

Politics as Morality: A Study of Keats' Poetry

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Abstract *The purpose of the present research is to explore the works of Keats from the uncommon and untraditional perspective, the perspective of Keats as a revolutionary poet fighting for the cause of politics and morality. For this purpose, his selected poems were taken for analysis. His works reveal not only the aspects of Romanticism but also of revolution. Most of his poems plead for political and social reforms in a constructive irony of the upheavals through intentionality. Swept up with the current of revolution and sanguinity, on one hand, he deplores the contemporary restlessness and stagnation, but, on the other hand, he is optimistic about the future, where change and reconciliation were for sure. In this way, the works of the poet present the present and the past in a relationship, where the past is allured, the present is struggled for politics and the future is hoped for imaginatively.*

Key Words: Politics, Morality, Keats, Poetry

Introduction

There had been six most important figures in English Romantic poetry: William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats. The poets of the second generation shared their predecessors' zeal for liberty, and they learnt from their experiments. John Keats is among the most cherished and admired of the second generation of English Romantic poets. He devoted his life to poetry, where he was marked for sensuous appeal, imager and other philosophical thoughts. Keats lost his father at a very early age. This is considered as what brought the beauty of human experiences to his poetry. Keats found comfort and solace in literature. Literature for Keats was a medicine of his grief, and that is why he left his field of medicine as an apothecary.

Keats's first book of the collection of his poems was published in 1817, which was written under Hunt's influence. Hunt introduced Keats to the politics through which England was suffering. In addition, Hunt led Keats into the group of prominent English poets, including William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Keats's style, which was considered a bold one at that time, earned him criticism, especially from *Quarterly Review*. Keats was of the view that poetry's role is to draw its effects from the beauty of the real world and its experiences. Keats wanted to think for his new doctrine, i.e., Negative Capability, so that he may think ahead of what role he and other human beings are expected for. He wanted to transcend social and

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intellectual constraints that human beings are bound to. For Keats, the world was more fun, a chaotic place, where creativity was more possible.

Despite various studies and researches done on the works of John Keats by eminent scholars and critics, a lasting impression is created by some critics that Keats was a romantic poet, singing about a farfetched romantic world and pining and yearning for things unachievable and was an ineffectual angel fluttering on each idea and concept. And some have sought to depict him as a daydreamer, and some as a pacifist ready to compromise with the oppressive forces. In his *Ode to Autumn*, Keats was not deploring the falling leaves nor the vanishing greenery. He was a poet as well as a philosopher having a metaphysical and transcendent genius'. Keats's works are no less a harbinger of socialistic revolutionary ideas. A thorough study of his works – prose and poetry – gives a clear picture of him as 'man thinking', sympathizing with suffering humanity and as an uncompromising fighter for establishing a social order bereft of inequalities, slavery, oppression and hatred. He wanted to establish a social order where love will rule supreme and serve as the connecting bond of all human beings. He wanted to bring in the millennium that would ensure liberty, equality, freedom and complete equality in material wellbeing. Most of his works reveal a sense of his ardent concern for social improvement. So to fill the gap, in this study Keats's perception of people's struggle with a perspective for socialist society has been undertaken, making the study worth appreciating.

Literature Review

The poets of revolutionary and political philosophies are most of the time shown as poets of aesthetics. But, how a poet like Keats would be placed in such a description? He, unlike other romantics, was deeply emerged in the race of revolutionary and moral struggle. His efforts in revolution, liberation, reforms and other strategies of resistance are often quoted. Such poets are seen as "the representative of the Revolution in its pure ideal" (Kipperman, 1992, p. 204) and their popular appeal, or revolutionary and political association, can hardly be denied. However, overall, little space has been given to their involvement in political and moral engagements in most of the critical studies. Therefore, because of Keats association with ideals and social, political and moral revolt, his work needs special attention.

Most of the literature was written in a time when Europe was in turmoil. It proclaimed the natural rights of man and stood for the total abolition of class distinction. No wonder the English people who were already embarked on an age-long struggle against monarchy found in the revolution a reflection of their own ideas. Nevertheless, the social, moral and political mood of the Romantic period in Britain was reflected in the change from a predominantly agricultural society to a modern industrial nation. Revolution in France and America fanned the flame of imagination as P. B. Shelley, Keats and other poets embarked on their own version of revolution in the literary area. Many of the Romantic poets embraced the democratic movement in France, especially when contrasted with the strict social hierarchy of Britain. Some of them travelled to France to experience the movement firsthand.

