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John Keats: His flight from the real and the ideal world

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Abstract :

The research paper depicts the movement of the speaker between the real and the ideal world. John Keats is one of the greatest poets of the romantic era. Keats often associated love and pain both in life and in his poetry. He repeatedly combines different senses in one image. The vital force behind his poetry was his power to apply imagination to every aspect of life. The series of odes written by John Keats are heavily loaded with sensualities. Most of his odes move between the two worlds; the real world and the ideal world. The real world is where the poet actually lives in and the ideal world is what he desires to be. The structure of his odes explains how he restores the friendly relationship between natural and material world, even in pain. The article depicts how John Keats moves from real world to the ideal world in his Odes. In Ode to Psyche the speaker moves to the ideal world of mind and imagination. In Ode to a Nightingale and Ode on Grecian Urn the speaker returns to the real world because he finds the ideal dissatisfying. Finally in his last Ode, Ode to Melancholy the speaker remains in the real world. He longed for the ideal world but at the end he embraced the natural, finite world.

Keywords : Real, Ideal world, friendly relationship and imagination.

Introduction :

John Keats was a great English poet and one of the youngest poets of the romantic moment. John Keats was born in London on 31 October 1795, the eldest of Thomas and Frances Jennings Keats's four children. Although he died at the age of twenty-five, they were indifferently received in his lifetime, but his fame grew rapidly after his death. Keats had perhaps the most remarkable career of any English poet. He published only fifty-four poems, in three slim volumes and a few magazines. Keats found comfort and refuge in literature and art. The themes of Keats's work were love, beauty, joy, nature, music and the mortality of human life. Keats had a style "heavily loaded with sensualities", notably in the series of odes. Typically of the Romantics, he raised extreme emotion through natural imagery. Today his poems and letters remain among the most popular and analysed in English literature - in particular "Ode to a Nightingale", "Ode on a Grecian Urn", "Sleep and Poetry" and the sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer". His odes move between the two worlds; the real and the ideal world. Ideal world is one every person has in mind and want to become; they have dreams which may be fulfilled or not depending on the circumstances prevailing. The real world is an entirely different storey, and it is based on events that occur on the ground. Ideal world is designed by a person in a way of comfort but the real-world deviates from the ideal sense depending on the local consequences. The ideal world is our expectation and the real world is actually. Keats has left behind a number of beautiful odes. The most prominent of them are Ode to a Nightingale, Ode on Grecian Urn, and Ode on Melancholy. Through these odes, the poet describes the melodious songs of the Nightingale, Grecian art and the changing human moods.

According to Keats, poetry is not the vehicle of philosophy, religious teachings or social and political theories but incarnation of beauty. He loved the principle of beauty in all things. The opening line of *Endymion* conveys this idea :

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever."

And in this world of beauty he sought refuge from the rejections and pain he suffered in real life. The ballad *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* is directly connected with Keats' feelings for Miss Fanny Brawne. Keats was in love with her but she rejected his love. In *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* Keats develops the folk theme of

the beautiful but evil lady into a powerful expression of a sense of loss, mystery and terror. The knight-at-arms is in thralldom of love and his fate thereof represents the chivalrous, romantic and visionary aspirations of the people which are bound to experience infinite agony and doomed to “loiter palely and alone.”

Acutely aware of the pain and suffering caused by poverty and illness, he worked about these subjects with great poetic force. *When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be* is an exquisite sonnet expressing Keats' fear about death.

Keats was continuously haunted by the fear of death. He was suffering from a fatal disease-consumption, to which he lost his mother and brother. In this sonnet the poet fears that death may come upon him even before he has expressed in art the thoughts and feelings that are teeming in his brain. And his thirst for immortal fame and love would remain unquenched.

*“When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain.”*

The only way to rescue love and fame is by artistic creation which takes them out of time and space into the realm of immortality. A great work of art is immortal.

*O Goddess! hear these tuneless numbers, wrung
By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,
Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see
The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?*

Ode to Psyche is a tribute to the Greek Goddess Psyche with which cupid fell in love. He claims to have had a dream about her and cupid, but he isn't sure if it was a dream or a fantasy. And any case, it was a view of reality that may properly be described as a peak of Keats creative intensity, in which the real and the ideal, the factual and the fantasy all came together.

*With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,
Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:*

The poet proposes to become her priest, to construct her shrine in the depths of his mind, to adorn her with flowers of verses, and to let his imagination be the gardener of that metaphorical garden of spiritual love, where the breeze and streams, birds and bees will soothe the dryads to sleep. The poet's fancy will produce an endless variety of flowers which mean verses. His creative imagination is even more fertile than an ordinary garden. Such a garden which is the fountain of imagination will be left open for the deity forever. The goddess for whom this temple is being built is transported from her natural state of unreality into the realm of fantasy. The goddess, her temple, and her garden are all clear in the minds' eye but only exist in the imagination. Those who do not comprehend the myth's meaning may accuse it of anthropomorphism but the significance rests in our realisation and experience of the ideal, spiritual, and imaginative phenomena.

His fancy will be the gardener and his verses will be the flowers in the garden. He has projected about his dreams and wishes while universalising the issue. He has worked his way through a theoretical acceptance of the value of vivid and imaginative experience. His intention is to glorify the imagination which is a means of approaching the immortal world by breaking through the bounds of the transient and the finite.

Ode to a Nightingale is the most passionate and personal of Keats' odes. Written soon after the death of his brother Tom, the poem contrasts the immortality of the nightingale, symbolized by its song, with the mortality of human world. It also contrasts the happiness and joy of the bird with the "weariness, the fever and the fret" of the world. The human world is over shadowed with death.

