

The streak of sadness in Keats' poetry: understanding meaning through his structures and lexis

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Abstract

Keats' short and tragic life left him with fewer options to enjoy and celebrate the colours of nature and fruits of love. His odes communicate a host of emotions which strived to find expression. Keats' preoccupation with self, his fear of pain and death, his unfulfilled desires of love, his tendency to escape from the agonising present to nature or to a world of fancy are some predominant emotions which find their place in different forms in his poetry. Through all his odes, there runs a streak of sadness which connects his odes in a very eloquent manner. The sorrow reverberates throughout his odes in different fashion and haunts the reader in the same way as it haunted Keats himself. Keats' poetry has been a subject of appreciation and criticism both. The genuineness with which he voiced his feelings capture attention. Keats did not obscure his writing by adding complex tropes or intellectual allusions and employing intricate structures. Agreeable rhythmic patterns, simplistic structures and lexis retain interest and are prime reason for the admiration of his odes.

The present paper studies the theme of sadness in Keats' odes. As we go through his famous odes we understand how his world was revolving around his lone self, its fears, desires and wishes. We also understand the way he handled sadness and pain and wished to escape repeatedly. The paper is an attempt to observe the structure and lexis of his odes and understand a connection between his style and theme.

Key Words

Romantic poetry, Keats' odes, Melancholy, Escapism, Structures and lexis

Romantics were hailed for their love of nature, tendency to escape in an enchanted world of beauty and voicing all their emotions ranging from pure joy amidst nature and carnal desires to morbid sensibilities. During their time, when so much was happening in the world,

romantics chose to find solace in escaping to an enchanted world of nature, beauty and emotions. Their works as Wordsworth says are characterised by “spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions”. In this realm of emotions, the element of sadness permeates too. Sadness has been dealt with different levels of intensity by different romantics in their poetry.

Keats’ poetry more particularly towers above all his contemporaries in manifestation of melancholy. Keats’ untimely departure from this world had brought an abrupt end to a much potent artist. The underlying sadness in his poetry is evident due to different reasons. During his short and tragic life he had to endure harsh criticism, diagnosis of terminal tuberculosis and rejection in love. Resultantly, death and its inevitability became his major preoccupations. Keats expresses mortality as a close observer, as to him experiences of small encounters with death or gradual approach of death came naturally. His symbols of death depicted in ‘Ode to the Grecian Urn’, ‘Ode to Autumn’ provide evidence to the intensity with which death finds its place in his poetry. Keats’ illustrations of passing away, fears of losing life before attaining fame or enjoying love in his odes have remained unequalled.

Keats was a prolific writer and aspired to surpass his contemporaries and predecessors in poetic achievements. In his ‘Sleep and Poetry’ (1817) Keats describes his literary aspiration and asks for ten years to complete it. "Sleep and Poetry" is remembered for its attack on neoclassical poetry¹

A thousand handicraftsmen wore the mask
Of Poesy. Ill-fated, impious race!
That blasphemed the bright Lyrist to his face,
And did not know it, — no, they went about,
Holding a poor, decrepid standard out
Mark'd with most flimsy mottos, and in large
The name of one Boileau!

Keats’ poetry is opulent in emotions and his style reflects it well. In the lines above, he pronounced his contempt through strong adjectives, ‘ill-fated’, ‘impious’, ‘poor’, ‘decrepit’ and ‘flimsy’ and highlight his reflections over the degradation poetry has undergone. The run-on-line structures capture the flow of thoughts dotted with commas which are intended to pack throng of reactions in a smaller casing. Keats reverence to poet finds its place in ‘Lyrist’ which he capitalises at the middle of a sentence. The fourth line records his disregard with two negatives

...And **did not** know it, — **no**, they went about...

Keats always sensed death as hovering over his dreams and which would bring an end to his hopes and desires. Majority of Keats' odes are written in first-person as he used personal pronoun 'I' and 'my'. This emphasises that he had formed around himself a world of his own which essentially comprised of his own dreams, passions, ambitions and fears.