With such revolutions and revolutionary ideas being attributed to the age of Romanticism, it allows us to study the poets of that age as figures of moral and political revolution rather than aesthetic beauty. It can also be claimed by different critics, on the other hand, that for those poets, aesthetic beauty was in morality and a political system free from certain traits, which they considered pernicious or were opposed to. Francis Hutcheson and Anthony Ashley Cooper (1673), the precursors of Romanticism, considered aesthetic delight as something that is good. Morality was central to these two Romanticists. On such opinions, related to the Romantic Movement, as being the cause of a revolution on a mass level and transformation on an individual level, we can find good grounds that the Romantic poet Keats theory of aesthetics is largely based on moral and political indulgence. Generally, the ideals of the french revolution can be found in the works of poets like William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, to a lesser degree, while in the poetry of Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, to a greater degree. But with the coming of 'The Reign of

Terror', their unfathomable fervor was abated politically, yet they expressed their rebellious ideas in their poetry.

Research Methodology

Researches on Keats are varied, which bring forth some of the practical as well as theoretical concerns. Some researchers and critics associate their research with a specific method, but there can be an interplay of other methods and approaches, and which can make the possibility of bringing different approaches together in a single study. The purpose of bringing the discussion here is not to evaluate these different approaches but to see the possibility of their relevance to the present research. The complex nature of research on Keats where he is explored from different angles, covering different aspects of their works, there is still need of great care while engaging with their works. One can defend any side of the poet, traditional and modern aspects, for example, romantic, imaginative, philosophical, political, revolutionary, and moral, depending on the research goals.

The present research is historical research, where literary works of both the poets, their records of the past and current criticism have been studied. As different methods can be used to analyze/study the poet, the present study uses historical or descriptive research.

The poems included in the present research as primary texts are:

- i. *La Belle Dame sans Merci*
- ii. *Lamia*
- iii. *Hyperion*
- iv. *The Fall of Hyperion*
- v. *Endymion*
- vi. *Isabella*
- vii. *The Eve of St. Agnes*
- viii. *To Kosciusko*
- ix. *To Hope*
- x. *Sonnet III*
- xi. *Ode to Apollo*
- xii. *Sleep and Poetry*
- xiii. *Of Flora*
- xiv. *The old Pan*
- xv. *Of human hearts*

While carrying out textual analysis, mostly Belsey's (2005) textual analysis has been used. For this purpose, the poems under consideration were broken down into units of meaning. The signs in its physical form (the signifiers) have been related to what it signifies (signified), and in this way, meaning has been derived. As signs are not the things that only comment on the world; rather, they are the things in themselves (Bainbridge, 2008). That is why the poems selected for the study have been studied in the historical and socio-political context where they were written. Apart from that, an educated guess has been made at certain points. Regarding educated guess, McKee (2003) says that "when we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text"(p. 1). In this way, while revealing the more subtle features of the poetry, the works of both the poets have been studied and are interpreted in their immediate context and also how other people have made sense of the concerned works. As poems belong to open texts, which, unlike closed texts, are open to interpretation, they were analyzed while keeping in view the following steps:

- First of all, notes were taken of the selected texts.
- Secondly, guess about how meaning is produced, was made. The guess was then unpacked, and it was shown that how meaning is made and that how it has a relationship with the objectives of the research.

- After getting evidence both from the primary and secondary sources, the results/findings were brought.

