

John Keats A Pictorial Poet: A Study

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Abstract

The poetry of Keats presents a unique blend of the poetic and the visual arts. His poems are visual and he uses words to paint his poetic pictures. He does not try to describe objects or present abstract ideas in his poetry. He is a pictorial artist in words like Chaucer, and Shakespeare, and excels in giving even abstract ideas and objects a concrete shape. Keats delights in all sorts of beauty, beauty of Nature as well as of manner. Unlike Shelley who deals mainly with abstract concepts and insubstantial objects, Keats deals chiefly with concrete objects and presents them in a pictorial poet of painter in words. The essential qualities of a painter such as sensitivity to beauty, an ability to render this beauty in his works, a sense of form and proportion, a vivid imagination and an ability to apply appropriate colours, are all present in Keats.

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Keats was a great lover of beauty and had a blind adoration for it; he has succeeded in presenting shapes of beauty in his poems; he has been able to give a proper form and finish to several of his poems, especially the odes; he possesses a vivid imagination which helps him visualise even abstractions and imaginary objects; and he has employed various colour in his word-paintings. The only difference between a painter and Keats is that while a painter uses brush and paints to paint a picture, Keats uses pen and words. His poems contain numerous references to, and applications of, diverse colours, such as the presentation of 'while clouds' in *I stood tip-toe upon a little hill*, 'siliver pinions' in *To Hope*, gray hairs and 'azure lidded sleep' in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, 'purple-stained mouth' in the *Ode to Nightangale*, and "pale kings" in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. Thus, Keats may be likened to a painter in all respects except that he paints pictures with words, not with colours. Robert Bridges has expressed his admiration for "the short, vivid pictures which may be called his masterpieces in word

painting, in which with a few words he contrives completely to finish a picture which is often of vast size."¹

The source of Keats's interest in pictorial writing lies in his study of poets possessing a pictorial appeal, specially Spenser, and his fondness for famous paintings, especially those of Titian, Raphael, Lorraine, Martin and others : His contact with famous artists and art critics of his day such as Leigh Hunt, Benjamin, Robert Hydon, Charles Brown, Joseph Severn and William Hazlitt had a great impact on his poetic art. It was usual in Keats's circle of friends to read prints, discuss matters relating to art and visit art galleries. Hunt was Keats's guide in the sphere of art and literature, and he taught Keats to enjoy and appreciate pictures. Haydon infused into his mind the idea of greatness and vastness in a work of art. Severn also influenced him and was, in turn, influenced by him. Keats visited picture-galleries and conditions of sculpture with Severn. He saw Titian's painting 'Bachhus' at the National gallery, which influenced his own description of Bachhus and his crew in his poem *Endymion*. Haydon took Keats to see the Elgin Marbles and Italian paintings. The paintings of various as well as Haydon's own, influenced Keats's imagination to a remarkable degree.

Keats's also frequented the rooms of Haydon and Hunt which were full of painting and prints, and must have been influenced by these. Hunt believed in the close affinity between poetry and painting, and he took Spenser to be a poet for painters, a poet painting exquisite pictures in words. Hunt traced the pictorial quality of passages in Spenser's poems back to great paintings and compared the objects pictorially presented in them to those painted by great masters such as Titian, Rubens, Rambrandt, Poussin and Correggio. Hazlitt aroused Keats's interest in the paintings of Claude Lorrain, Hogarth and Poussin. Thus, whatever faculty of visual apprehension and expression Keats possessed, was strengthened by his contact with painter-friends and his visits to famous piece of art and sculpture, besides his close reading of Spenser and other poets. Hunt and Hazlitt taught Keats to read Spenser from the angle of vision of a painter. Natural phenomena painted by various painters also appealed to Keats. As a result the approached and viewed Nature with painter's eye and painted her picturesque aspects in his poetry.

Keats was a great lover of Greek mythology, art and literature. Several great painters had treated subjects from Greek mythology in their paintings, and Keats got keenly interested in these paintings because of the commonness of the themes treated in these paintings and his own poems. As has already been pointed out, he was fascinated by Titian's painting 'Bachhus'

dealing with the subject he himself dealt with in *Endymion*. Titian's '*Diana and Actaeon*' and Poussin's '*Triumph of Flora*' were some of the other paintings dealing with Greek mythological subjects and figures that Keats dealt with in his poetry. In several cases paintings and sculptural works proved a gateway for Keats's entry into the world of Greek mythology. Some pictures had been painted on the basis of the works of classical authors; for example, Nicolus Poussin had painted pictures based on descriptions in Ovid's works. In such cases, the paintings served as a stepping stone to an acquaintance with and study of these works. Thus, paintings helped Keats in gaining an access to the three main sources of his inspiration, viz. literature or art, mythology and Nature. One must agree with Ian Jack when he says : "Keats was not a painter, but he loved painting, and his poetry would not be what it is if he had not learned partly from Hazlitt — to see nature with the creative eye of a lover of art."²

Keats is a highly sensuous poet and his poetry mainly appeals to the five senses. The visual sense or the sense of sight is one of these senses. Naturally, his poetry also contains a visual appeal. This appeal is possible when objects are presented in a concrete and pictorial manner. Keats's poetry has this pictorial quality which makes it appealing to the sense of sight. Even his earliest known poem '*Imitations of Spenser*' has a pictorial quality and can be called a picture in words.

