



AN ANALYSIS OF ELEMENTS OF HELLENISM IN JOHN KEATS' POETRY

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ABSTRACT

According to various perspectives of history, Greek as a civilization was very much advanced, across all the aspects of a social set up. They were the icon of all kinds of cultural activities for the people of the rest of the world, with special reference to the contribution it had in the development of rest of the European civilizations across various ages, starting from the Renaissance. As a result, in the field of literature, the aspects of their civilization were a potential influence. Many poets, especially in English literature drew inspiration from Greek civilization. John Keats, being the most influenced Romantic poet among English poets. His literary achievements were notable side of English poetry. It has been the pursuit of the critical minds of all the times since romantic poetry, the factors that contributed towards the influence of Greek customs, myths and legends in the poetry of John Keats. The main focus of this paper is the elements of 'Hellenism' in Keats' poetry.

KEYWORDS: gender study, depression, nationality, Freudian theory, relationships, separation, autonomy, patriarchy, psychology, socio-cultural conditions.

INTRODUCTION

In the olden times Greek was called 'Hellas' and the population of Greek were known as 'Hellenes'. The term 'Hellenism' emerges from 'Hellenes', meaning the Greek culture and civilization. But Hellenism is not merely confined within Greek. It is a popular literary term and style. It is commonly acknowledged that the European civilization in modern time was influenced by Greek philosophy. So, it can be derived that these Hellenic or Greek culture had largely contributed to the world literature and broadly, civilization. However, the literary term 'Hellenism' is associated mostly with John Keats, John Milton and Swinburne. But Keats was the supreme master among the poets dealing with 'Hellenism' for all era. He did it so smartly that no other poet even in Greek overcame him. In fact, he had established the 'Hellenic' style in English poetry and given an extraordinary gravity to Greek culture. While studying Keats's poems depended upon this style, I found that Keats wrote those poems with a special kind of temperament and interest, which is above all unique. Keats was inspired through many sources for this purpose. The main features, influences and aspects are briefly discussed in this paper.

For Keats, beauty is the moving spirit of both life and arts; but his aware of the concept of beauty can be interpreted differently. Mr. Ford interprets Keats' conception of beauty from the sensuous point of view. For him, Keats' chief poems celebrate sensuous beauty and sexual love whereas Wasserman, Murry and Bradley find ideal beauty in Keats' poems.

Keats focuses on how experiencing beauty gives meaning and



value to life. In *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, Ed Friedlander thinks that Keats seems to be telling his readers about something that may have happened, or may happen someday, to them. They discover something that they think they really like. They do not really understand it, but they are sure it is the best thing that is ever happened to them. They are thrilled and focus on it to give in to the beauty and richness and pleasure, and let it overwhelm them.

Though Keats was a born Englishman, P.B.Shelly once said that Keats was a Greek. We are well known that in his short life of twenty five years, Keats had not got any opportunity do any thorough research on Greek culture, mythology or any other customs. So we are very much surprised in what kind of way Keats blended his carrier with 'Hellenic' customs. As Keats had not inherited any Greek culture, probably he was overpowered towards everything that was Greek. Actually, he was a born Greek in heart. Therefore, there need not be any special support for him to write in this peculiar diction. I assume that there is no other poet in English literature except Keats having such an outstanding capacity. So it is not a farfetched argument to say that Keats had discovered the glamour of Greek custom better than any other Greek poet. He was influenced by many sources such as translations of Greek classics, classical dictionary, Greek sculpture, mythology, anthropomorphic faculty and his passion for beauty. But I think the most active influence was probably his own tendency and nature. Homer was one of the eminent poets not only in Greek, but also all over the world. He was the idol of the people interested in literature for all time. Keats was introduced with Homer by Chapsman's translations, which one of his friends lent him. Keats was highly fascinated by Chapman's Homer. Through this book he discovered an "utopian world". Then he felt a new sense of warmth in his vain. His famous sonnet 'On first looking into Chaps man's Homer' was written after a whole night spent over the 'Iliad'. In this poem, Keats described how he discovered a new planet in it.

"Then felt I like some watcher of skies,
When a new plant swims in to his kin."

It is also notable that he was inspired by Homer for writing in Hellenic mode. I'm sure that Homer was the touchstone of Keats's literary architecture. Here I can mention Keats's "Sonnet to Homer" as evident of my thinking

"Standing aloof in giant ignorance,
Of thee I hear and of the Cyclades,
At one who sits ashore and longs perchance
To visit dolphin-coral in deep seas."