Analysis

Philosophical and Literary Influences on Keats

It looks pertinent to say how Spenser's creative aspiration and the visionary cosmos he produced might have influenced Keats. Spenser played a key role in Keats' poetic vision. Keats's early poem, *Imitation of Spenser* (1814), is witness to the fact. Charles Cowden Clarke, a headmaster's son at Enfield School, introduced Keats to Spenser. After leaving school in 1811, Keats frequently visited him and relished the literary conversation as an apprentice, a surgeon at Edmonton. In the spring of 1813, Clarke recited Spenser's "Epithalamion," the ode he had written to his newlywed beloved, Elizabeth Boyle, in 1594. Clarke recollected this occurrence, and later he said that at that moment, he might have been a teenager; and in his prime time, he surely comprehended the broad aesthetics of the poem composition and realized the more flamed scripts as his characteristics and vocalization were rapturous (Clarke, 125). Keats's love for poetry and Spenser being the motive force is obvious from his letters. On 18 April 1817, Keats wrote in a letter to his friend John Hamilton Reynolds as follows:

I find that I cannot exist without poetry — without eternal poetry — Half the day will not do — the whole of it — I began with a little, but the habit has made me a Leviathan — I had become all in a Tremble from not having written anything of late . . . Just now I opened Spenser[sic], and the first Lines I saw were these. —

"The noble Heart that harbors virtuous thought,
And is with Child of glorious great intent,
Can never rest, until it forth has brought
Th' eternal Brood of Glory excellent —" (Rollins, I, 133–34)

It was Clarke who introduced Keats to Leigh Hunt, an admirer of Spenser. Keats had a close affinity, personal as well political, to Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt, broad-minded journalists of that era. The history of the friendship between John Keats and Leigh Hunt is the story of Keats's development as a poet. From the year 1816 to 1821, Keats got maturity as a poet, changing from the rippled craftsmanship during his youthhood to the command proved from his odes, such as *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, *Lamia*, *The Fall of Hyperion*, etc. These days he was in close friendship with Leigh Hunt. This relation focussed on poetry since the beginning, and the poetry he produced was accompanied by many of the sufferings it accrued. These were the reason, too, that made their friendship exemplary. Though, Hunt could not influence the public opinion regarding Keats at that time favourably. Indeed, in the beginning, Keats was neglected and then attacked on account of his being close and affiliated with Hunt. The detrimental review of *Endymion* from *Blackwood's Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review* was a portion of a broad onslaught on the Cockney School.

Hunt, in his essay "Young Poets", taken from *The Examiner* (December 1, 1816), quoted by Kandl (2001), thought of Keats in addition to a few more poets such as Shelley and J. H. Reynolds that these poets were drawn into politics of controversy at its peak. Keats would very openly attack Tory dishonesty and misappropriation.

Without any doubt, Keats's advancement via the relationship was steadily moving towards more freedom, when Keats rejected Hunt's recommendations as well as Shelley's invitation to Keats to follow Shelley, as he envisioned his triumph. Unfortunately, in the summer of 1820, Keats was compelled to depend on his malady. By then, all the same, the relation was quite contrastive to what it had been in the beginning. Keats's works follow the selfsame path, from a primal dependence upon Hunt to intended freedom.

Anyway, Hunt and Spenser had not been Keats models only; Browne, Drayton, Milton, Wordsworth, and later, Shakespeare was also enlisted. Keats in no way, even in 1815-1816, had been an unoriginal

imitator. His poetry has a sense of self-consciousness wholly devoid of anything Hunt has used. Keats's poems are poems of escape towards nature, and in this version, we feel Keats's very sharp apprehension of Wordsworth's poetic undertaking as of Hunt's. In poems such as the precise sonnet "How many bards gild the lapses of time!" or the "Ode to Apollo," or the lovable sonnet "Oh! how I love, on a fair summer's eve," we find an all important Keatsian trope: the poem testifying the poet's own sense of himself as a modern writer, fixing to compose from his experience new poetry to be at par with those of England's best producers.

Keats's poetry especially mixes the past and present in a dialogic relationship, requesting the past to present the same creatively as well as politically via the current time. The Cockney culture was supplied the background through which Keats developed this strategic orientation in the form of a poet. Hunt and the authors related to him were entangled in a convoluted, disputatious program to reclaim the literary prescript for their own revisionist products—and the rich allusions of Keats's poetry verify his engagement with this task. Cockney cultural politics lent modern-day leverage to Keats's indigenous studiousness, involvement in history, and prospective imaginative orientation, and such other leverages helped determine the form of his short poetic occupation.

