

Keats an Escapist or a Realist: A Brief Analysis

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Abstract

Escapism is an effort to escape from the hard realities of life, from this world of misery into an imaginary world of the poet's own creation which is full of beauty and pleasure. An escapist keeps himself aloof from real life and its difficulties. He shrinks in a cowardly manner from the realm of human suffering. Though all poets, more specially the Romantics are escapists to some extent, Keats, in general concept, is regarded as the worst sinner in this respect. He is the only romantic poet whose object as a poet was to create aesthetic delight for the readers and to provide them means to escape from the hurly-burly of hectic life. The whole of his career is a career of conflict between the ideal and the real, between a passionate, fiery and stormy search for permanent bliss away from the impermanence of mundane joy and beauty and the horror of 'the weariness, the fever and the fret'¹ of life. Virtually, the fact is that if we go through Keats' poems minutely we can establish him as an escapist in his early poems, but his later poems show an increasing awareness of life and its problems.

Keywords

Escapist, Realist, Beauty, Truth

1. Introduction

Keats was born at a time when the whole of Europe was shaken by the ideas of French Revolution, and he grew up in this atmosphere but in his poetry these ideas never found expression. The ideas that awoke the youthful passion of Wordsworth and of Coleridge, that stirred the wrath of Scott, that worked like yeast in Byron and brought forth new matter, that Shelley re clothed and made into the prophecy of the future were ignored and unrepresented by Keats. He had almost no vital interest in the present, nor in man as a whole, nor in the political movement of human thought, nor in the future of mankind, nor in liberty, equality and fraternity, no interest in anything but in the world of beauty, romance, imagination, art, into Greek mythology and into the

romance of the Middle Ages where he tries to discover a symbol of permanent bliss. And this misleads most of his readers to label him a mere escapist.

2. Objective

The objective of the study is to assess Keats in a broader scale and to ascertain his real worth, that is, to explore whether Keats should be framed as an escapist in a narrow sense or he deserves more.

3. Methodology

The methodology of the study is descriptive analysis and is based on texts and secondary data collected from various sources like published books, web pages, journals and letters.

4. Analysis

4.1. Ode to a Nightingale

In the Poem the sweet and melodious song of the nightingale produces on Keats the narcotic effect of hemlock or dull opiate or Lethe-wards. The poet here seeks oblivion of the earthly sorrows and sufferings in the song of the nightingale in full-throated ease. He then desires to 'Leave the world unseen, And with the nightingale fade away into the forest dim' ² under the impact of wine that has been cooled for a long time deep under the ground or with the help of a cup of red Hippocrene. In the very next moment, dismissing the idea of wine, the poet decides to fly into the felicitous dark world of romance on the wings of his poetic imagination. And he feels transported from the world of reality imaginatively for a short while. But the poetic imagination itself has only brief flight and the poet apprehends –

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' to do, deceiving elf. ³

It makes us realize that escape from the realities of life is neither possible nor desirable.

4.2. Ode on Melancholy

In 'Ode on Melancholy' the poet presents completely a paradoxical idea from that of 'Ode to a Nightingale'. In this poem, he disapproves of our seeking oblivion. Here he opines that a mood of oblivion is not the right mood for melancholy, because the mood of oblivion means an escape from melancholy, not a full-blooded experience of melancholy. So the poet starts the poem with the lines –

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. ⁴

Here Keats concentrates on the world of realities where the poem deals with purely human emotions of pain and joy. In the poem 'Ode to a Nightingale', the poet dwells upon the idea of permanence of the song of the nightingale, but in 'Ode on Melancholy' he accepts impermanence as inevitable. He describes the true character of melancholy. Melancholy arises from the transience of joy and joy is transient by its nature. So joy and pain are inseparable and to experience joy fully, we must experience sadness or melancholy fully. The rose is beautiful indeed, but we can't think of rose without its thorn. It is therefore impossible to escape from inevitable pain in life.

4.3. Ode to Autumn

In 'Ode to Autumn' which is Keats' Swan song, that is, the last and the best song, the poet gives a comprehensive picture of life with all its bitter-sweets in terms of beautiful nature images. He finds in the continuous cycle of seasons (Summer-autumn-winter-spring-summer) the satisfying symbol of permanence. The season cycle symbolizes the continuity of life with all its growth and decay, appearance and departure, the cycle of coming and going. The ode thus gives a vivid description of different beauties of autumn and depicts a real world – a world that fades, dies, grows and lives again. Here a kind of serenity and impersonality of mood dawned upon Keats by the time he attempted this 'Ode to Autumn', the last and the maturest of his odes.

Superficially altogether different from the 'Ode on Melancholy', 'Ode to Autumn' is deeply related to that poem. The melancholy ode accepts the impermanence of beauty and joy as inevitable. In the 'Ode to Autumn', impermanence is again accepted and accepted without the least trace of sadness. Keats is able to see it as part of a larger and richer permanence.

4.4. Ode on Grecian Urn

'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is built upon a tension between ideal beauty and actual life. No doubt the ode has highlighted art, but it cannot be said with certainty that it has established the supremacy of art over life though many of the critics hold an opinion like this. Rather we can say from a broader and unbiased point of view that the poet has balanced art and life. The Urn itself is in an object, an 'Attic Shape', a 'Cold Pastoral', a 'silent form'. Everything on the urn is unchanging expression of beauty, but

it is lifeless. Whereas everything in our real life is subject to change and decay, but it pulsates with life and passion.

The central thought of this ode is the unity of Truth and Beauty. Keats declares emphatically in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'.⁵

Beauty and Truth, says Keats, are not two separate things. They are one and the same thing seen from two different aspects. Keats believes, "Beauty is a middle term which connects and reconciles two kinds of truth-through the mediation of beauty, truth of fact becomes truth of affirmation, truth of life."⁶

Many other poets and the Hindu conception of God echo the same thing about beauty and truth. Robert Browning conceives of God as a manifestation of truth and says, 'God is truth and truth God.' He held that God is the Absolute Truth. In the poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra" he writes,

"And God and infinite
Be named here.....
with knowledge Absolute".⁷

Likewise, Keats' influence on Tennyson is discernible in the latter's adoration of beauty. His Poems express his creed of beauty. Critics hold that Tennyson saw all the universe of the man and nature and God in their relation to ineffable beauty. In this connection, we might also note Anatosh France's wise words, "If I were called upon to choose between beauty and truth, I should not hesitate; I should hold to beauty, being confident that it bears within it a truth both higher and deeper than truth itself. I will go so far as to say that there is nothing true in the world, save beauty".

Similarly the Hindu devotees of God depict the figure of Him as an embodiment of Satyam, Shivam and Sundaram. To Keats, truth presupposes beauty and joy. From this viewpoint his implicit import of these words – beauty and truth – is identical to Vedantic interpretation of God. Just as Keats uses these words with a profound philosophical implication, the Hindu saints too use these words to describe God in terms of beauty, joy and truth.

5. Conclusion

Keats, the mighty lover of beauty, gives an eloquent expression to his aspiration for a life of permanent beauty and bliss away from the cares and anxieties of the oppressing world. Beauty and truth are identical to him. What is beautiful must be true and what is true must be beautiful. As Keats' aim was to pursue beauty which is also truth; he cannot be called an escapist, for in pursuing beauty he pursued truth.

References

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