

The Creative Launcher

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Imagery in Keats' Poetry

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Abstract

John Keats is a well-known Romantic poet of the 19th century who has become the most sensuous poet of the Romantic Movement. His poetry is full of visual images, for Keats uses words to paint his poetic picture. It is the pictorial skill together with sensuousness of Keats that makes the use of Greek myths more significant in his poetry. Sensuousness is an aspect of imagery that heightens the artistic appeal of myths in his poetry. Keats's heightened sense of awareness, his love for sensuous details and for natural objects, creates a world of nature in his mind. There are very few olfactory images in Keats's poetry. His olfactory images are rounded, heavy and pervasive. In the poetry of Keats, lovers generally meet at a lonely place full of natural fragrance and sweet smell all-around. Keats is really a burning star of the literary orbit who has started to perfume the poetic passage and will continue to perfume in the womb of time.

Keywords: Romanic, Sensuousness, Visual, Olfactory, Fragrance

Introduction

John Keats has been called the most sensuous poet among the Romanticists who was the last to born but first to die in the prime of youth. The chequered career of Keats made him the glittering star of the creative milieu. The sudden death of his parent, pre-mature death of younger brother Tom, poor economic condition and, above all, rejection of love by his beloved Fanny Brawne failed to prohibit him from making a poet of great repute without dispute. Emotional outburst, glittering poetic meadow, emotional exploitation, painterly painting, natural iridescence, description of human feelings and philosophy of sufferings--- all these poetic qualities are presented artistically across his verses that make him a poet of romantic tradition in English poetry. The poetic beauty his poems exhale, natural iridescence it spreads, style it incorporates, mythology it includes, sensation it stirs, philosophy it propounds, capital idea it possesses, various figures of speech it possesses and the poetic doctrine it propounds stir sensations to all those shaping souls for the literary whirlwind for Tom, Dick and Harry on this strife-stricken

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earth. He is really a burning star of the literary orbit who has started to perfume the poetic passage and will continue to perfume in the womb of time.

Sensuousness is a temper in Keats. Keats believes in the sensuous perception of objects and their beauty. His imagination is stirred by what he perceives through the senses. He is always moved by the external appearance of things which is almost in keeping with his concept of beauty:

. . . 'tis eternal law

That first in beauty should be first in might. (1994:269)

Keats's poetic inspiration comes from the objects of the external world that appeal to his senses and he deals with them in such a manner as to appeal to the reader sensuously. Keats is endowed with sensations of taste, sound, odor, touch and sight and he conveys all these sensations in his poetry. For the purpose of sensuous treatment of objects and situations, Keats uses words, phrases and imagery that he finds rich in sensuous apprehensions.

Keats poetry presents a unique blend of the poetic and the visual arts. He is really a great word painter. His poetry is full of visual images, for Keats uses words to paint his poetic picture. It is the pictorial skill together with sensuousness of Keats that makes the use of Greek myths more significant in his poetry. Sensuousness is an aspect of imagery that heightens the artistic appeal of myths in his poetry. Keats's heightened sense of awareness, his love for sensuous details and for natural objects, creates a world of nature in his mind. In fact, the nature he describes is the nature of his poetic imagination. Keats observes:

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of imagination. What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth whether it existed before or not. The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream, he awoke and found it truth. (2011:36-37)

In fact, Keats's creative imagination leads him to a world of higher reality, undisturbed by 'the meddling intellect.' His poetry appeals not only to one or two of the senses but to all our five senses. All the five senses of sight, sound, smell, touch and taste are enchantingly put together in his poetry. Keats presents various objects in such a way that we feel their touch, their smell and their taste, and because of our sensory perception of them, we seem to hear their sound also. We in fact see them in all their colors.

Keats often employs a single image or a number of images to convey diverse sense – impressions of an object. Different sense – impressions or sensations are presented in a unified manner. At many places in his poetry, Keats has expressed the deeper sensations of languor, fatigue, pain and suffering in a sensuous manner. It seems sensuous perceptions serve as a launching pad for his powerful spontaneous imagination.