Keats's Aesthetics as Politics

The study of criticism on John Keats's poems establishes the idea that the critics of his time were more involved and affected by politics than Keats. G.M Mathews (1971) artistically portrays this thought by describing the conditions in which Keats's career expanded, as a phase where the works of fellow critics, deliberately or accidentally resulted in depicting an emergence of literary and political notions. Thus, this amalgamation made impossible for a writer belonging to one side, to receive positive and impartial reviews from the opposite.

Keats is generally regarded as one of the major romantic poets due to his imaginative poetry and his little affiliation to politics. But Carl Woodring (1995) ironically describes Keats as the poet whose works are considered to be free of political stance. Though in reality, such evasion from politics for a poet, in those times, would have needed a serious and great struggle. Keats has been through the time of political unrest when the working class issues were flourishing in the air of England; the middle-class was stirred with the fight for change, England was dealing with economic difficulties burdened under the weight of taxation left from Napoleonic wars, recurrent street protests, withholding of Habeas corpus from its implementation, depriving the liberty by taking booksellers in police custody, treachery proceedings and death penalties and the massive Peterloo massacre at St. Peter's Field which turned a peaceful protest into a destructive event near Manchester in 1819. Keats termed the ongoing conflicts and turmoil as "the present struggle in England" in his letters, particularly those posted to America to his brother and sister-in-law. Although this political unrest often seems far and undetached from Keats's mind.

The presences of these particular political bits in Keats's work depict his association to politics and hence to the public and state affairs. One of the most famous literary critics and literary theorists, Paul de Man, who explored Romanticism in-depth, making significant contributions, sketches out the nature of Keats's imaginative faculty as a potential that does not only dwells in the past, that is, retrospective rather it places the past and imaginatively orient it towards a possible or destined future, i.e. prospective. The same evolution is presented in his works like *Sleep and Poetry* by establishing the subjects of reform, progress and success. These themes are then taken as a foreground in Keats's later works, e.g. the odes and *Hyperion*, where these themes were continued and further illustrated. In *Sleep and Poetry*, Keats's through his perspective imagination demonstrates that though he has begun his poetry by praising the kingdom of peace and beauty, he will eventually climb up to confront the harsh realities of life to write poems that explain the despair and distress of human hearts. He has followed the same progressive pattern in his other works as well, including important letters, for instance, the Mansion of Life letter of May 3, 1818 and "Knowledge or

Religion" (Letters [1958] 1: 282). In his letter of September 18, 1819, Keats proposed one of the most important and significant theories of development in social and political spheres. While referring to the example of free England, he compliments the notable contributions of the truthful, honest and broad-minded writers of France and England, who disestablished the despotic governance in the French Revolution.

The pattern of social and political development presented by Keats in his 1819 letter is more vividly sketched out in the theme of his famous poem, *Hyperion*. In fact, all the longer poems of Keats can be argued as the piece of literature having an underlying distinct and indispensable political theme. His narrative poems though more specifically revolve around romance, also has a tinge of political stance as in most of his long romantic narrative poems, for example, *The Eve*, *Of St. Agnes*, *Lamia and Isabella*, the oppressors and the authoritative characters are the ones who contend and fought to bring down young pure love. In the poem "Lamia", all the male figures, from the God Hermes to the lover Lycius and the sage Apollonius, are represented as oppressive, cunning and dictatorial in nature. The substructure of these poems is based on fascination, allure and sensational dramatic events which make the work surpass the barriers of time but along these themes, Keats through the characters of murderous brothers in the poem "Isabella" harshly presents the evil and tyrannical aspects of capitalist, who take advantage on their subordinates with their power and authority. These poems are fables of spiritual lessons based on the battles between the liberty of love and the oppressors who snatch away their freedom through the misuse of power. Keats considered love as a pure emotion of giving without expectations but on the other hand, also describes it as force tending to take a hold of the human will. This theory of love is appropriately depicted in the character of Lycius in the poem *Lamia* when he decides to marry Lamia in a public wedding inviting all friends to the ceremony. Lamia who first strongly opposed such a plan, agrees later, on the persistence of Lycius which at last wins her resistant consent. This depicts the transformation of Lamia into a vulnerable, yielding and kind human from being authoritative, manipulative and dictatorial as men. Thus as Keats points out the expression of love has also the capacity of ruling power as in practicing politics.

