

## Element of Sensuousness in Keats's Poetry

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### Abstract

Keats has rightly been considered a sensuous poet. That is to say. Keats's poetry abounds in the element of sensuousness. This fact is repeatedly asserted by various schools and critics. As Matthew Arnold points out, "No one can question the eminency, in Keats's poetry, of the quality of sensuousness. Keats as a poet is abundantly and enchantingly sensuous; the question with some people will be, weather he is anything else ?"<sup>1</sup> David Masson believes that "The most obvious characteristic of Keats's poetry, that which strikes most instantaneously and palpably; is certainly its abundant sensuousness."

According to H.W. Garrod, 'Not in political thinking, nor in tears given to human suffering, but in something which, though it seems easier, is in fact far harder, lies Keats's real effectiveness, in the exercise, I mean, of the five senses.'<sup>3</sup> Garrod further remarks about him, when he finds truth in beauty, that is to say, when he does not trouble to find truth in beauty, that is to say, when he does not trouble to find at all.

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Opinions such as these point out the predominance of the element of sensuousness in Keats's poetry. The word 'sensuous' may be taken to mean that which pertains to the senses. It should be clearly distinguished from the words 'sensual' which implies 'voluptuousness' or 'licentiousness'. Keats's poetry is sensuous not in the sense of being 'sensual' or abounding in feelings of sensuality; it is sensuous in the sense of holding an appeal to the senses or having its origin in the sense-impressions. It is sensuous in the sense that it does not deal with mere abstractions or ideas. It is sensuous, again, in the sense of not abounding, unlike Shelley's poetry, in intellectual content or, unlike Wordsworth's, in spiritual content. Thus, the word 'sensuous' as applied to Keats's poetry, has mostly to do with the five senses as opposed to abstractions, philosophical concepts or intellectual elements. As Oliver Elton remarks, Keats "never became abstract, though he left some nobly intellectual verse; that is, he remained a poet."<sup>5</sup>

Keats believed in the sensuous perception of objects, and cared little for things that could not be perceived by senses. He longed for life of sensations, not of sensations, not of thinking or philosophising. In a letter to his friend Bailey, he expressed this longing in the words that follow:

"O for a Life of sensations rather than Thoughts."<sup>6</sup> He did not trust intellect as a source of knowledge, but believed sensations to be the most valid and vital mode of gaining it. However, the word 'sensation' is not used by Keats in its usual sense of perception through senses or feelings excited by external objects and transmitted to the brain. "It stands for Poetic Sensation, and indeed for much more. It is, to speak broadly a name for all poetic or imaginative experience."<sup>7</sup> Keats did not believe in anything which could not be experienced through the senses. His imagination is stirred by what he perceives through them. He was moved by the external appearance of things. The colour, the sight, the sound, the touch and the smell of various objects inspired him to write poems on them. The wealth of beauty that lay in the external world stirred his inner soul.

All this is not to say that Keats was the only sensuous poet. In fact, all good poets are sensuous in some way or the other. They all have sense-impressions to start with, and it is these sense-impressions that stimulate their emotions and imaginations. Chaucer Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Gray, Wordsworth, Tennyson and others must have been moved to their depths by the vast phenomena they perceived through their senses, and then only must have moved on to higher realms of imaginations or spiritual thought. The reason behind Keats's being called a sensuous poet is that his poetry is steeped in sensuousness to an extraordinary degree. His inspiration comes from objects that appeal to his senses, and he deals with them in such a manner as to appeal to the reader sensuously. The imagery he employs to present objects, is also sensuous. Thus, Keats's poetry is sensuous because of its origin in a sensuous response to objects and situations, its treatment of sensations rather than ideas, and its appeal to the five senses. What distinguishes him from others in this respect is the predominance, in this poetry, of the elements of sensuousness over those of thought, philosophy or abstract idea. He differs from his contemporary young poet Shelley whose poetry abounds in ideas and has an appeal to the intellect. "Perhaps his most notable divergence as a poet from his contemporary Shelley," remarks Arthur Compton Rickett, "is that he elects as a rule, to deal with abstract imaginings Sight and hearing respond to ideas; touch to sensations. The metaphysical power that Charges with intellectual fire the visions of Shelley, is outside of his scope."<sup>8</sup>

