

*Dr.Maithili. S.Barahate
Assistant Professor & H.O.D
P.I.E.T,
Nagpur.
maithilibarahate@yahoo.com

**Dr.Kirti Dorshetwar
Assistant Professor
RKNEC, Nagpur

Shakespearean Influence on Keats Sonnets

Abstract

Of all the Romantic poets John Keats (1795-1821) was a true and pure romantic. He was deeply influenced by the Elizabethans. The Elizabethan age was called as the first Romantic age in English Literature. Shakespeare, Spenser and others belonged to the first Romantic Age. Keats appreciated the work of Shakespeare and Spenser from the core of his heart and most of his compositions are a result of deep influence of these on Keats. There was a difference between the Elizabethan and Romantic Age. The poets of the Romantic age revived the poetry of the Elizabethans. They imbibed the characteristics of Elizabethan era, polished them and made them a part of their poetic compositions.

In the earlier poetry of Keats we find experimentation by Keats. He tried to experiment and this in turn resulted into his evolution as a great poet. The early poetry was one of fluidity of thought and poetic technique. It abounded in weakness of dramatic and narrative power, deficiency in characterization and extreme sensuousness. But gradually Keats showed a power of artistic design of great excellence. His sensuousness became rich; he came very near to Shakespearean felicity of expression. He selected felicitous phrases and often replaced flat words with suggestive and forceful ones. He discovered the use of all the suggestive power of words – their music, associations, and their romantic and sensuous appeal. He had a wonderful power of expression

through imagination.

The present paper deals with the Shakespearean influence on the works of John Keats with specific reference to his sonnets.

Introduction:

John Keats was one of the greatest English Romantic Poets inspite of other great contemporaries like Byron and Shelley. There was a spiritual quest in Keats which was revealed in his letters and poems. He wanted to search for a system of the tragic mystery of existence and offer a mode of release. His short and pitiful life was more ambiguous and complex than what the critics suggested. But Keats succeeded in pursuing his passion, his true love. Today he occupies place amongst one of the greatest Romantic Poets in English literature.

Keats as a writer of Sonnets:

Keats fame mainly rests on his Odes. He was known as a writer of Odes, unlike Shakespeare who was a writer of sonnets. Both of them were genius in their own area of composition. But in case of Keats he did not hesitate to experiment with the sonnet form of poetry. He wrote in all 65 sonnets, in Petrarchan and Shakespearean form. Sonnets consist of fourteen lines carrying one single thought or feeling Keats had handled this form with dexterity and maturity. He was a great sonneteer even though he did not produce a large quantity of sonnets. Keats was a passionate poet. He believed in

