

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Keats's Poetry: The Clash of Imagination and Human Constraint

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Abstract:

Escaping into the imaginary world is a great way to overlook the harsh realities of life. John Keats, the most romantic poet, ragged with the sufferings of practical life, escapes from the real world and takes asylum in the realm of imagination. There is a collision between the truth in which the poet actually lives in, and the world of imagination where he desires to be. All through his life, he struggles between his earthly life and the immortal world of eternity. His poetry sheds light on the reality of human life but very often Keats recognizes that the imaginary world holds much greater beauty and wonder. This paper presents Keats's way of escaping into imagination to forget the human limitations. In this paper, I would like to discuss some of his odes to show his view on the transitory nature of human pleasure in contrast to the permanence of imagination. Hence, it intends to become a manifestation for the common individual who are totally exhausted to the harsh realities, completely fade up about the human constraint and seeking for the ventilation in the world of imagination.

Keats odes are the excellent lyrical composition that presents his poetic genius. It reveals the conflicted human nature simultaneously. It expresses the interconnection between joy and pain, life and death, the imagination and real life. In real life, he is tormented with the sorrowful events one after another. Life to him is nothing but series of groans and complaints. Life seems to him is full of misery, of tiring struggle, diseases, pain. He uses poetry as the wings of imagination to soar high in the world of imagination but he can fly only for a while, he is to back to the reality. He always feels a collision between the world of imagination and his real life. His conflict of mind, tension, sufferings above all, and his feelings creates a universal appeal through his poetry.

Keats wretchedness begins at the very early age of his life. He lost his father at the age of nine and in the next year his mother died. He was the eldest of five children. He has to take the burden of his family when he was only eleven. In 1818, when he was eighteen his younger brother Tom died of sufferings from Tuberculosis. The strain of nursing his brother, Tom brought about a breakdown in his health. He was attacked savagely in the same year because of his writing "the Quarterly Review" and "Blawood's Magazine" The adverse criticism deeply wounded the poet and the opinion of some critics hastened his death. Keats had seen a premature death because he had always felt threatened by consumption which ran in the family. In 1820 He became definite about his sufferings from consumption. As a last hope he left England for Rome. He died in 1821, at the age of 26. From his short biography we come to know that life is full of suffering and pain. This world is not a desirable place, so wherever he sees some beautiful things, he tries to dip into an ideal world of imagination. But this little moment of pure happiness does not last long; he is to come back to this world again. In the well known letter to Benjamin bailey of 22 November 1817, he declares: "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of imagination" (Enright, Chickera 256)

His odes like ode to a Nightingale, Ode to psyche, Ode on a Grecian Urn, Ode to fancy are the beautiful examples of his view on the conflict of imagination and human limitation.

Ode to a Nightingale is the beautiful example of his presentation of the contrasting nature of imagination and human limitation. These contrasting feelings are understandable as the poem was written in the spring of 1819, just after a month that marked both the death of his brother Tom and his engagement to Fanny Broune, thus Keats was feeling mixed emotions. In his imagination he could escape the pain of the reality of the death of his brother, however this would mean he couldn't enjoy his relationship with Fanny. In this way reality posed on him the inverse feelings, the joy of his love but the pain of the grief. Ode to a Nightingale represents tensions echoed in Keats personal life.

Ode to a Nightingale is not only a discussion about a bird or a song rather it is about human experiences in general. It is about a dream of escaping this world of fever and fret and about capacity of imagination to transcend life's painful realities. "Ode to Nightingale" shows a clear conflict between the happiness and immortality of imagination and the misery mortality and the limitation of human life.

The poem begins with Keats's complaint about humanity. he says,
 My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
 My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk (Ode to a Nightingale, 1-2)

He is filled with heartaches and pains, life has brought him to a state of forgetfulness and drowsiness to find a "light winged Dryad Nightingale of the trees". Nightingale's song is a source of everlasting joy for him. Nightingale's song creates such a magical impact on him that he feels like one has drunk heavily just now. Forgetting all the pains of real life he is now in a position to leave this real world with the Nightingale. Here he beautifully compares Nightingale as an immortal being (imagination) and the human limitation he says.