The following selections from 'When I have fears that I may cease to be' best express his desperation to be successful in love and lyrical accomplishments:

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain...
...And think that I may never live to trace
Their shadows with the magic hand of chance...
...That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery power
Of unreflecting love—then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

Noticeably almost in every line he uses 'I' or 'my', which is a telling illustration of his preoccupation with self and his subjectivity. The words 'fears' and 'cease' in the title categorically establish his pangs of impending end of a life. His helplessness before destiny is expressed as he repeatedly utters 'never'. Poet chooses 'that' clauses over other structures to record his foremost fears, i.e. fear of missed opportunities of more lyrical output and inability to see his beloved any more. He laments as his pen would cease to garner the swarming emotions in his brain. He grieves of not having left with time to love. Towards the end this vulnerability culminates as he envisages his desires for fame and love sink into 'nothingness'. These powerful lines with end rhymes contain the crux of the poem. Standing on the shore he would see his dreams of love and fame would sink to nothingness when he ceases to exist anymore to attain them. The picturesque quality of these lines strike the right chord in reader's heart.

Examples of Keats' preoccupations with death and ponderings over mortality are many, as in

"On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" (1817).

My spirit is too weak—mortality
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
And each imagined pinnacle and steep
Of godlike hardship tells me I must die
Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.

Poet makes the word 'mortality' stand out through a hyphen, as it constantly jabs his tranquillity. Keats' similes here speak more than a thousand words could express. The simile of an 'unwilling sleep' encapsulates all his emotions related to loss and mortality. His premature death was certainly an unwilling sleep for him and troubled his psyche in all his poetic endeavours. He yearned to live longer to enjoy fruits of love and peak of fame. The simile of 'sick eagle' brings out the unfathomable remorse with which he awaits his end. The picturesque phrase 'sick eagle looking at the sky' vividly portrays his agony. The helpless surrendering before destiny is another trait which rings into ear as we read more. His utterances, as, 'My spirit is too weak' and 'I must die' extend the pain of his voice as these are supplied with intensifiers 'too' and 'must'.

The streak of despondency is also apparent in Keats' contemplation of beauty. Keats finds solace in aesthetics. For him, thoughts of beauty alleviates the agony related to inevitable death. The following lines from 'Ode to the Grecian Urn' reveal his emotions of joy and sorrow being merged with each other.

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:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,

A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

The rhyme scheme of the lines is agreeable. He rejoices the eternal beauty art is capable of imparting to nature and humans. Keats envies the immortality trees and lovers can enjoy in the work of art. Ode commences in a happy note as we find references to 'sweet melodies', 'soft pipes', 'ditties', 'fair youth' 'bold lover'. Pipers will always play their sweet melodies, trees inscribed on the ancient urn shall never shed their leaves as the spring goes. He assures young lovers by telling them that their beloveds shall always stay beautiful. The people on the urn, unlike the poet himself, shall never stop having passionate experiences. They shall remain forever while the poet grows old and dies. The unfulfilled desires of a romantic lover are best expressed through repeated adverb 'forever', which voices his grief for not being immortal like a work of art.

Although poem indicates the short-term joy poet has discovered in the realm of art but it is also replete with tragic implications as he is envious of the immortality of art. The regret of not being there to enjoy youthful love and beauty to its fullness pains the poet as he repeats 'never', 'happy' with a hint of regret and envy:

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss...

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed...

More happy love! more happy, happy love!..

Keats' adjectives in these lines display transition from happier 'fair' and 'bold' to dejected 'high-sorrowful', 'cloy'd', 'burning' and 'parching'. Keats visualizes the objects of art as living entities when he addresses them with interjections like 'ye' and 'ah'. Keats' conjunctions, 'but', 'therefore', 'that', 'though', 'and' are vital in linking the ceaseless flow of emotions and he is liberal in using them.

The contrasting tones in two stanzas quoted above point toward the fleeting emotions poet experiences as his feelings oscillate between two extremes of cheerfulness and anguish.

The most celebrated ode by Keats, which explores the themes of nature, ephemerality, mortality, and projects his sombre disposition is 'Ode to a Nightingale'. The verbs, 'aches' and 'pains' introduce the poet's anguish in the beginning:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains

Expressions like 'fade away', 'dim', 'fade far away', 'dissolve', 'weariness', 'fever', 'fret', 'groan', 'sad', 'gray', 'pale', 'spectre-thin', 'dies' augment the agony in the voice of the poet. His desires of being 'unseen' or 'fade away' and 'dissolve' bring out the escapist in Keats:

...That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,

And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret...