It is seen that Keats is deeply influenced by painting and sculpture, and this influence is carried over to his poetry. He supplies clear outlines, well-defined shapes and various colours to his poems. He does not describe an object or a sense ; he simply paints it. A picture is the nearest equivalent to an emotion or object for him. Even abstractions are presented as concrete pictures, and it seems that his imagination works visually. His descriptions have a pictorial and visual quality and picture can be said to be an 'Objective correlative' to his imagination. Innumerable examples of Keats's pictorial manner and of the pictorial quality of his poems can be cited.

The pictorial quality of Keat's Odes can hardly be over-emphasised. Some of the pictures, such as those in *To Autumn*, are life-size portraits. A few of the pictures in these odes are modelled on various paintings and pieces of sculpture, and translate those works of art into words and verbal images that, in their turn, go to build up exquisite pictures of them. The pictures of Cupid and Psyche painted by various painters such as Raphael, Romano,

Giordano, Canova and Reynolds must have haunted Keats's mind when he painted in words his own picture of these mythological figures in his *Ode to Psyche* and showed them

couched side by side

In deepest grass, beneath the whisp'ring roof

Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran

*A brooklet, scarce espied.*³

In the *Ode to a Nightingale*, Keats paints a nice picture of

a beaker full of the warm South,

Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,

With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,

*And purple-stained mouth.*⁴

And another picture of

Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam

*Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.*⁵

In the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Keats present not mere pictures but movie-picture of the objects and persons carved on the urn. The pictures of the 'bold lover', 'fair youth', the 'happy boughts' and of the

little town by river or sea-shore,

*Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel.*⁶

are transcripts of marble or colour in words. The French painter Claude's picture '*View of Delphi with a Procession*' may be said to be the source of Keats's pictorial description of the people 'coming to sacrifice', the 'mysterious priest' leading 'that heifer lowing at the skies', and the 'little town by river or seashore' in the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. The following lines contain exquisite picture of beauty arrested in art, of motion energised by motionlessness, of music made sweeter by silence, and of love made everlasting through unfulfilment :

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard

Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;

Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd

Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone :

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave

Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;

Bold Lover, never, never, const thou kiss,

*Though winning near the goal – yet, do not grieve;
 She cannot fade, though thou has not thy bliss,
 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!*⁷

In the ode *To Autumn*, Keats makes the abstract Autumn look a concrete object. The second stanza of this ode contains four pictures of Autumn and shows it.

sitting careless on a granary floor.

Or keeping

*steady thy laden across a brook.*⁸

In the *Ode to Melancholy* the abstract of joy is presented pictorially when the poet describes

*Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
 Bidding adieu.*⁹

A delicately coloured picture is presented by Keats in his balled *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* where he portrays the fatigue and anguish of the wandering knight in the following lines :

*I see a lilly on thy brow
 With anguish moist and fever dew;
 And on thy cheek a fading rose
 Fast withereth too.*¹⁰

The chief characteristics of Keats's pictorial method are Minuteness, Sensuousness and Solidity or Concreteness. Selecting significant details and bringing them together in his poems, Keats produces a lasting impression on the readers' mind. He does not leave a picture after a few bold strokes of brush as Chaucer often does; he works slowly and minutely, and produces a cumulative effect by mentioning a number of facts. His pictures have an appeal for the eye, and they suggest nothing beyond what they appear to be. They have no spiritual meaning. In this respect they differ from Spenser's which usually have a moral and allegorical implication. Keats's pictures are concrete and solid. They are not frail, thin, or unsubstantial like Shelley's. Unlike Shelley's pictures, which are mostly airy and abstract, Keats's pictures are solid and can be visualised by the reader easily.

Keats is also adept in painting word-pictures of various physical states like weariness, haste, numbness, thirst, cold, langour etc., mental states like joy, sorrow, hope, memory, forgetfulness and indolence, and emotions like love as well as abstract concepts like beauty, melancholy, and fancy. His 'heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains' his sense in the *Ode*

to a Nightingale; he wants in the *Ode to Psyche*, to be a worshipper of Psyche or human soul and build a temple in her memory.