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
 What thou among the leaves hast never known.
 The weariness, the 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 disdain;
 Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
 Or new love pine at them beyond to-morrow. (Ode to a Nightingale, 21-30)

He wants to dissolve himself into the forest where the immortal Nightingale lives who is beyond all the weariness and the fatigue of the real life. Here he remembers the bitterness of his own life and reminds us that of our life. He considers that life is nothing but a series of groans and complaints; He reminds us that our life is full of limitations, here young man cannot keep on their youth, they become old, and the old man loses strength of their body, suffers from so many diseases and finally lived. Even the young men are dying of terrible diseases, here the poet thinks of the death of his young brother before his eyes; in the real world youth, beauty, passion everything is short-lived. Beautiful women cannot retain the brightness of this eyes and the passion of young lovers has only a short duration. He remembers his beloved Fanny Brownn's rejection of his young love and turning to others. He has beautifully discussed his view on reality in the above lines of "ode to a Nightingale"

Being tired of the harsh realities of life he wants to move away from the this world to the world of imagination, the abode of Nightingale, he says,

Away! Away! For I will fly to thee,
 Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
 But on the viewless wings of poesy,
 Though the dull brain perplexes and retards ;(Ode to a Nightingale, 31-34)

He now wants to escape into the forest, carried on the invisible wings of his poetic imagination. His rational side hinders him to the way of the flights of fancy. Hearing the song of Nightingales he forgets his pains momentarily. Through his poetic imagination, he feels the healing surroundings of the Nightingales happy abode which made him forget all the pains of life. He imagines himself one of the part of this happy surroundings.

But he can keep himself in the world of imagination only for a short while the song of the nightingale was heard by the last generation, he is now hearing the song and the song will remain for ages but he will not last forever. He is to come to reality. The word forlorn like a bell of the alarm clock reminds him of his position in the real world. He says ‘

For lorn! The very word is like a bell
 To toll me back from thee to my sale self!

 Adieu! Adieu! Thy plaintive anthem fades
 Past he near meadows, over the still stream,
 Up the hill side; and now 'tis buried deep
 In the next valley-glades:(Ode to a Nightingale, 71-78)

So, the poetic imagination itself has only brief flights and at the end of a poetic flight to imaginary world, one must return to the painful realities of life.

The world of the imagination is a relief from the painful reality for a short while but contrast it presents the world of reality more painful by contrast. The imaginary world makes the poet to be more pathetic and makes him to think that the pleasure provided by the song is far-far away from the approach of human beings. So Imagination can impart only momentary pleasure but cannot give anyone the complete release from the harsh realities of life.

Keats glorifies imagination in the 'Ode to psyche'. In this ode psyche symbolizes soul; the sum total of human consciousness. For Keats the most important ingredient of that consciousness is imagination. Keats begins his poem with the praises of psyche as the neglected goddess whose sufferings and mistakes represent the miserable conditions of human life. Keats has taken the source of 'ode to psyche' from the Greek mythology, it is related to the Greek legend of the love of cupid and psyche. Psyche, a King's beautiful daughter with whom cupid, the god of love fell in love and after many vicissitudes they united with each other. After many days psyche was given the status of a divinity and but she was not made immortal till the days of simple religious faith, observance were gone by. The fact is that she has never been duly worsted Keats is very sympathetic to the sufferings of psyche. Keats considers psyche as his object of worship, because for him, imagination, the most active component of human soul, is the best mean to transcend the mortal world. Imagination provides a link between the mortal and the immortal. Psyche as a symbol of imagination acts like an instrument to bridge the gap between the mortal and the immortal because she stood between both: she had been a mortal and then became a goddess. Thus duality exists in Keats's very concept of psyche. In the last stanza the poet declares that the paradise for the soul is to be built by the poet's imagination within the poet's own consciousness. The temple to psyche will be built 'in some untrodden region' of Keats's mind. To build Psyche's temple in his mind Keats has to widen consciousness. He says,

Yes I will be thy priest, and build a fane
In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain, (Ode to Psyche, 50-52)

But an increase in consciousness or mind carries with it the dual capacity for pleasure or pain. So the consciousness or the mind is the place where pleasure and pain can exist simultaneously. And only through the imagination a man can transcend the feeling of sufferings and neglects of mortal life.

In 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' Keats again praises the imagination the immortal world of art. The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' also begins with a symbol, here the urn symbolizes unchanging ideal world of art. Very efficiently Keats presents a comparison between the unending happiness of immortal world of art and the brevity of happiness in mortal life. The urn is an ancient piece of sculpture which has been lying undisturbed beneath the earth for ages and ages. The pictures depicted on the urn are always fresh young. The men are always in a passionate mood of chasing maidens who are struggling to escape from their clutches. The flute players are continuously playing wild and ecstatic music. The poet says,

"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: (Ode on a Grecian Urn, 11-14)

The music that we can hear is sweet but the music that we imagine is sweeter. Imaginary pleasures are more enjoyable than the pleasures of reality. In the picture depicted on the urn the flute players are continuously producing music through their pipes. The music of the pipes cannot be heard by our bodily ears but it can be heard by our imagination. Imagination is more beautiful than the actuality. So though we do not hear what tunes are being played by these pipes, we can enjoy this music more than any actual music.