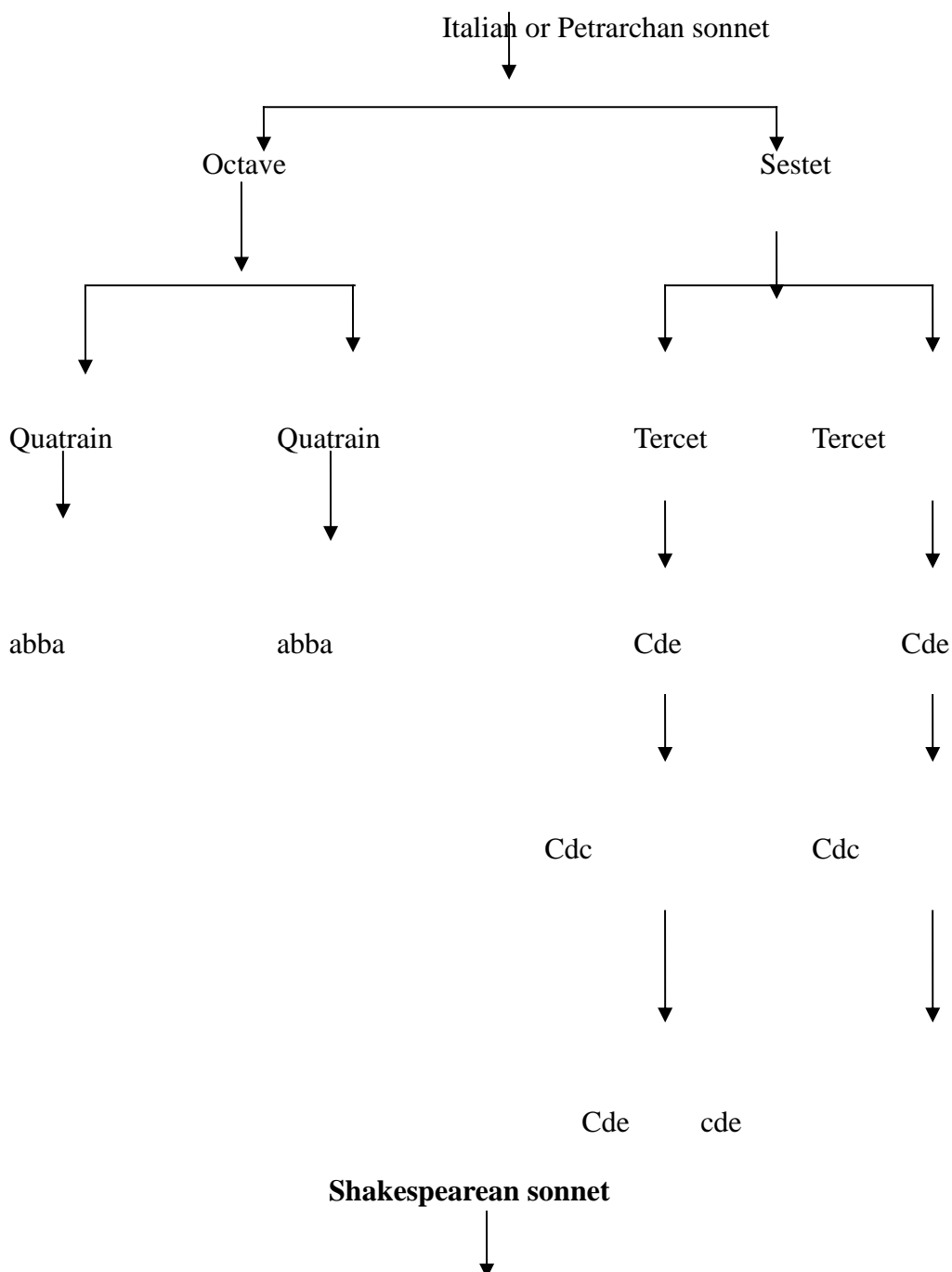
Excellence arising from intensity that was his ideal.

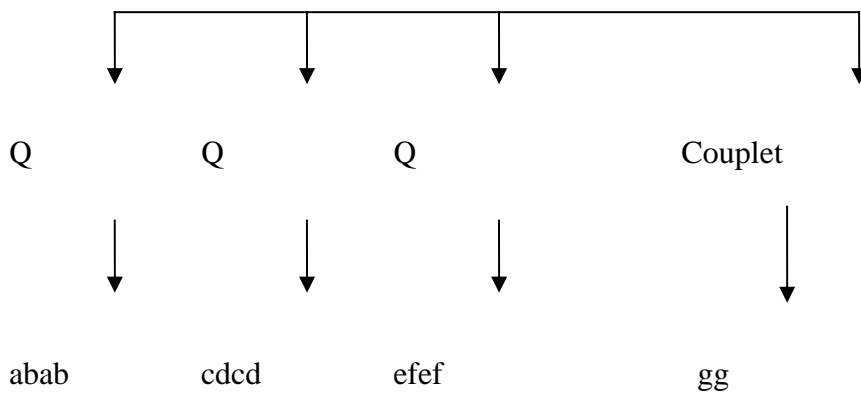
Though Keats rejected Sonnet for Ode, even then he is reckoned among the great sonnet writers in English. His early sonnets are largely concerned with poets or with pictures, sculptures or the rural solitudes in which a poet might nurse his fancy.