"Where youth grows pale and spectre thin, and dies"

And

"Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes."

The poet longs to drown the realities of the world with the help of a cup of wine but only the poet's creative imagination helps him. And aided by his poetry he visits the immortal and beautiful world of the nightingale.

*"Away! Away! For I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards
But on the viewless wings of Poesy."*

The world of imagination represented by the immortal song of the nightingale is pleasant and enjoyable than the real world. Keats soars high with his wings of poesy into the world of ideas and perfect happiness. But the next moment consciousness makes him land on the grounds of reality and he bids farewell to the ideal bird. In fact, no one can escape into the ideal world forever. Imaginative minds can have a momentary flight into the fanciful world. But ultimately one has to return to the real world and must accept the reality. The poet imagines the Queen Moon sitting on her throne. She is surrounded by the starry fairies. The atmosphere is soft, sweet and calm. Keats provides a rich and sensuous imagery that delights the reader.

*“The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn and the pastoral eglantine.”*

The poet is reminded of death, but in the world of imagination, death is purged of its horror, providing solace to the poet.

Ode on a Grecian Urn develops on the theme of transience and permanence. The real world is transient and the world of imagination is permanent. His ode is based on the tension between the ideal and the real. The Grecian Urn is the symbol of the world of imagination. In this world the melodies are sweeter than the songs that we actually hear.

*“Heard melodies are sweet,
But those unheard are sweeter”*

The love and beauty depicted on the urn will remain fresh forever. The trees will never shed their leaves and the musicians will never stop playing the music. The heart of the lover will always throb with passion while the beauty of the beloved will never fade. The permanently ideal world that is presented in the urn is lifeless thing when seen from the viewpoint of real life; the real life is complemented and enriched by their ideal.

“Forever wilt thou love and she be fair!”

The poet is seeking for the reality of life to be like that of the ideal world. He is trying to establish the world of his wish with the help of imagination. The

poem begins with an address to the Grecian Urn and with almost envious amazement but it ends with the realization that beauty or ideal is also a dimension of the truth of the real.

*“Beauty is truth, truth beauty that is all
Yet know on earth and all ye need to know”*

Whatever is beautiful must also be true and whatever is true must also be beautiful. Truth is not the life as actually lived but life as one may imagine it.

A distinct feature of Keats’ escapism is that though the world of imagination provides him comfort but he returns to the real world in the end. In Ode to a Nightingale the word ‘forlorn’ reminds the poet of his own forlorn condition. As the song of nightingale becomes more distant, his imagination which had carried him to the forest also decline and the poetic vision fades.

*“Adieu! The fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam’d to do, deceiving elf.”*

The poet moves back from fancy to common world of reality.

*“Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music: Do I wake or sleep?”*

In most of his poems Keats had tried to escape from reality and enjoy beauty through self forgetfulness and absorption in another image. But in Ode to Melancholy he does not evade melancholy but faces it. He says that melancholy does not lie in sad and ugly things of life, nor in death or means of death but in everything beautiful and joyful.

*“She dwells with Beauty-Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips bidding adieu.”*

The poet finds the reason of melancholy. Melancholy lives with beauty. The humans find joy in beautiful creations of the world. But beauty is short lived. And this makes us sad and gives rise to melancholy. The poet further says that only those who have very sensitive souls can enjoy the pleasures of life which bring melancholy in their trail.

*“Though seen none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might”*

Sorrows and sufferings are part of everyone’s life. According to Keats, happiness is an occasional episode in general drama of pain. No one can survive from sufferings but one can escape from them. Death of loved ones, rejection in love and harsh criticism of his works tortured Keats’ soul. That’s why we find underlying theme of melancholy in most of his poems. Hyperion is full of sorrows and sufferings.

*“Saturn has fallen, am I too to fall?
Am I to leave this haven of my rest?
This cradle of my glory, this soft Clime”*

The final stanza of his last great Ode, “To Autumn”, he creates a gloomy atmosphere and asks

“Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?”

“To Autumn” was to become one of the highly regarded poems in the English language.

As the modern world seemed to Keats to be hard, cold and prosaic, he habitually sought an imaginative escape from it. But his escape is not like that of Shelley who dreamt of a future land of promise but into the past, the Greek mythology, or medieval romance and provides us with poetry of rich sensuous beauty. Middleton Murry has rightly adjudged the nature of Keats.

“They (lines from Grecian Urn) contain deep wisdom purchased at the full price of deep suffering.....It has a precious message to mankind, not as a thing of beauty which gives exquisite delight to the senses, but as a symbol and prophecy of a comprehension of human life which mankind can attain.”

Conclusion :

Keats came to learn that the kind of imagination he pursued was a false lure, inadequate to the needs of the problem and in the end; he traded the visionary for the naturalized imagination and embracing experience. Keats imagination is a means

to understand life, a means of quest for the truth and beauty and the most reliable mode of experience and insight. Ode to Psyche suggests that Keats longs for the ideal and rejects the natural world. In Ode to a Nightingale the poet joins the nightingale and thereby escapes from the suffering and the pain of the world. But later he drives away the nightingale in order to prolong his sympathetic grip on the natural world. In Ode on a Grecian Urn the everlasting world of the urn is full of desirable life and passion without any suffering and aging. But the speaker has returned to the more sufficient, finite world, resigned now to embrace the natural beauties. In Ode on Melancholy, he urges the reader not to search after the idealistic world but rather to seize and experience the beauty of the transient natural and human world. Keats attitude towards the world is reflected in this article that he no longer desires to escape to the perfect world but desires to live fully in the natural one.

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