Keats's very first poem, published in *The Examiner* was political in nature. It is believed that the sonnet got its main focus as political legitimization, which remained his concern from 1816 onward (Kandl, 2001). Besides, he also worked for poetic legitimization that went side by side. Kandl further says that having made its debut in *The Examiner*, the poem is less read for its narrative than its political and cultural reforms.

Keats's famous poem *Hyperion*, revolves particularly around the historical subject matter in a more eloquent and precise manner. Literary author, Kenneth Muir advocated the idea that the French Revolution and the political unrest in 1818-1819 have provided the base for the subject of the poem. But this suggestion had not gained much attention and significance. Rather the critics were persistent in dealing with the poem concerning its high spirits, rich interactional quality and Miltonic special positioning of verse and the figures. In a nutshell, he dealt with the poem entirely with the literary perspective, considering it just as a piece of appealing, imaginative and artistic work.

In Keats's sonnet *To Kosciusko*, Kosciusko is presented as a reformist and a remedy to political problems. Kosciusko has been linked with Alfred and it is said:

Good Kosciusko! thy great name alone
 Is a full harvest whence to reap high feeling:
 It comes upon us like the glorious pealing
 Of the wide spheres — an everlasting tone:
 And now it tells me that in worlds unknown
 The names of Heroes burst from clouds concealing,
 Are changed to harmonies, for ever stealing
 Through cloudless blue, around each silver throne.
 Thy name with ALFRED'S, and the great of yore,

Gently commingling gives tremendous birth

While bringing his political objectives to the front, Keats, in one of his sonnets "Flora, and the Old Pan", says that glory and loveliness have passed away. The reference is made to the old times with decent constitutional values were the hallmark of England. Kandl (2001) elaborates that the reference is to the Revolution of 1688 and the French Revolution of the 1790s. In another poem titled *To Hope*, Keats starts as:

In the long vista of the years to roll,
Let me not see our country's honour fade:
O let me see our land retain its soul,
Her pride, her freedom, and not freedom's shade. (31-34)

Keats, while expressing his love for his country, says that his country should have its honour and dignity, and it may have no downfall. He longed for that a time may come where his country retain whatever it has lost because of the disturbance and political anarchy. Keats ascertains that his country may get its real freedom back and not merely the shadow of freedom.

As the poem progresses, Keats turn the poem to politics as:

Let me not see the patriot's high bequest,
Great Liberty! How great in plain attire!
With the base purple of the court oppress'd
Bowing her head and ready to expire:

Here Keats talks of liberty and also attacks the court – a system of justice – but corrupt in the era the poem was written. He criticizes all for the sake of liberty. Similarly, because of his love for freedom and political thoughts, in Sonnet III (Written on the Day that Mr Leigh Hunt Left the Prison), Keats describes Hunt as a man of liberty. He names Hunt as "libel" "for showing truth to the flatter'd state". Of Hunt, it is said as "In his immortal spirit, been as free / As the sky-searching lark, and as elate" (3-4). In this sonnet, Hunt is referred as a genius who took flights in his own regions. His purpose was to achieve liberty with the help of poesy.

Keats's Aesthetics as Morality

John Keats has been considered anti-moralistic in terms of literary practices, which refers to the fact that in his case, conventional morality is very important; without it, the aesthetics do not appeal. Two different ways have been dramatized in terms of departing from morals. This deviation from morality has been shown in different ways: by diverting the character from moral conventions related to gender and every writer refusing to edify the reader, which clearly portrays the fascination toward the immoral characterization. Keats reflects morality in character through respect and admiration, their unselfish attitude towards beauty.

The poet Keats thinks that self-loss is very important for a poet, and they must be affected by beauty somehow. That is why Keats was a very sensitive and intelligent person in terms of morality. This aspect was present both in his poetry and personal life. He has depicted this by showing his specific approach towards moral concerns and has always followed the distinction between good and bad. He was greatly involved in the significant moral concerns. Similarly, the reason why his work appeals so much to the youth is because of his moral intelligence, his struggle for selfless love and friendship, and his acceptance of complicated things that couldn't be understood easily, more appropriately explained: "Things cannot go to the will / Be settled, but they tease us out of thought" ("Dear Reynolds, as last night I lay in bed", ll. 76-77) (181).

