

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

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A THEMATIC STUDY OF JOHN KEATS' ODES

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ABSTRACT

Great odes of John Keats lie at the centre of his literary production. In his odes Keats has achieved the highest development of his literary genius. His odes are the gems among his literary production. Keats wrote a number of odes in his career, but following are considered his important odes which are mentioned below in the chronological order.

- + Ode to Psyche.
- + Ode to Nightingale
- + Ode on Melancholy.
- + Ode on a Grecian Urn.
- + Ode on Indolence.
- + Ode to Autumn.

KEYWORDS: Thematic Study , John Keats lie , literary genius.

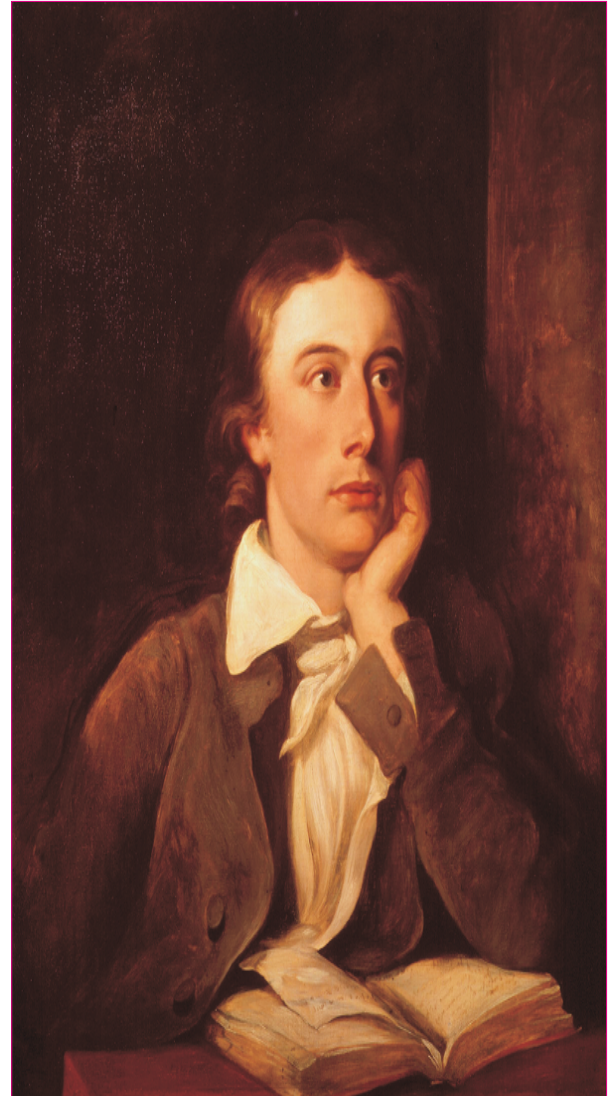
INTRODUCTION :

Keats' odes grew out of his life and conflict. He was a very tender and sensitive human being and was easily impressed by events, incidents and happenings around him. Keats' odes reflect on various themes that are directly related to human life. The theme of intricate nature of pain and pleasure in human life appears again and again in his odes. The intricate nature of the blending of pain and joy, sorrow and happiness is contemplated by Keats in his odes. Wright and Brown comment on this aspect of his odes:

..... it becomes also thought, a kind of brooding contemplation of the lot of human beings, who must satisfy their desire for happiness in a world where joy and pain are inevitably and inextricably tied together.

(Wright and Brown)

Allied with this theme appears the theme of escape into imaginary world to get relief from the pains, sorrow and suffering in life. He escapes into an imaginary world, away from harsh realities of life. At other times, he seeks comfort from harsh realities of life into the glorious world of the past. Keats was fascinated by antiquity, especially the Greek and Medieval period. His life was one of misery and pain, and poetry provided an escape from this painful life. In the poem Ode to Nightingale, Keats expresses his desire to fly away from real



world into the beautiful world of nightingale:

***That I might drink, and leave the world unseen
And with thee fade away into forest dim;***

(Keats).

He wants to fade away with nightingale into forest. He appeals nightingale not to come near human world because human life is full of weariness, fret and fever. Beauty and love in real life are transitory. In Ode on a Grecian Urn Keats characterises human life as one of misery and high sorrow:

***All breathing human passions far above
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyd,
A burning forehead and a parching tongue***

(Keats).

Allied with the theme of pain and suffering in human life is the theme of fleeting and transitory nature of beauty and joy in human life. Keats felt that beauty, youth and joy in human life are most fleeting things. This duality principle is carried in Ode to Melancholy. Keats feels that the dwelling place of melancholy is not to be found in ugly things. The true sadness, melancholy lies in knowing the fact those good, beautiful things will come to an end eventually, sooner than we expect. In their very nature lie the seeds of decay and destruction. Both beauty and joy are subject to law of decay and destruction and this realization brings sadness and melancholy. So melancholy lies at the centre of joyous and beautiful things. He states in Ode on Melancholy that:

***She dwells with beauty—beauty that must die;
And joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu;***

(Keats).

In Ode to Fancy, Keats observes that all the realistic pleasures are nothing compared to the joys of an imaginative life:

***At a touch sweet pleasure melteth
Like to bubbles when rain pelteth.***

(Keats).

Along with pain and suffering in human life and transient nature of human life, the theme of death appears prominently in Keats' odes. In number of his poems Keats has talked about death. He expresses his apprehension of death in the poem When I have Fears That I May Cease to be. In the poem Ode to Nightingale, he says that many times he has fallen in love with death:

***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.***

(Keats).