Keats had found a massive ground of legend in Chapman's translations of Iliad and Odyssey. Early in school he read the classical dictionary of Lamprier. He observed the dictionary with a great zeal. The book was an eminent source of Greek mythology. He learnt a lot about mythology from the book and surely transformed it in his poetry. As a result, he published some legend poems depended upon Hellenic mythology. For example, Endymion, Lamia, Hyperion may be furnished for this purpose. I also found that the theme, morals, essence of many of his literary works is directed by this classical touchstone. Such as "Ode to Psyche" and "Ode on Grecian Urn" highlight the matter in their inner significance. So in many cases, Keats takes the help of Greek legends and mythology to express the beauty of his odes. For "Endymion", Keats had borrowed subjects from the Greek Pagans. Keats had strong affinity and most vital response for the outmoded polytheism of the ancient Greek and Roman. Hence, we can find that the frank sensuousness, mysterious message, joys of life, eternal quarries of the pure phenomenon world are furnished in the verses of Keats. Thus Keats' poems naturally becomes Hellenic. The fact is that Keats had genuine faith on the fervour ancient pagans, its wonder, awe and fear inanimate objects like tree, jungle, waves of ocean, star, planet, universe etc. Keats was more conservative than to let a heathen goddess be so neglected. He expressed in "Ode to Psyche"

“So let me be thy choir, and make a moan
Upon the midnight hours;
.....The shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat
Of pale mouth'd prophet dreaming.”

Personification of nature is a prominent feature of romantic poets. Keats also possessed the same trait. As nature is the chief protagonist of his poetry, he personified the natural elements. But the wonderful fact is that Keats' pleasure in the poem on nature led him to the heart of Greek mythology. His feeling was just like the Hellenes. For example, I can mention in “Endymion”, Keats treats the moon as the Greek Goddess coming down to kiss Endymion. He also thinks the fiery Sun as God Apollo. According to literary term, anthropomorphic is imaginative faculty connected with natural phenomenon. Keats's anthropomorphic was in a high level. In “Ode to Autumn”, Autumn is not a season of mists and mellow fruitfulness to Keats. He personifies the autumn in human shape. Autumn is found conspiring with maturing sun as a close blossom friend. Later autumn is personified as a reaper, as a gleaner or leaden. Here Keats follows the Greek attitude by attributing shaping human qualities to God and semi God. The Greeks sees Protens in sea, Dryads in tree and Naiads in the brooks as per the Pagan mythology. The same style is found in the case of previous discussed “Ode to Autumn”. It is like Pan of Greek mythology which reveals Keats's Hellenic psychology. The ancient Greeks cultivated the devotion of beauty and joy of life. They were the true lovers of beauty. As a result, as Keats worships the Greek customs, he also becomes a lover and worshipper of beauty. Actually, beauty was the aim of his all arts. Beauty was such an aspect in Keats's poetry that it was the ultimate development of any human perfection. So he tells in the final line of “Ode on a Grecian Urn”,

“beauty is truth is truth, truth beauty that is all,
Yea no know earth, and all ye need to know.”

The instinctive Hellenism lies in his sensuous, imaginative, passionate searching for the true essence of loveliness. For evident i can produce the first line of “Endymion”,

“A thing of beauty is a joy forever.”

So we can easily guess that all the happiness, joy and comfort of his life was nothing but beauty. This spiritual longing of his life clearly highlights the Greek influence upon him. Again his spiritual longing and passion are expressed “Ode to Psyche”,

“Yes I will be thy priest and build a fane
In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind.....”

Here another notable matter is that Keats's beauty does not carry any philosophical message because he enjoyed the pure pleasure of nature which does not carry any philosophical note for him. The fact is that the Greeks also do not burden their literature with any philosophical note. Here we can find another fine similarity between Keats and Greek. Keats became wonder at the sculptures of ancient Greek. Thus he expressed his emotional expressions in his poetry. It had made a tremendous turn in Keats's career. All these aspects are found in his wonderful sonnet “On seeing the English marbles”. No doubt it indicates the effect of Greek sculptures upon him. Also in “Hyperion” and “On Indolence” Keats deals with the innocence, art, symmetry, simplicity, proportion of Greek sculpture. However, it was the most active influence than any other externals. In order to discuss about the matter we should mention the name of the poem “On a Grecian Urn” which is probably the best poem depended on this aspect. The idea of external

principals of beauty and ornamental note on human being is deeply expressed in "Grecian Urn". In it Keats wants to say that the ever unchangeable art will show its mastery over the nature or human being. This idea again establishes the Greek impact upon Keats. For another example, in his sonnet "On seeing the Elgin Marbles" he presents the mingling of Grecian grandeur with the wasting of time. So I think there is no doubt that the scene of Greek sculpture was constantly in Keats's mind while he was writing his sonnet.

I have already mentioned that Keats was highly accounted by Greek legend Homer. Not only Homer, He was also inspired by many other Greek Scholars. As a result, in his writings, he produces his expressions in a very simple and direct method. We guess that probably he tried to follow the Greek scholars. Such a type of attitude is the golden result of his Greekness, keen interest in Pagan and Hellenic mythology, sculpture, culture and passion which are briefly discussed in this thesis. In the sonnet, "On a picture of Leander", we can find it clearly as

"Tis young Leander toiling to his death;
Nigh swooning; he doth purse his weary lips
....Dead-heavy; arms and shoulder gleam awhile
He's gone; up bubbles all his amorous breath."

So in conclusion of the paper I may say that though many influences affected Keats, but the most important and ultimate cause of his Hellenism is the inborn sensitive Greekness of his heart. Here Keats becomes the supreme icon on this field in literature. However, the fertile and beautiful fact is that by this temperament of Keats, the English literature for all time is enriched and fulfilled by some marvellous literary achievements from him. It is the best and immortal result of his Hellenism.

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