*In some untrodden region of mind,*¹¹

In *Lamia*, Lycius is shown

*Adding wings to haste.*¹²

In the *Eve of St. Agnes*. Madeline, lost in thoughts of the vision on the eve of St. Agnes, scarcely hears

*The Music, yearning like a God in pain.*¹³

In '*Fancy*' we are told that

*At a touch sweet Pleasure melteth,
Like to bubbles when rain pelteth.*¹⁴

Occasionally, Keats portrays imaginary objects, persons or scenes that may have never existed, but have been visualised by his imagination. For example, in the *Ode to Nightingale* he presents Ruth

*When, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn.*¹⁵

or paints

*Charm'd magic casements opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.*¹⁶

In the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Keats presents the picture of the imaginary "little town by river or sea-shore", which is emptied of its folk, this "pious morn" and "whose streets for evermore/Will silent be."¹⁷

In the *Fall of Hyperion*, we come across the picture of "that eternal domed Monument" with

*The embossed roof, the silent massy range
Of columns north and south, ending in the mist
Of nothing, then to eastward, where black gates
Were shut against the sunrise evermore.*¹⁸

In fact, a whole visual world is created in *Hyperion*, and it would require the skill of a consummate artist in words to present the picture of *Hyperion's* palace which follows :

*His palace bright
Bastion'd with pyramids of glowing gold,*

*And touch'd with shade of bronzed obelisks,
Glar'd a blood-red through all its thousand courts,
Arches, and domes, and fiery galleries;
Flush'd angerly.*¹⁹

The visual and pictorial quality of Keats's imagination is revealed in his letters too. He describes person, place and scenes in his various letters in a pictorial manner. The following description of the atmosphere during a visit to the Druid Temple, given in a letter to Tom Keats (June 29, 1818), possesses the quality of picturesqueness:

"On our return from the circuit, we ordered dinner, and set forth about a mile and a half on the Penrith road, to see the Druid temple. We had a fag up hill, rather too near dinner time, which was rendered void, by the gratification of seeing those aged stones, on a gentle rise in the midst of Mountains which at that time darkened all round, except at the fresh opening of the vale of St. John."²⁰

In a letter written in April 1819 to his brother George and his wife Georginia, Keats describes a dream he saw after his reading of the fifth Canto of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and the description of this dream has a pictorial quality; he writes :

"The dream was one of the most delightful enjoyments I ever had in my life — I floated about the whirling atmosphere as it is described with a beautiful figure to whose lips mine were joined as it seemed for an age — and in the midst of all cold and darkness I was warm even flowery tree tops sprung up and darkness I was warm — even flowery tree tops sprung up and we rested on them sometimes with the lightness of a cold till the wind blew us away again."²¹

It is seen thus that Keats's imagination is mainly visual and his manner chiefly pictorial or, at times, sculptural quality to his poems. He himself hinted at the visual quality of his preception in a letter to Tom (June 25-27, 1818);

"I cannot think with Hazlitt that these scenes make man appear little. I never forget my nature so completely. I live in the eye; and my imagination, surpassed, is at rest."²²

It is perhaps because of their visual appeal that two of Keats's poems, viz. *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn* were first published in an art-magazine *Annals of the Fine Arts*. Another testimony of the pictorial quality of Keats's poems lies in the fact that several scenes in them are easily translatable into paintings, and have in several cases, been

actually painted by various artists. In the sixth and seventh decades of the 19th century, several painters including the pre-Raphaelite painter poets painted scenes from his poems. Holman Hunt, for example, exhibited his picture *The Eve of St. Agnes* based on Keats's poem with the same title in 1848. Millais painted his pictures *Lorenzo at the House of Isabella* and *The Eve of St. Agnes* on the basis of Keats's poems *Isabella* and *The Eve of St. Agnes* respectively. Another painting based on Keats's *The Eve of St. Agnes* was made by Arthur Hughes under the caption *Eve of St. Agnes*. The renowned pre-Raphaelite-poet D.G. Rossetti painted several pictures based on scenes from *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*.

As a painter in words, Keats exerted an enormous influence on poets of the later times. A number of poets of the Victorian poets Tennyson, Browning and Arnold, carry traces of Keats's influence as a pictorial poet. His influence on the pre-Raphaelite poets was great too. Especially his fragmentary poem '*The Eve of Saint Mark*' held a strong appeal for them. Keats can be called an early imagist, and the Imagist poetry of the 20th century, with its emphasis on clear-cut images, may be said to owe much to his pictorial method.

It may be concluded that the pictorial quality of Keats's poetry is one of the chief sources of its lasting appeal and influence. As Graham Hough remarks, "The poetic equivalent for an emotion with Keats is commonly a picture It is by the precision of his sensuous imagery—that he commands the response that he wants. This imagery is chiefly visual:"²³ Keats may rightly be said to belong to the category of the illustrious painters in words such as Spenser, Shakespeare; Milton, Tennyson, Rossetti, and the like, His appeal to painters might be said to be as great as to poets and readers of poetry. He is one of the finest and greatest pictorial poets in English.

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