Keats wrote one sonnet **On Cassandra**. It was a free translation of a sonnet of Ronsard. Though he wrote the earlier sonnets in Petrarchan model he later moved to adapting Shakespearean model in

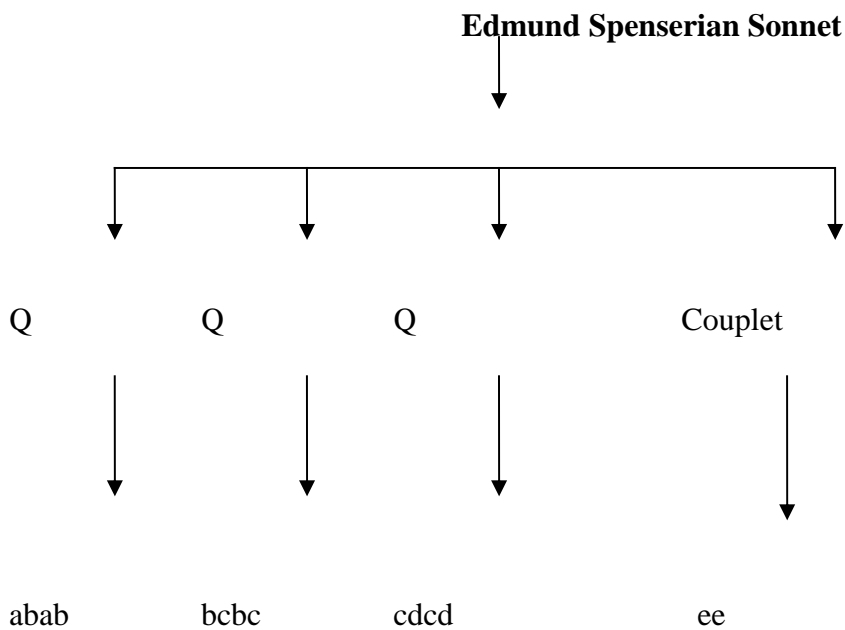
composing sonnets. Out of 71 sonnets, 44 were composed in Petrarchan model. 27 of the sonnets have their sestet restricted to two rhymes –ed, cd, cd. Other sonnets were written with three rhyme sestet. Main influence in composing sonnets in Petrarchan model came to Keats from Milton who took it from Wordsworth.

Influence of Shakespeare on Keats sonnets: We find the influence of Shakespeare and Milton on Keats' poetic compositions. After writing a sonnet **Lear**, Keats experimented with combining Petrarchan octave and Shakespearean sestet.





Before Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser (1562-1599) wrote a new variety of sonnet connecting the quatrains.



In Shakespearean sonnet there is no pause at the end of the eighth line. The climax of the thought is duly reached in the climax.

Keats wrote a Shakespearean sonnet, **When I have Fears** after nine days. Though he composed the

sonnet **To the Nile** in February in Petrarchan model, from then onwards he experimented with the Shakespearean form. Thus his early sonnets are Italian in rhyming scheme and Shakespearean in later sonnets.

Keats sonnets brought forth his genius. Sonnets were rich in expression and noble in thought. He wrote many sonnets addressed to his acquaintances, then animals, birds and to things as well as quality and Greek Gods, places and books.

He wrote sonnets on his brother George, to a friend who sent him roses, to G.A.W (Georgiana Augusta Wylie) to his brothers, Haydon, Byron, Chatterton, Spenser, a young lady who had sent him a laurel crown, Miss Wylie, to John Hamilton Reynolds, to Homer and Sonnet to Fanny.

His sonnets were not limited to a particular idea. He composed sonnets on seasons, fame, sonnet on sonnets, sonnet on the country England, sonnet on solitude, sonnet on Nile, on sea, on seeing the Elgin marbles, on a picture of Leander, sonnet on Peace, on a cat, etc.

His variety of sonnets displays his power of poetic compositions. Sonnets in 1817 volumes are:-

“Keen, fitful, gusts are whispering here and there”.

“Great Spirits now on earth are sojourning”

“The poetry of Earth is never dead”

“To one who has been long in city pent”.

“On seeing the Elgin marbles”.