Keats sometimes says the poet should be a selfless person and live for others rather than feeling for himself. He must do well and be a good poet. He should be a moralist or a teacher. There must be a purpose in his poetry; there shouldn't be any obtrusions in his poetry, i.e. he must not indicate any palpable

designs upon us. Poetry should be great in nature rather than being obtrusive; its purpose is to amuse the soul rather than startling it. Bradley says that poets should love to create beauty. He should not be diverted from the poetic style due to his personal desires. Unlike Wordsworth, there is no didacticism found in Keats's approach. Keats does not teach morality through his works; as seen in *The Eve of St. Agnes and King Lear*, the works speak for themselves. In one place is one of the Sonnets 'On Peace' (1814) by Keats; philosophical certainties can be seen. The speaker in the poem has a notion that the people of a nation have every right to practice freedom under the rule of law of a country and that law is applicable for everyone living in that country. Keats keeps a dual concept regarding truth. At one level, the truth is approachable through deduction by a philosophical mind, i.e. this kind of knowledge is philosophically substantive, and Keats does not discourage it.

Keats dedicated poems to Hunt after his early meetings with him that gave him great confidence. Yet, the dynamism of the group was an issue raised for him. For example, Robinson once asked the question if Hunts was being more sympathetic and kind towards Keats when he was alone with him, pointing at their relationship that failed later. Keats wrote a letter to George Keats on 17th December 1818 where it was written:

if I were to follow my own inclinations, I should never meet any one of that set again, not even Hunt – who is certainly a pleasant fellow in the main when you are with him – but in reality, he is vain, egotistical and disgusting in matters of taste and in morals (ll, 11). 104

Although the poets have been given great opportunities by Hunt, his dominating role in the relationships kept Keats vigilant. As Lilla Maria Crisafulli Jones writes, "Keats needed to free himself, by a decisive intellectual act of will, from a man of dominant character". Despite being greatly assisted by Hunts, Keats always had a hunch that Hunts was trying to dominate him and underestimating him. Despite the greatest efforts of Hunts to convince Keats to adapt his guidance and style, he failed, and therefore the relationship deteriorated. But another friendship was soon encouraged that was comparably more lasting.

John Keats firmly believes in the statement 'beauty is truth'. It has led him unknowingly to adopt this vision towards poetry. Due to this notion, he has created the sweetest poetry in English Literature. If Coleridge is famous for his Romanticism via Supernaturalism, The critics claimed Keats's earliest works to be appreciated only the physical beauty, but the later works of Keats's are devoted to spiritual beauty, which shows that Keats worships beauty in any form and glorifies it in all of his works, e.g. *The Hyperion. A Vision* he admires beauty which is a form of might: For it's the eternal law that first in beauty should be first in might. Keats thinks that both true imagination and beauty are the ultimate truth. Beauty is one of the forms of true imagination. Keats has written in one of his letters: "What imagination sizes as beauty must be truth, whether it existed before or not." Beauty, according to Keats, is not only truth but power as well, as shown in one of his works, *The Hyperion: the vision*. This shows his greatest dedication towards beauty in all its forms, be it spiritual, ideal, physical or sensuous. Keats has made it his religion, his aspect of life and creates his dominant style that can be seen in his poetry.

In terms of attaining suitability, the process of soul-making is a constructive one, and its end goal is attaining the realm of Pleroma. Discoveries regarding spiritual knowledge are not considered with respect to the Christian myth of salvation. The moral sensitivity found in John Keats is, to a great extent, motivated by the hardships in his life. His poetry has the reflections of utilitarianism. Yet, he explains beauty, good and truth with respect to poetry's nature. Meanwhile, he also focuses on the poetry's quality and its writers, i.e. both standards must be high. So it is concluded that his moral system is greatly influenced by utilitarianism.

Conclusion

John Keats lived a very short life. His poetry got different themes, including death, imagination, ideal world of beauty, and also decay. He has remained pre-eminently political and romantic, but he has been celebrated romantic only.

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