In the immortal world of art depicted on the urn the song of the handsome young man can never come to an end. It is always the time of spring, the leaves of the trees never fall, the lover who is trying to kiss his beloved cannot enjoy the pleasure of the kiss. In this imaginary world neither the beloved will grow old, loses neither her beauty nor the love of her lover diminish or decline. The unravished bride depicted on the urn will always remain inviolate, untouched, pure. At the end of the third stanza he compares the love, passion of real life with those of the imaginary world. He says,

More happy love! Happier, happy love!
Forever warm and still to be enjoy'd
Forever panting and forever young;
All breathing human passion for above
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead and parching tongue. (Ode on a Grecian Urn, 25-30)

He claims that the love the world of imagination is superior to human love. In real life, Human being enjoys the pleasures of love fully and to the maximum but this enjoyment leaves a man in most feverish condition. The aftermath of human love is a feeling of satiety and emptiness; but the joy of love as depicted on the urn can never lose its freshness.

The third scene depicted on the urn reminds him of the silence, eternal coldness of art. In this image we find a town of empty people situated by a river or a sea shore or a mountain in a haste morning. Keats feels that the silence of the town will be forever, because it is work of art and imagination this scene reached him to the limit of static art.

The final stanza contains his final realization about the imagination and reality. The urn teases him out of the thought as does eternity. That is the problem of the effect of a work of art on time and life. It just moves us out of the world of the actual and into an ideal world which is free of the particular imperfections of our lot here. He says,

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
 As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
 When old age shall this generation waste
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other owe. (Ode on a Grecian Urn, 44-47)

His short flight to fairy land of art is over now. He feels now that all the pictures, the love, passion, the music that glorifies the world of art is lifeless, there is no real life in it. Art has beauty and permanence on the other hand life is transitory but it has reality. So, art may be an aid to life not a substitute for it. Art can enrich our real life but it can never take its place. 'The ode to a Nightingale' ends with the explicit confession that the 'fancy' is a 'cheat' and 'ode on a Grecian urn' concludes with a similar concept. But this time there is positive conclusion instead of negative. There is no escape from 'the sufferings of mortal life, but the action of time can meet the challenges of immortal world.

Keats venerates imagination as being almost better than reality in his 'ode to Fancy'. The main idea of this ode is that reality is not as powerful as imagination. Because reality fades or becomes boring while the imaginary world never fades. In the world of imagination a man can be what he wants, he can go anywhere, can feel or see anything that he likes. Imagination can set a man free from his circumstances. 'Ode to Fancy' starts with a definite point of view where imagination is given more preference than reality. He says,

Ever let the fancy roam
 Pleasure never is at home
 As a touch sweet pleasure melteth
 Like to bubbles when rain pelteth; (Ode to Fancy, 1-4)

The real pleasure can be realized only by the power of imagination. Because the duration of the pleasures of reality is very short, it vanishes like the bubbles of rain. Each of the season like summer, spring, autumn, winter have their own beauties. They provide us different flowers, fruits. Every season have different appeals to our life. Sitting by the fireside on a wintry night is very enjoyable, again the buds and bells of May, the heaped wealth of autumn have different attraction to human being. Spring is the queen for its blooming flowers and the sweet song of the birds. But all these seasons can never give us real and lasting pleasures because like all other pleasures of reality it suffers from imperfections. We very soon become tired of the pleasures which these seasons provide. Only the pleasures of imagination are ever fresh and everlasting. We can enjoy all the pleasures of the different seasons simultaneously in imagination. Keats compares this enjoyment with the enjoyment of three excellent wines mingled in a cup. Even the loveliest woman in the world loses her appeal and charms as a result of too much familiarity. With the passing of time her beauty becomes stale, she cannot keep her youth. But if we spread out the wings of fancy, then we can find herself as the most beautiful lady who never loses her charms and appeal. The beauty of imaginary sweetheart can never fade or decline.

So all through the poem he wholeheartedly praises imagination. In reality every pleasure is short-lived; we cannot keep its freshness. But Keats proclaims that if remove all the restraints and restrictions upon the imagination, if we give it unlimited freedom to wander abroad, then only imagination can provide us the exquisite pleasures which cannot be found in reality.

In conclusion, we can say that the world of imagination which he enjoyed through his poetry is the asylum for Keats to forget the harsh realities of life. But it is also true that Keats, himself renders through his poetry that the world of imagination can shelter us for while but it cannot give us the better reality. Though Keats' escapism is individual but the common people find a tremendous affinity with him. His poetry becomes the shelter of common people who are seeking the place to relieve themselves from the bitterness of life. In my paper I have tried to analyze some of his odes to show the role of imagination to forget the human incapability. Through analyzing his poems I have tried to present his poetry as the collision of imagination and human constraint that Keats experiences all through his life.

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