

## John Keats: His flight from the real

Vivek Malik

PGT English, Govt. Girls High School, Rithal (Rohtak)

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The present paper aims to analyse the streak of escapism in Keats' poetry, an escape from the real world of pain, loss, and rejection to that of an artistic and imaginative world of beauty. The Romantic period was a time of political turmoil and new ways of looking at the world were evolving. It propagated the fact that the use of reason beyond a certain specific point leads to destruction of any work of art and thereby, weakens the human capacity to appreciate its beauty. Imagination, to the Romantics, was a clear, mysterious and creative faculty which transcends reason. It is a synthesizing force that bridges the gap between sensation and thought. Keats has used it to switch off the unpleasant reality by imagining worlds that did not otherwise exist and found solace therein. Keats was neither a rebel nor a utopian dreamer like Byron and nor he did share Shelley's humanitarian zeal and passion for reforming the world. Keats' world of imagination was not full of supernatural and wonderful feats as Coleridge's world was. He is different from other Romantics as his world of imagination shows his complete detachment from all the movements and conflicts of his time.

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 for ever."*

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 thrall 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.

*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 overshadowed 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. 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. 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.

*"Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!"*

The poet wishes to convey that art is superior to real life. Art has beauty and permanence, while life is transitory.

*"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,..that is all  
Ye 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"*

And in *Ode to Autumn* he creates a gloomy atmosphere and asks

*"Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?"*

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.”

### **References**

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