In Keats's poetry various objects are presented in such a way that we feel their touch, their taste, and because of our sensory perception of them, we seem to hear their sound or actually see them before us in all their colours. The qualities of solidity and colourfulness of Keats's images enchant us. We have to agree with G. Wilson Knight when he says: "Keats's poetry is brimful of sensuous richness, in tactile and sculptural yet exquisitely living attractions; 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 short of a cloying sweetness"<sup>9</sup>

Keats's poetry appeals, not only one or two of the senses but to all the five senses. Keats was endowed with the sensations or taste, sound, ardour, touch and he conveys these sensations in his poetry. Moreover, he feels and conveys the physical sensations of comfort and pain, and renders successfully various physical states such as sleep, fatigue, motion and stillness. For the purpose of a

sensuous treatment of objects and situations, he uses words, phrases and imagery that are rich in sensuous appeal.

The sensuous quality of Keats's poetry is revealed in the rich sensuous imagery employed especially in his early poems, and in the sensuous appeal of most of the scenes, situations and descriptions contained in his poems. We have just to pick up examples here and there from his poetry to prove how great or intense an appeal to the five senses is held out by it. Keats had an acute sense of taste and relished different varieties of food and drink. He has succeeded in conveying this sense, for example, in the following lines from his poem *Endymion*:

*here is cream.  
 Deepening to richness from a snowy gleam;  
 Sweeter than that nurse Amalthea skimm'd  
 For the boy Jupiter: and here, undimm'd  
 By any touch, a bunch of blooming plums  
 Ready to melt between an infant's gums.<sup>10</sup>*

The following lines from *The Eve of St. Agnes* also contain an appeal to the sense of taste; they refer to Porphyro who is hiding himself in the chamber where Madeline is sleeping:

*While he from forth the closet brought a heap  
 Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;  
 With jellies soother than the creamy curd,  
 And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon.<sup>11</sup>*

The appeal to the sense of taste is also found in lines *Mermaid Tavern* that follow:

*Have ye tippled drink more fine  
 Than mine host's Canary wine ?  
 Or are fruits of Paradise  
 Sweeter than those dainty pies  
 Of venison ?<sup>12</sup>*

Keats makes the reader feel the sensation of touch in the following lines from *Lamia*:

*When in an antichamber every guest  
 Had felt the cold full sponge to pleasure press'd  
 By minist' ring slaves, upon his hands and feet,  
 And fragrant oils with ceremony meet  
 Pour'd on his hair, they all mov'd to the feast  
 in white robes.<sup>13</sup>*

*The Eve of St. Agnes* abounds in descriptions containing a strong visual appeal. An example can be given of the following lines about Madeline:

*And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep  
 In blanched linen, smooth and lavender'd.<sup>14</sup>*

or of the casement of Madeline's chamber:

*A casement high and triple-arch'd there was, All garlanded with carven imag'ries  
 Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,*

*And diamonded with panes of quaint device.  
 Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,  
 As are the tiger-month's deep-damask'd wings.<sup>15</sup>*

A delicate appeal to the sense of sight is also made in the following lines in the ode To Autumn where Autumn is presented and addressed as a person.

*sitting careless on a granary floor,  
 Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind.<sup>16</sup>*

The sensory perception of smell is presented in the Ode to a Nightingale, such as in the following lines:

*I cannot see what flowers are at my feet;  
 Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,  
 But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet  
 Where with the seasonable month endows  
 The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-free wild.<sup>17</sup>*

Such appeal to the sense of smell is embodied in these lines from Isabella where sweet odour is presented skilfully:

*Then in a silken scarf-sweet with the dews  
 Of precious flowers pluck'd in Araby,  
 And divine liquids come with odorous ooze  
 Through the cold serpent-pipe refreshfully,-  
 She wrapp'd it up.<sup>18</sup>*

Lastly, the sense of hearing is appealed to at various places through the presentation of the sounds of music or birds. In The Cap and Bells, Keats tells us that

*loud bells  
 With rival clamours ring from every spire;  
 Cunningly-station'd music dies and swells  
 In echoing places.<sup>19</sup>*

Auditory sensation is also produced by the following description from The Eve of St. Agnes:

*Soon, up aloft,  
 The silver, snarling trumpets'gan to chide.<sup>20</sup>*

or in the one that follows from the same poem:

*The boisterous, midnight, festive clarion,  
 The kettle-drum, and far-heard clarinet,  
 Affray his ears, though in dying tone:-  
 The hall door shuts again, and all the noise is gone.<sup>21</sup>*

The gradual fading of sound and the dimming of the sense of hearing is found in the lines where the poet bids farewell to the Nightingale in the Ode to a Nightingale-

*Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades  
 Past the near meadows, over still stream,  
 Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep*

*In the next valley-glades:*<sup>22</sup>

Keats is an adept in producing sound and music from silence, as we find in the poem I stood tip-toe where he presents

*A little noiseless noise among the leaves,  
Born of the very sight that silence heaves.*<sup>23</sup>

sometimes silence or speechlessness is more vocal than speech itself, as is seen in the following lines from The Eve of St. Agnes:

*No uttered syllable, or woe betide!  
But to her heart, her heart was voluble,  
Paining with eloquence her balmy side.*<sup>24</sup>

The above examples indicate that Keats's poetry holds out an appeal to various senses, and it arouses tactile, auditory and visual sensations through its imagery and phrases. He uses epithets that are rich in sensuous quality, such as "melodious plot", "full-throated ease" and "Purple-stained mouth" in the Ode to a Nightingale; "aching pleasure" in the Ode on Melancholy; "azure-lidded sleep" in The Eve of St. Agnes; "drowsy ignorance" in Isabella; "anguish moist" in La Belle Dame Sans Merci; ripening breast" in Bright Star; "innocent dimples" in Epistle to My brother George, and so on. Images such as those found in "Drunken from pleasure's nipple" in Endymion, "Music's golden tongue" in The Eve of St. Agnes, "Notes/Like pearl-beads dropping sudden from their string" in Hyperion and "beaded bubbles winking at the brim" in the Ode to a Nightingale are soaked in sensuousness and appeal mainly to senses.

Wordsworth and Coleridge both realised the importance of dealing with senses in poetry. Wordsworth's poetry contains an appeal only to the senses of sight and hearing; but Coleridge's poetry appeals disciple of Coleridge. Garrod is of the view that "In his best poetry Coleridge is, save for Keats himself, the most purely sensuous of our poets....A deep and rich sensuousity is, despite Coleridge himself, Coleridge's most notable characteristic; and of this deep and rich sensuousity Keats more than any one else, and more than he was himself aware, was the disciple."<sup>25</sup>

Keats mode of perception is sensuous, and the manner in which he conveys his perception in his poetry, is sensuous too, so much so that her presents even abstract objects sensuously. An example, may be cited from The Eve of St. Agnes. A thought came to Porphyro's mind

*like a full-blown rose,  
flushing his brow, and in his pained heart  
Made purple riot.*<sup>26</sup>

In the Lines to Fanny, Keats states that

*Touch has a memory*<sup>27</sup>

In the sonnet On Seeing the Elgin Marbles, he remarks:

*mortality  
weighs heavily on me unwilling sleep*<sup>28</sup>

In To Hope, he prays to hope to shed its influence round him

*And wave thy silver pinions o'er head*<sup>29</sup>

In Isabella, two brothers planning to murder Lorenzo,

*Cut Mercy with a sharp knife to the bone.*<sup>30</sup>

Thus, it is seen that abstract notions, feelings and emotions have been presented sensuously at several places in Keats's poetry.

Very frequently, Keats presents a nice blend of various sensations. Various sense-impressions coalesce into one and produce a unique effect. The sensations of taste and sight are mingled in the description of wine in the 'Ode to a Nightingale'; e.g.;

O for beaker full of the warm south,

*Full o the true, the blushful Hippocrene,  
 With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,  
 And purple-stained mouth;*<sup>31</sup>

The following lines from The Eve of St. Agnes contain a combined appeal to the senses of sight, touch, and smell:

*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.*<sup>32</sup>

Keats employs a single image or a number of images to diverse sense-impressions of an object. Different sense-impressions or sensations are presented in a unified manner. Sometimes he substitutes one sense for another. For example, the sense of sight is substituted for that of sound in the following lines from the Epistle to Charles Cowden Clarke:

*Spensarian vowels that elope with ease,  
 And float along like birds o'er summer seas.*<sup>33</sup>