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Keats is par excellence a poet of the senses, of objects and images. His poetry is not only rich in color, light, shade and sound but is also rich in images of the intimately physical sensations of taste, touch, smell and sight. In fact his poetry is rich in every type of sensuous imagery. His images of sight occupy a great significance because Keats is minute in observation with an eye to the particular aspects of every object. His images are generally static and reposeful. Visual images outnumber other sense – images in Keats. His tactile imagery is exquisitely subtle and almost inseparable from his conceptual and emotional perceptions.

In Keats tactile serves to strengthen and round out other types of sense imagery. Visual images are reinforced by tactile images. All tactual images blend and merge with other sensations like ‘solution – sweet’.

Keats’s auditory images are very often sweet and full – toned and soft. There are many sounds so faint that they hardly rise above silence but their low tone enforces the effect intended. It seems that Keats has used the language of silence in his poetry.

One can observe the lines cited below from his poem *I Stood Tiptoe* which describes ‘silence’ in nature:

How silent comes the water round that bend ;
Not the minutest whisper does it send
To the o’er hanging shallows: blades of grass
Slowly across the chequer’d shadows pass. (1994:4)

This language of silence speaks volumes in Keats’s poetry. Soft humming and buzzing noises are frequent in his poetry. Nature, lambs, swallows and crickets are also shown singing, for ‘the poetry of earth is never dead’.

There are very few olfactory images in Keats’s poetry. His olfactory images are rounded, heavy and pervasive. In the poetry of Keats, lovers generally meet at a lonely place full of natural fragrance and sweet smell all-around. When these lovers meet in a palace or hall or in their bedroom, it is always full of scents and perfumes. Keats also describes garlands of sweet smelling flowers and sweet scented smokes coming out of censurers. Even in olfactory images, Keats is concrete and uniform in his approach to the sense.

In gustatory images, Keats is well in advance but his sense of taste plays only a small part in his poetry. However, they are all sensuous and convey a concrete emotional ecstasy that fits into the scheme of the sense of taste. One cannot forget the wealthy banquet-room and the grand feast in the palace of Lamia. Keats describes all the dining tables covered with silken clothes loaded with varieties of foods and gold cups and goblets full of rare wine for the guests. Keats’s love for wine finds a definite expression not only in *Lamia* but also in ode to a Nightingale where Keats gives a very rich sensuous descriptions of wine. In *The Eve of St. Agnes* also, Keats gives a long list of food and drinks. His *Ode to Autumn* offers a long detail description of fruits

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and vegetables which creates luxurious sensations of taste. Keats compares the sweet voice Lamia with honey. Eating and drinking are apparently metaphorical in the poetry of Keats.

Keats is simply massive and smooth in his organic imagery. His use of organic imagery makes his poetry only hypnotic. In organic imagery, sound and meaning merge into each other and produce powerful throb and beat in his poetry. Elements of music are wedded to the subconscious workings of our muscles and nerves. Some of organic images of Keats work through sensations of throbbing or vibrating, often imitating the beat of the pulse.

In Keats, kinesthetic impulses mingle with organic images. The kinesthetic in Keats evolves slowly, with every element displayed in turn. He is very leisurely in movement and yet effective. Keats has little motor imagery because motor sensations are weak in sensuous content. Even then his certain phrases like 'sea-waves', 'blowing-wind', 'car-wheels' and 'pacing-steed' show motor qualities in his imagery.

In imagery of composite sensations —synaesthetic imagery, Keats uses different modes of sensations, often using analogies between color and music, music and odor, and odor and color. In synaesthetic imagery, scents, colors and sounds melt and mingle with each other like perfume, diffusing in the air. In the imagery of composite sensations, many sense – images combine together and make it a memorable image. One would like to quote two examples from the poems of Keats. Here is a passage from *The Eve of St. Agnes* :

Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;
Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;
Loosens her fragrant bodice; by degrees;
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees;
Half-hidden like a mermaid in sea-weed.(1994:222)

This passage contains a highly sensuous description of Madeline undressing. It appeals to our four senses of sight, hear, smell and touch. We have a similar example from his poem *To Fancy* :

With a waist and with a side
What as Hebe's, when her zone
Slipt its golden clasp, and down
Fell her kirtle to her fact,
while she held the goblet sweet,
And Jove grew languid.(1994:240)

The passage appeals to all the five senses, including the sense of taste also. Keats delights in the luxury of sense perceptions. Such poetic images are images of composite sensations. And this is why the present scholar prefers to call it the imagery of composite sensations.