Keats did not compose any sonnets from April 1817 to January 1818. On 16th February 1818 he wrote a letter to George telling him that he had composed many songs and sonnets. So this was a

fruitful period for sonnets. During this time Keats composed **When I have Fears that I may Cease to be, Times Sea has been Five years at its slow Ebb, Why did I Laugh Tonight** , 1819 in which he states:

‘Verse, Fame and Beauty, are intense indeed,
But Death intenser – Death is life’s meed”.

His sonnet **On the Cat**, takes us back to his childhood days, we find a mention of animals in his letters. Keats went a step further by composing a sonnet on a Cat –

Cat! Who hast pass’d thy grand climacteric,
How many mice and rats hast in thy days Destroy’d? How many tit bits stolen? Gaze
With those bright languid segments green and prick”.

Keats’ last sonnet was **Bright Star**. He wrote it on board the ship on his last journey with his friend Joseph Severn. It is rich in melody, imaginative description and union of emotional force.

Dr. Roberts Bridges, a Critic, states about his Sonnets:

Keats sonnets are generally distinguished by a total absence of the self-consciousness which is the common bone of sonnets, so that many lovers of poetry put them next to Shakespeare’s. They are free from effort and puzzle, headedness and pedantry, and when they do fall stiffly but negligently, and most of them are pleasant poems and graceful to the reader.

Shakespeare had limited the theme of sonnets to some subjects like earlier Elizabethans. Milton widened its scope and engulfed in the realm of sonnet almost everything from human feelings to experience. John went a step further by extending the scope of sonnet by dealing with subjects from cat, peace to acquaintances.

Keats experimented with the sonnet form and wrote the **Lear** sonnet of Petrarchan type but with an unusual scheme of cd, cd, and ee in the sestet of the sonnet.

It is the combination of Petrarchan octave and Shakespearean sestet.

Sonnet

On sitting down to read King Lear once again

| | |
|---|------|
| O Golden tongued Romance, with serene lute! | a |
| Fair plumed siren, Queen of far-away! | b Q |
| Leave melodizing on this wintry day, | b |
| Shut up thine olden pages, and be mute: | a |
| | |
| Adieu! For, once again, the fierce dispute | a |
| Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay | b Q |
| Hust I burn through; once more humbly assay | b |
| The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearian fruit: | a |
| | |
| Chief Poet! And ye clouds of Albion, | c |
| Begetters of our deep eternal theme! | d |
| When through the old oak Forest I am gone, | c S |
| Let me not wander in a barren dream | d |
| But, when I am consumed in the fire, | e |
| Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire | e |
| Q - Quatrain | |
| S - Sestet | |

Keats was influenced by Milton in writing sonnets in Petrarchan type and in composing sonnets in

Shakespearean type he was greatly influenced by the writings of the great bard. Keats could read and understand Shakespeare in depth.

E.g. of Shakespearean type of sonnet adopted by Keats:-

Sonnet: When I have Fears

| | |
|---|-------|
| When I have fears that I may cease to be | a |
| Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain, | b Q |
| Before high-piled books, in charactery, | a |
| Mold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain | b |
| | |
| When I behold, upon the nights Starr'd face, | c |
| Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance, | d Q |
| And think that I may never live to trace | c |
| Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance; | d |
| | |
| And when I feel, fair creature of an hour, | e |
| That I shall never look upon thee more, | f Q |
| Never have relish in the faery power, | e |
| Of unreflecting bone, then on the shore | f |
| | |
| Of the wide world I stand alone, and think | g C |
| Till low and fame to nothingness do sink | g |

Q - Quatrain

C - Couplet

Keats later sonnets were composed in Shakespearean style. This brings forth the undying influence of the Bard on John Keats. Other than this sonnet which is mentioned above we find the composition of the sonnet **Time's Sea, The Human Seasons, and the Bright Star**, on Shakespearean line. Keats was influenced by Spenser and Shakespeare but not dominated by them.

Sonnet though composed in great numbers, were not the interest zone for Keats. He was to make a mark as a writer of Odes. In due course of time Odes became Keats domain and today he is famous as a writer of Odes.

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