At other times, one sense is substantiated by another with the help of phrases such as Ode to a Nightingale. The sense of hearing is strengthened through its association with visual sensation, as in the lines that follow, wherein the auditory appeal of the Nightingale's song is substantiated by the visual imagery employed to describe it:

*Perhaps the self-same song that found a path  
 Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,  
 She stood in tears amid the alien corn;  
 The same that of-times hath  
 Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam  
 Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.*<sup>34</sup>

A part from the appeal to the five senses, Keats's poetry is sensuous also in that it deals abundantly with the sensations of blush which is a physical symptom of a man's embarrassment. There are several references to and descriptions of blushes in Keats's poems, such as the one in sleep are Poetry where he shows how the eye of Bacchus "Made Adriane's cheek look blushingly."<sup>35</sup>

Physical sensations are also aroused by Keats's descriptions of nakedness or semi-nakedness, kisses and embraces, and his frequent allusions to arms, face, lip breasts and nipples. In *Fancy* he asks:

*Where's the maid*

*Whose lip mature is ever new?*<sup>36</sup>

In the *Ode to Psyche*, he describes Cupid and Psyche thus:

*Their arms embraced, and their pinions too;*

*Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu;*

*As if disjointed by soft-handed slumber,*

*And ready still past kisses to outnumber*

*At tender eye-dawn of aurorean love.*<sup>37</sup>

In *'Lines to Fanny'* he requests his beloved:

*Give me those lips again.*<sup>38</sup>

In *Endymion* he remarks that

*One kiss brings honey-dew from buried days.*<sup>39</sup>

There are numerous references to creamy, well-shaped and developed breasts as in *Bright Star* where Keats refers to his beloved and longs to be

*Pillow'd upon my fair loves's ripening breast*

*To feel for ever its soft fall and swell.*<sup>40</sup>

Keats seems to be enchanted by the female figure, and presents the physical aspect of its beauty with all its sensuous appeal. He is, at times, even sexually perturbing because of his presentation of the physical and sensuous side of love verging on sex. His exquisite picture of feminine beauty such as the following from one of his sonnets on woman, with all its sensuous charm, is an ample proof of his sensuousness:

*Light feet, dark violet eyes, and parted hair;*

*Soft dimple hands, whit neck, and creamy breast.*<sup>41</sup>

At an early stage, Keats lays emphasis on the physical aspect of beauty and love although later on he comes to realise the aspect too. It should be difficult to agree completely with G. Wilson Knight when he says that "Basically, love is to Keats a frankly physical enjoyment, but so is almost everything else, basically."<sup>42</sup> But it can hardly be denied that Keats deals mainly with the physical aspects of love, and exploits its sensuous appeal. However, he is conscious of the limitations of human love

*That leaves a heart high sorrowful and cloy'd*

*A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.*<sup>43</sup>

*(Ode on a Grecian Urn)*

Still he would like to enjoy the love of his beloved

*Pillow'd upon my fair' love's ripening breast,*

*To feel for ever its soft fall and swell.*<sup>44</sup>

*(Bright Star)*

Keats's sensuousness is not confined to a sensuous representation of physical beauty or love. There

are places in his poetry where he has expressed the deeper sensations of languour, fatigue and pain in a sensuous manner. The sensation of an aching heart is, for example, represented by Keats in the opening lines of the Ode to a Nightingale:

*My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
 My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,  
 Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains  
 One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk.*<sup>45</sup>

In the Ode On Indolence, he describes his lethargic state thus:

*Ripe was the drowsy hour;  
 The blissful cloud of summer-indolence  
 Benumb'd my eyes; my pulse grew less and less:  
 pain had no sting, and pleasure's Keats presents melancholy in a visual manner:  
 Ay, in the very temple of delight  
 Veil'd Melancholy has her Sovran shrine.*<sup>47</sup>

Keats's sensuousness is not confined to the treatment of human love and beauty or the worldly objects related to man. It extends to the treatment of Nature. He does not real Nature as a spiritual entity as Wordsworth does, not does he respond to it intellectually as Shelley does. He responds to the external beauties of Nature, and enjoys natural objects or phenomena as revealed to the senses. Numerous instances can be found in Keats's poetry to show his sensuous treatment of Nature. In the Epistle to Charles Cowden Clarke, he describes a swan when it.