As with other romantic poets, nature appears prominently in Keats's odes. He faithfully and vividly depicts the nature as he perceives it with his sense. He loved nature unconditionally which is reflected in his poetry. Albert writes:

His love of nature is intense and is constantly to be seen in the imagery of his poems.

(Albert, 326)

He didn't project his thoughts on natural objects. The pictorial, sensuous, descriptive element is more dominant in his poetry than other romantic poets. Hudson writes about treatment of nature in his poetry:

In his treatment of nature this same passion for sensuous beauty is still the dominant feature. He loved nature, just for its own sake and for the 'glory and loveliness' which he everywhere found in it.

(Hudson, 205).

His treatment of nature is different from other romantic poets like Wordsworth or Shelley. He didn't worship nature for any divine message nor did he see any reflection of his thoughts in nature. There is nothing mysterious in nature like Coleridge for him. He is content to observe and enjoy external beauty of nature and that is why we find very beautiful descriptive sensuous pictures of nature in his odes. He loves natural beauty for its own sake without any other purpose. Keats transformed nature he observed in rich objects of poetic beauty. He is primarily a poet of senses; he loves nature for its sensuous appeal. We find sensuous pictures of nature in odes after odes. His nature pictures delight all of five senses. In Ode to Nightingale he portrays a very sensuous, beautiful picture of nature:

***The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral, eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.***

(Keats).

How many flowers and how beautifully they are depicted in these lines. It is a very rich, sensuous and suggestive stanza creating before our eyes the most beautiful picture of the flowers in the forest. Ode to Autumn is the finest description of nature with its fruitfulness and mellowness. Keats describes the various flowers and fruits that we find in autumn. Along with flowers and fruits, Keats presents other sights and sounds in the nature. The autumn is characterised as a season of abundance. Keats feels that autumn has its own music. The autumn blesses vines with fruits and bends apple trees under the weight of fruits. It fills all the fruits with ripeness to core. Its music is even better than the music of spring:

***Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too.***

(Keats).

Ode to Fancy is rich with the most beautiful description of natural scenery which pleases all the five senses. Various fruits are described along with buds and flowers in May which is accompanied by singing of the birds. Keats describes various flowers in following way:

***Thou shalt, at one glance, behold
The daisy and the marigold;
White plumed lilies, and the first
Hedge-grown primrose that hath burst;
Shaded hyacinth, always
Sapphire queen of the mid-May;***

***And every leaf, and every flower
Pearled with the self- same shower.***

(Keats).

What distinguishes Keats from other romantic poets is his love of beauty. He spontaneously reacted to what is beautiful in the world. He worshipped beauty in all its aspects and forms. He wrote in one of his letters that what the imagination seizes as beautiful is true. He has expressed this doctrine in the poem Ode on a Grecian Urn:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty.

(Keats).

Beautiful things are always a source of inspiration for Keats. He felt that beauty and truth are not two separate entities. What is beautiful is true and what is true is beautiful. In another poem, Keats states that a beautiful thing is a constant source of joy and delight:

A thing of beauty is joy forever

(Keats).

He has said that he loved principle of beauty in everything. He adores beauty in every form. Keats' concept of beauty is not only aesthetic but also intellectual. He felt that beautiful things never diminish, their beauty keeps ever increasing. Along with beauty of nature, Keats also considered the pleasure of poetry, of memory, of great deeds also beautiful which shows that his concept of beauty is intellectual.

Another theme that recurs in Keats' odes is the permanence of nature and nature and transitory nature and decay in human life. Arts are superior to human life. This stark contrast between art and human life is expressed in the poem Ode on a Grecian Urn. The following lines depict the human condition where decay, destruction and frustration are unavoidable:

***Where beauty cannot keep its lustrous eyes
Or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow.***

(Keats).

But the figures of the youth and the maiden on urn achieve permanence and immortality:

***She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss
For ever will thou love, and she be fair.***

(Keats).

These lines are in stark contrast to the lines above. In human life both beauty and love are transitory and are subject to the law of decay. But the youth of both the girl and boy depicted on urn will last forever. Another image in Ode on a Grecian Urn establishes the superiority of art and of imagination over reality. Keats says that heard melodies are sweet but those unheard are sweeter. He appeals to the musician on urn not to play to the sensual ears but to the imagination. The actual experience is subject to satiety and being stale. But the imaginative life never grows stale. The imagined beauty is superior to actual beauty because our imagination has limitations, but the creative power of imagination has no limits. Their love will never grow stale. He will chase her forever and she will be young forever. Their love is far above the human passions, for it will never be fulfilled, and so will never grow stale. The maiden and youth on urn and their love is eternal at the cost of fulfilment. Sanders comments on these pictures on urn:

Both scenes are frozen and silent, images taken out of time and rendered eternal only by the intervention of art.

(Sanders, 326)

The same contrast between art and human life is also shown in the poem Ode to Nightingale. Here Keats describes the song of nightingale as immortal. The song he hears was heard by emperors and clowns in the ancient days. Though this particular bird will die, the song itself is permanent and immortal. The bird is one with nature which unchangeable, permanent, and immortal while human life is changeable, transitory and mortal. The nightingale's song symbolises the imperishable, immortal world of art and imagination. The world of nightingale is in sharp contrast with the human world. The world of humans is full of sorrow, suffering, diseases and mortality. On the other hand, in sharp contrast, the world of nightingale is full of joy, happiness and immortality. So Keats expresses his desire to escape with nightingale far away from the fever and fret of human world. In this ode, Keats has established the superiority of art, imagination and nature over human world. Daiches comments:

..... shows Keats in his last and greatest phase finding a way of handling poetically his growing concern with the relation between art and life, beauty and reality.

(Daiches, 920)

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