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Keats invariably uses concrete imagery in his poetry. His imagery tends to a concrete method of treatment of scenes. One finds the description of concrete objects like ‘wide-plains’ ‘fair trees’, ‘Lawn slope’, ‘clear stream’, ‘smooth lake’ and so on.

Empathy is a psychological phenomenon which accounts for our knowledge of the external world – the power to see in forms the joy and sorrow of existence that they hide. In Empathy, strong motor, kinesthetic or organic impulses are fused with poetic emotion. It is concerned with shapes, forms and objects which it endows with human feelings. A poetic image offers pleasure to a reader who feels one with scene on mental plane. One can enjoy Keats’s imagery even without being conscious of or having the knowledge of the concept of empathy. One feels that the concept of empathy is a hypothesis. Keats has the power to transport the mind of his readers to a higher plane of imagination for the enjoyment of his poetry. A poet needs empathy for the concrete realization of the object he contemplates. Similarly, a reader also needs empathy to step gradually to higher levels of perception to identify himself with the scene for aesthetic pleasure. This is the reason why the scholar has certain reservations regarding empathic imagery. Even this kind of classification of poetic imagery is erroneous.

Keats’s images convey the sense of things rather than the knowledge of things. His poetic imagery is a mode of expressing personal experiences in the form of mental pictures. His images are complete, concrete and comprehensive. They illuminate the abstract with the concrete and explain the material by an abstraction and an abstraction by a concretion perceived through senses. His images are rich in expressing the intimate physical sensations of taste, touch, smell and the organic sensations like hunger and thirst. His poetry exhibits human passions, emotions, feelings and also external beauty of natural objects, by means of form and color. Keats maintains a balance between material phenomena, sense impression and inner consciousness. External signs and symptoms of joy, sorrow, fear, anger, frustration, sympathy can be examined as different physical manifestations of emotions, triggered off in the mind primarily by the sensory impressions conveyed by the nerves from the peripheral organs of sensation.

In fact, the physical perception of sensation is received by our eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin. Man is mind and body both – a “psycho-somatic whole.” And emotion has both a mental and a physical side. The mental side consists of cognitive, affective and conative changes. But the physical side consists of changes in limbs and veins of our body. Sensation is not cut off from emotion. Sensation is viewed here through the medium of Adam’s dream and is equated with spontaneous imagination. Sensation of Adam on seeing Eve is primarily visual, perceived physically by an organ of sense – impressions. Keats finds a ‘vision in the form of youth’ – Adam enjoying the taste of the forbidden fruit followed by sorrow of losing paradise. The auditory happiness of Adam in hearing the sweet voice of Eve followed by the fearful voice of

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God cursing them, all the sensory experiences of the joy of procreation followed by sorrow of Decay and Death—here all sensations represent a mental state of feeling.

There is a meaningful relation between sensation and poetic sensibility between poetic imagery and sensation, and also between poetic experience and imagery. It is fact that the principle of poetic imagery lies in the sensuous which is a part of the poetic experience of the poet.

Poetry is sensuous by nature, so it often offers naked sense – stimulus. It offers a balance of concept, emotion and sensation, because poetry presents indivisible wholes of human consciousness, modified and ordered by the stringent requirements of form. Keats’s poetry has many ‘layers’ of images, each reflecting the other like that of a room of mirrors. His poetry probes beyond the mere verbal level of language, to a level where the connotations of word become highly significant. Keats predominantly uses images of sensation and impression which are constructed in such a way that they intensify the basic idea emotionally. Keats’s imagery is “a loud symphony of all the sensations.” One would like to conclude with the apt remark of K.G. Wilson Knight that –

Keats’s poetry is brimful of sensuous richness, in tactile and sculptural yet exquisitely living attraction; in rich stones, and smooth surfaces; in earthly fecund nature; in warmth and perfume and taste; until the mind is all but drowned, fumed, intoxicated by a pleasure just stopping sort of a cloying sweetness. ^(1953:260)

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