*ruffles all the surface of the lake,  
 In striving from its crystal face to take  
 Some diamond water drops.*<sup>48</sup>

The physical aspect of winter is presented very plainly in La Belle Dame Sans merci where the poet describes that

*The sedge is wither'd from the lake,  
 And no birds sing.*<sup>49</sup>

In the Ode To Autumn, Autumn is described as the

*Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness  
 Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun,*<sup>50</sup>

and is presented as a gleaner keeping

*Steady thy laden head across a brook,  
 Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,  
 Thoou watchest the last oozyngs hours by hours.*<sup>51</sup>

Thus, both in his treatment of scenes and objects of Nature as well as of human life, Keats is consistently and predominantly sensuous. It is through his senses, and not through his mind or intellect that he seems to receive impressions of the world around him. The sensations he receives and conveys in his poetry, pertain mainly to the body and are equivalent of thoughts or ideas. Like Donne's mistress in his poem, Second Anniversary, Keats's body thought and thus did the work of



the mind. As Aubrey Thomas de Vere aptly remarks about Keats, "His body seemed to think; and, on the other hand, he sometimes appears hardly to have known whether he possessed aught but body. His whole nature partook of a sensational character in this respect, namely that every thought and sentiment came upon him with the suddenness, and appealed to him with the reality of a sensation."<sup>52</sup>

It would, however, be a mistake to think that sensation alone counted for much in Keats's poetry. The emphasis on sense impressions and sensory experience does not take away from the role of imagination in it. In fact, sensuous perception serves only as a launching pad for his skyrocketing imagination. The fire of his imagination is kindled by the spark produced by his senses. The moment he receives a physical sensation or undergoes a sensory experience, his imagination sets to work. He hears the song of the nightingale with his ears, and his imagination transports him to the ideal land of this nightingale; he sees the Grecian Urn with his eyes, and is led by his imagination to the town by the sea-side; the reading of Chapman's translation of Homer's works stirs his imagination, and he feels

*like some watcher of the skies  
 When a new planet swims into his ken,*<sup>53</sup>

Sensation, thus, serves as a stepping stone to imagination in Keats's poetry. "Keats's truth of imagination," remarks Christopher Ricks, "begins in the directness of sense', of physical sensation; but this directness is not such as 'solidity of objects', which can be conceived of, as say a billiard ball can, from many different angles and still appear the same, but of physical sensations in which an alternativeness of response is inherent. Keats's apprehension of the physical is most drawn to, and most acute in the conjunction of pleasure and displeasure in physical sensation; and the value of this imagination-'no longer reflection but feeling'-is its necessarily helping to create in us the sense that others have an 'equivalent centre to self', at home within a situation which is not ours, 'whence pleasure and displeasure must always be felt with a certain difference.'"<sup>54</sup>

The importance attached by Keats to sensations or sense impressions does not preclude the presence of ideas or thought content in his poetry. His mature poems such as the great Odes and *Hyperion* are brimful of ideas on various aspects of life and art, but these ideas are assimilated in the very texture of the poems; they are not stated explicitly nor allowed to overshadow the aesthetic aspects of the poems. In fact, Keats could grasp them only in a concrete shape and convey them in a concrete manner too. Naturally, only such ideas appealed to him and were dealt with by him as could be expressed in a concrete form after being assimilated aesthetically.

Keats's sensuousness is more conspicuous in his early poetry. As he matures as a poet, his interest in mere sensations or physical aspects of experience is accompanied by an interest in its moral or spiritual aspects as well. Mere sensuousness is subordinated to a growing human concern, and the exclusively aesthetic element is submerged in an intellectual whirlpool. The delight in the realm of Flora and Pan is replaced by an exploration of the 'miseries of the world.' "Without losing its sensuousness", as James Russell Lowell remarks, "his poetry refined itself and grew more

inward, and the sensational was elevated into the typical by the control of that finer sense which underlies the sense and is the spirit of them"<sup>55</sup>. The worshipper of beauty becomes an adorer of truth as well. And this gives an additional and depth to his poetry. However, sensuousness can still be said to be one of the foremost traits of Keats's credit that he exercised enough restraint to keep his sensuousness from degrading into mere sensuality and his love and treatment of physical beauty from becoming a mere exercise in voluptuousness. The success of his art is proved by the fact that even the descriptions of naked female form as in *The Eve of St, Agnes*, do not arouse baser feelings.

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