that his father was not in pain and was only waking up from a dream. Any death or tragedy that came to Keats, he could just deal with it like a bad dream and it will be over eventually. Keats was so aggressive and known to be a "fighter" because he wasn't afraid to die. He would welcome death if it came. Keats did not feel like there was no greater pain than to die. He thought life continued on and got better. The Author also advise people not to be so afraid and says that we lead a life of sorrow and pain when the people we love die and when we become ill or close to death ourselves. We should instead be happy for them and go on with our lives and try to live up to their standards.

Keats wonderful technique is very unique. As a kid he was known to be a sensitive person. Keats didn't follow the obvious and sought further meaning into things around him. Keats listened to sounds a different way than everyone else did. He heard music instead of noise. Being a romantic poet, Keats loved and honored the olden days. But also being born during a time of great industrialism, harmony and nature were not paid much attention to. Some of the most enjoyable times were spent during Keats' stay at Oxford with his friend Bailey. It was very quiet there even indoors. There, Keats could concentrate on his poems without disturbance yet also watch and listen to the peaceful things around him. Eventually Keats left Oxford and moved back to London where he hated it because it was very cramped and noisy. John became truly grateful of nature and peace.

'To Autumn' was one of Keats' last poems. It has a deep feeling of serenity, freshness and abundance. Yet at the same time it shows decaying and the passing of something. Autumn is the time of harvesting and is also when there is the "most food on the table". The glee and happiness is clearly shown in the tone of the poem. The Author describes also how Autumn is passing of summer and green life and the bringing of a dark cold winter. Autumn takes the summer's warmth and rips down the leaves.

The idea that John Keats was trying to portray was that everything dark has a purpose. Spring wouldn't be that invigorating if hadn't seen winter for a while. Would we really appreciate light if we had never seen dark? Life wouldn't be nearly as treasured if we never knew what death was. Dark things make people very grateful for the good things that they had. Keats really understood this and secretly summarized his life in this poem. Keats lost many of his family and friends. As a result, no matter what situation that Keats was in he was still glad to be alive. Keats was very grateful of the luxuries he had during his stay at Oxford, unlike most other people there, because he had witnessed poverty. The wealthy aren't truly grateful unless they have been poor for a while.

'Ode to Apollo' displayed Keats' great respect for many well-known poets. Apollo is the god of the arts including poetry and music. There is also a lot of history involved in 'Ode to Apollo'. Keats had a very good education as a child and was thirsty for knowledge. Keats knew a lot about Greek mythology and culture thus giving the poem a very ancient feeling tone. The author once again refers to poets as bards throughout the literary work. In the line "whose chords are solid rays, and twinkle radiant fires," a metaphor describes Apollo's harp as having strings made of the sun's rays. Keats also uses stanzas to individually describe seven poets. The poets are Apollo, Homer, Maro, Milton, Shakespeare, Spenser, and Tasso. All of these poets were highly admired by Keats. Irony is used when Keats describes Homer in "Looks through renovated eyes". This is situational irony because Homer was blind. The last stanza separates itself from the rest of the poem. In it, Keats states that the bards mentioned in the poem all had lineage with Apollo. This clearly shows that Keats highly admired these poets. When Keats read most of the books in the entire library of his school, he probably did the best thing he ever did to aid his career. He shows advanced knowledge of Apollo and the other poets in 'Ode to Apollo'. These poets' style often appears in many of John Keats' poems. When Keats liked what he saw he adapted some of their technique. John's life was full of many hardships and difficulties that would be almost impossible for anyone to normally bear. However, Keats was able to go on with his life and cage up his emotions. When he writes, Keats puts his entire mood into the work. Those emotions can be traced through the poem and they add true passion to his works. Using this style, Keats wrote some of the best literary works ever created.

III. CONCLUSION

Like all romantic poets, Keats seeks an escape in the past. He travels back into the ancient Greece as well as the Middle Ages. 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' and 'Isabella' are suffused with medieval atmosphere. The romance and artistic glory of the medieval world are also presented in The Eve of St. Agnes. In The Eve of St. Agnes we notice medieval beauty and spiritual symbolism of the church ritual, in the Eve of St. Agnes we see that external wealth of colour and picturesqueness that Walter Scott found so fascinating in the middle Ages. Keats's poems are saturated with sensuousness. All the five senses of sight, ear, smell, touch and taste are enchantingly put together in his poems.

Keats was a renowned admirer of wonderful sights and scenes of nature. He loves nature purely for her own sake and paints her not with the reason but with imagination. According to Compton- Rickett, "Whereas Wordsworth spiritualizes and Shelley intellectualizes nature, Keats is content to express her through the senses. Imitating much, whether consciously or unconsciously, Keats was certainly nobody's slave but his own; subjecting himself to the influences of the senses and of the past, he saw vividly and memorably but with his own eyes; we may mark the influences in his work, but also take account of his own unique creativity. He is a visual poet, a writer of the senses and feelings, but his poems and letters bear eloquent witness to the quality of his thought.

REFERENCES

- [1] Robert Gittings: Ch.5 ('Troilus to Cressida')
- [2] Finney: Vol. I, Ch. I ('The Pot of Basil and Other Poems')
- [3] Sparks Notes.com. Through Internet
- [4] 'John Keats: Selected Poems' by Dr. S. C. Mundra, 7th edition 1996
- [5] "The Complete Poetical Works of John Keats" ed. H. Buxton Forman. Oxford University Press (1907)
- [6] "Selected Letters of John Keats" ed. Grant F. Scott. Harvard University Press (2002)

AUTHORS

First Author – Sanjai Kumar, Research Scholar, Singhania University, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan, India

Second Author – Dr. Suman Singh, Dr. Suman Singh, Asst. Professor (English), P. P. N. College, Kanpur, U. P. India