Through parallel relative clauses in the following lines Keats reproaches the mortal life and envies the life of nightingale as she is beyond constraints of pain and weariness which men in this physical world have to endure. Keats' choice of relative pronoun 'where' pinpoints his impressions about this world which imparts more pain and less joy:

Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow

Keats repeats his desire to escape from his agony as he foregrounds the adverb 'away'.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,

Keats admits his preoccupation with death as he talks of having it mentioned in many forms giving it 'soft' names. Keats' obsession with death makes him fall in love with it and he admits of singing about it in many of his rhymes. He yearns for an 'easeful' death 'with no pain' as he finds the experience of death as 'rich':

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;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain...

Being 'half' in love catches attention, which may point toward his half-heartedness in accepting his end. Keats' longing for a painless death reiterates his escapist temperament where he wants to fade away in oblivion. Death and its connotations like, 'immortal', 'passing', 'tread thee down', 'sick', 'tears', 'sad', 'perilous', 'forlorn', 'adieu', 'plaintive', 'buried', 'sleep' are strewn in this stanzas which enhance the sombre disposition of the poet.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;

The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Significantly, Keats' stating here that being 'Forlorn' or 'sole' in this agonising state rings like an alarm and brings him back from the world of dreams to reality. Such expressions dig out the sadness yet again. The interrogatives at the end of this stanza and synonymous 'fancy', 'vision' and 'day dream' underline his earnest wish to keep the world of fancy alive as his fears diminish in such surroundings. With similar emotions he accuses 'fancy' as not being adept to sooth his agony and 'cheat' him with charmed atmosphere.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

"Ode on Melancholy" deals with sadness in a different way. "The only ode not to be written in the first person, "Melancholy" finds the speaker admonishing or advising sufferers of melancholy in the imperative mode; presumably his advice is the result of his own hard-won experience... For the first time in the odes, the speaker in "Melancholy" urges action rather than passive contemplation."² Poet here wants the sufferer to do everything he can to remain aware of and alert to the depths of suffering. He should not seek anything to be relieved or forget his sorrow:

No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist
Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd

By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;
Make not your rosary of yew-berries,
Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be
Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl
A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,
And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.

Significantly usual autobiographical 'I' 'my, is replaced by 'thy' 'your' and 'thou', which establishes that Keats comes out of his own sheath to urge his readers with some recommendations in a somewhat commanding tone. Negative adverbs 'no', 'nor', 'not', 'neither' declare the imperative tone poet has espoused to encourage his readers to not to resort to any means which would comfort them while in pain. Perhaps Keats' own experiences with pains have strengthened his soul and he is now in a state to embrace the pain as it comes irrespective of its kind and intensity. The parallel structures further develop this imperative tone:

Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd...
Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be

Keats wishes to keep the agony alive and not attempting to mitigate its effects by consuming a poisonous wine, drowsiness or finding some company in sorrow. These prescriptions appear in a series of ten subordinate clauses which end only at the final line of the stanza. The rhyme scheme of ABABCDECDE contributes in maintaining a pattern of his utterances. Keats coins his own lexis as, 'Wolf's-bane', 'tight-rooted', 'yew-berries' and 'death-moth' and creates his own objects which he fancies to be pain relievers. Keats believes that it is difficult to endure pain in a wakeful state through his noun phrase, 'wakeful anguish' which he utters at the end after his calls to keep oneself awake to confront pain. 'Suffer', 'pale', 'mournful', 'sorrow', 'drowsily', 'anguish' are the words which are synonymous with pain and these back the subject of the stanza.

The following lines from his „Ode on Indolence“ once again express his wish to escape into the world of fancy and forget the agonising present:

How is it, Shadows! that I knew ye not?
How came ye muffled in so hush a mask?
Was it a silent deep-disguisèd plot
To steal away, and leave without a task
My idle days? Ripe was the drowsy hour;

The blissful cloud of summer-indolence
Benumb'd my eyes; my pulse grew less and less;
Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower:
O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense
Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness?

Keats' adjectives, 'muffled', 'hush', 'silent', 'drowsy', 'blissful', 'benumb'd', 'melt', 'unhaunted', and 'idle' bring out the lethargic vein of the poem as they imply relaxation. Like most of his odes, Keats wish to find solace through different means is evident here. 'Shadows', 'mask', 'disguised', 'steal' indicate his fears from some forces of nature which may work against his wishes to steal from him his blissful indolence. He pines to escape from his wakeful life and cherish his 'idle days'.

References

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