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Concept of Beauty in John Keats' Poetry

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Abstract

It goes without saying if we go through the poetry of John Keats, we can witness the influence of Edmund Spenser which is clearly perceptible on his poetry as he was a passionate lover of Beauty in all its various shades and hues. There is no doubt in denying the fact that passion of Beauty is an integral and inevitable part of John Keats' aestheticism. It is because of this fact that he opines that a thing of Beauty is a joy forever. Keats was so much obsessed with the concept of Beauty that both Keats and Beauty have become almost synonymous. A close reading of John Keats' poetry reveals the fact that he made Beauty his object of wonder and admiration and became a great poet of Beauty. The concept of Beauty and Keats are as inseparable as the William Wordsworth and Nature, and S.T. Coleridge and supernatural. In the same way, as P.B. Shelley stood for ideals, and Lord Byron for liberty, for John Keats the passion for Beauty was the greatest, rather the only consideration.

Key-words: Beauty, Passion, Aestheticism, Truth, Religion

Paper

"Beauty is truth, truth Beauty."

While William Wordsworth was a worshipper of Nature, John Keats was a worshipper of Beauty. Love for Beauty is the dominant note in his poetry from the early *Endymion* to his last poem *Hyperion*. In one of his letters, Keats wrote:

"With a great poet, the sense of Beauty over comes all other considerations."

Beauty for John Keats is the moving spirit of his life and art. In fact, Beauty was his religion. John Keats' poetry reflects beautifully that his early conception of Beauty was entirely sensuous and physical. The Beauty of nature, charm of female anatomy and the pleasure of literature and mythology all thrilled him, and he expressed them in form of Beauty. His friend, Hayden, writes about Keats' love for Beauty,

"The humming of bee, the sight of a flower, the glitter of sun seemed to make his nature tremble; then his eyes flashed, his cheeks glowed and his mouth quivered."

Gradually, Keats' concept of Beauty evolved and became spiritual which is clearly brought by the poet in one of his letters written to his brother, Tom when the poet points out:

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"I have loved the principle of Beauty in all things," and in another letter, he says: "I loved the mighty abstract idea of Beauty in all things."

Without any shadow of doubt, Keats' letters frequently reflect his own ideas about Beauty as in one of his letters to George and Tom, he wrote:

"With a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates another consideration."

Thus, he was not satisfied merely with sensuous Beauty, but wanted to give an intellectual and spiritual basis as he says:

"A thing of Beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness"

A beautiful object gives him joy forever, and its charm increased with the passage of time. In other words, Beauty is eternal. Physical Beauty fades with time, and finally dies out completely. On the other hand, it is spiritual Beauty or the Beauty of ideas that is realization of truth which transcends time and space, and hence, is eternal.

All his poetry reveals a strong yearning for that higher type of loveliness which is real and true contact with human sufferings-the severe illness and death of his brother Tom- imported him a new concept of Beauty. He, now, realized that sorrow and suffering is the control fact of life. The following lines reveal the growing humanitarianism of John Keats when he asserts:

Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eye

Or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow

Any conception of Beauty to be real and meaningful must take in to account this basic truth of human life: otherwise it is not real; it has no significance. His problem was how to relate his love of Beauty with the reality of life.

There is no doubt in denying the fact that his letters reveal a gradual advance towards this oneness of Truth and Beauty as in one of his letters he writes:

"What the imagination seizes as beauty must be true."

And , at a later date, he writes:

"I never can feel certain of my truth but from a clean perception of its Beauty."

By the time of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, he positively asserts:

"Beauty is truth, truth Beauty

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know"

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Keats is right in this assertion. Everything that is beautiful must also be truthful. But, the Beauty which is true is spiritual and not merely physical. A work of art is beautiful, for it is an expression of truth within the soul of the artist. In John Keats' poetry, one can find the oneness of the elements, truth and Beauty. He concept is not merely confined to the form of Beauty only, rather his ideal was the Greek ideal of Beauty internal and external, the perfect soul of verse and the perfect form. In Keats' early poetry, we find the description of poets, pictures, sculptures or the rural solitude based on poet's fancy. His important odes have their subject matters Grecian Urn; a Nightingale; and a season of autumn, to which he turns from the song of spring.

The intermingling of both the elements of Beauty and truth in John Keats' poetry can be justified with art that captures Beauty of life and makes it a truth for all the ages to be "a friend to man." According to John Keats, it is not the logical reaching after facts that helps in understanding the truth of things. Keats is of the idea 'what the imagination seizes as beauty must be true' and it is his powerful conviction. The present logic is simple: what is beautiful is truthful, and what is ugly cannot be truthful. Find truth through Beauty and Beauty through truth. Beauty is no more a sensuous, physical or sentimental affair. It has spiritual associations; it is a concern of the soul of man for the salvation of man. Search for salvation must come from the heart of man and Keats knew it: "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."

While describing his concept of Beauty, John Keats did not advocate Shelley's views who subordinates the true end of poetry to the object of social reform as his poetry is replete with enthusiastic zeal with which he wants to bring about some radical and drastic changes in the world. Keats thinks that the world of Beauty is an escape from the dull, painful, mundane and dreary routine of the world. While writing about Beauty, Keats completely deviates from the political and social scenario of the contemporary world in to the realm of imagination. Not like the other Romantics including Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron and Shelley, John Keats was not affected by revolutionary theories for the regression of mankind.

In Keats' later poetry, *Ode to a Nightingale*, and *Hyperion* one can witness his growing inclination towards human problems as well as humanity. The fact is that had he lived more, he would have established a closer contact with reality around him. In his poetry, the reader find him neither as a poet of social protest nor of philosophical doctrine, but for the expression of Beauty. Keats aimed at expressing Beauty for its own sake, and did not like only those things that are beautiful according to the recognized standards, but on the other hand, he had deep insight to perceive beauty even in mundane things quite hostile to Beauty for ordinary people as the poet also points out:

> "I have loved the principle of beauty in all things."

A close study of Keats' concept of Beauty is possible only through his natural and spontaneous application of senses. It was because of his extraordinary sense-perception that the poet could perceive objects more intensely than other people. Keats derived great aesthetic delight at the sight of Nature objects, of a fair face, of the works of art, legends, old and new. It was on account of his faculty of senses that every moment revealed to him a sensation of wonder and delight as he has written, "The setting sun would always set me to right, or if a sparrow were before my window, I take part in his existence and pick about the gravel." Such kind of natural descriptions are source of

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deriving aesthetic delight through his senses. He looked at autumn and says that even autumn has Beauty and charm:

> "Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
> Think not of them, thou hast thy music too"

In his most celebrated poem, *Hyperion: A Vision*, Keats went step ahead and identifies beauty and power when he himself says:

"For it's the eternal law

That first in beauty should be first in might"

S.A. Brook comments:

"Where there is highest Beauty, there is of necessity the greater power."

Law of beauty is distinguishing not of his poetry. In the beginning of his poetic career, Keats was frankly sensuous, but his faculties underwent a rapid development and he remained a lover of sensuous beauty to the last. But, his aestheticism became more and more spiritual and intellectual and ultimately, he could identify with truth and power.

It goes without saying that Keats was not only the last but also the most perfect of all the Romantics. If we go through Walter Scott's works, we find him only telling stories, Wordsworth, on the other hand, in his reforming poetry, does nothing but preaching some moral laws, Shelley is always found busy advocating some impossible reforms, and Byron can be seen voicing his own egoism and the political measure.

In this way, after making a hurried and close survey of John Keats' poetry, we can safely and rightly aver the fact that of all the contemporary poets, Keats is one who is closely associated with the love of Beauty. He is the most passionate lover of the world as the career of beautiful images and of many imaginative associations of an object with a heightened emotional appeal. It is according to John Keats that a true poet enjoys light and shade, foul and fair with the same delight. In this way, Keats' idea of Beauty is an amalgamation of Joy and Sorrow, Melancholy and Happiness which cannot be separated. The poet thinks that imagination reveals a new aspect of Beauty, which is 'sweeter' than Beauty perceived by the senses as the senses perceives only the external aspect of Beauty, but imagination apprehends its essence.

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