

Hellenic Strain In John Keats's Poetry

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Abstract

Hellas is the name for ancient Greece. Hellene means 'a citizen or native of ancient or modern Greece.' Hellenism refers to the character, culture and literature of ancient Greece. The Hellenism of Keats refers to his love of culture, literature and character of the ancient Greece. During his last days, he asked his friend Severn to read him *Holy Living and Holy Dying*, popular books of the faithful. He imbibed the Greek influence through three agencies the agency of literature, sculpture and through the innate tendency or inborn instinct. For loving Greek life Keats' love for Greek mythology was produced by his study of Lemprier's 'Classical Dictionary.' He gathered all information about Greek Gods and goddesses by reading the Dictionary. The Second source of Keats' Hellenism is the Elgin marbles, obtained chiefly from the Parthenon by Lord Elgin in 1811. The influence of this piece of sculpture on the poet was very great and made him a fervent admirer of the Greek way of life. But stronger than either of these in the third element in Keats' art, namely the inborn temperamental Greekness of his mind.

Keywords: Hellenism, Myths and legends, Mode of Expression, Approach to Nature and Manner of treatment.

A Discussion of the classicism of Keats or the classical strain in his poetry leads us to an examination of his Hellenism or the Greek spirit in his poetry; because the classical traits and elements of his poetry have their chief source in Greek literature and mythology. His classical spirit finds nourishment in the mythology and poetry of ancient Greece. Moreover, the works of Greek art and literature serve as classical models of his own work. Keats was a Greek in sense of possessing a Greek spirit, a love of all that belonged to Greece-its, legends, myth, art and literature. He shared with them a delight in the beauty of the external world and pagan worship of Nature. What is most surprising is the fact that he imbibed this Greek spirit without ever having seen Greece

or learnt the Greek language.

As a poet Keats has drawn much upon his knowledge of Greek mythology. He has taken his subjects from there and treated them in a novel manner. Several of his longer poems such as Endymion, Hyperion, and Lamia are based on Greek myths. A few of his sonnets like To Homer, On first Looking into Chapman's Homer and On Seeing the Elgin Marbles are inspired by Greek art and literature. The great odes To Psyche, On a Grecian Urn, Indolence and To Maia also owe their origin to Greek mythology and art. There are several references to Greek mythology in other poems as well. Endymion deals with the legend of the love of the Moon goddess for the shepherd Endymion; Hyperion treats the ancient Greek legend of the overthrow of the old gods (Titans) by the new gods (Olympians); Lamia presents the story of the love of the serpent-goddess (Lamia) and a human being, Lycius. The Ode to a Grecian Urn and Ode on Indolence are inspired by pieces of Greek Sculpture, the decorated marble urns; the fragmentary ode to Maia is related to the ancient worship of the Greek goddess Maia; the ode To Psyche is based on the legend related to the love of the Greek god Cupid and the goddess Psyche or the human soul. All these poems show how deeply Keat's imagination was steeped in the classical mythology and art of ancient Greece. The ode To Psyche, though a lesser and inferior work as compared to the other great odes of Keats, "is perhaps the most interesting, the fullest expression of the profound charm exercised by the Greek myths on Keats's imagination."¹

His mode of expression and ways of thought also developed some Greek characteristics. He is a Greek in his manner of personifying the powers of nature. The attitude of the ancient Greeks in the presence of Nature was one of childlike wonder and delight; they deified those powers. They felt the presence of Proteus and Triton and Neptune in the sea; of dryads in the trees; of nymphs and fairies in the woods and of naiads in the brooks. And so did Keats. His instinctive delight in the presence of Nature easily led him to the 'beautiful mythology' of the Greeks. What the Greeks felt, Keats also felt. We know how he put the crown of Apollo on his head and then realised that he was not worthy of the crown of the god. He wrote an 'Ode to Apollo' as a sort of apology:

*Where, where slept thine ire,
 When like a blank idiot I put on thy wreath,
 Thy laurel, thy glory
 The light of thy story?*

But then he knew that in him there was something of the true worshipper of the god of

music and poetry and someday he might be crowned with the laurel wreath of Apollo. Like a fool, we may say, he rushed in where angels fear to tread. Apollo clapped him on the shoulders knowing that one fine day he would be crowned with Immortality.

Keats uses myths and legends from the Greek lore directly in several of his poems. The legend of Endymion : A Poetic Romance comes from his vast reading and particularly from Praytous 'The Man in the Moon: He read Endymion's encounter with Phoebe there. 'Lamia' is the most perfect of his narrative poems and its story is also Greek. The direct source is Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy. He depended on various sources but gave the story a shape of his own. 'Hyperion' is an ambitious effort of Keats and it directly comes from Elizabethan sources and from works which he had lately studied particularly Hesiod's Theogony and Chalmer's English Poets. Keats takes his legends from various sources as Shakespeare had done. Shakespeare had moulded every tale in his own way. So did Keats. Regarding Hyperion, says, "The treatment and adaptation of the material and the affirmation of the law of progress in the poem are Keats's own inventions,....." Keats wrote it again and it is known as The Fall of Hyperion. Here the poet made the best attempt "to express his own convictions concerning human life." The poem is a mighty promise as it is a fragment. It clearly indicated his "poetic maturity."

The subject matter of his odes 'To Psyche' and 'On a Grecian Urn' is not directly derived from any classical work. Strangely enough, the body and spirit of both the poems are Greek. One who is not a Greek in mind and spirit cannot compose such poems. Keats imbibed the spirit of classical learning and sculpture to such an extent that figures became real and persons became alive. He could present the Greek way of life in his ode On a Grecian Urn in the true Greek way:

*Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
 Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
 Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
 What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about the shape
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?*

(Stanza 1)

The love-theme of Cupid and Psyche had a great fascination for Keats. In one of his letters he told that he took a lot of pains for his 'Ode To Psyche'. He recreated a myth suggesting that he was an orthodox, a true Greek : "You must recollect that Psyche was not embodied as a goddess

before the time of Apuleius, the Platonist who lived after the Augustan age, and consequently, the Goddess was never worshipped or sacrificed to with any of the ancient fervour-and perhaps never thought of in the old religion- "I am more orthodox than to let a heathen Goddess be so neglected." He will worship her and make a proper temple for her and worship her.

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: **(Lines 50-54)**
 A rosy sanctuary will I dress
 With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,
 With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
 With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,
 Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:
 And there shall be for thee all soft delight
 That shadowy thought can win,
 A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
 To let the warm Love In! **(Lines 59-67)**

Keats's approach to and treatment of Greek mythology is novel. He imparts to Greek myths a human significance and an allegorical interpretation. He does not treat the Greek mythological figures as the classical Greek poets had done. For instance, Greek poets like Hesiod, Homer and Orpheus have simply supplied pompous epithets to the Greek gods and goddesses presented by them; they treated them in the light of the conventional attitude towards them without investing any new qualities in them or showing them involved in any dramatic action or conflict. The mythological figures are rarely shown speaking, and when they do so, their speeches are godlike and removed from the ordinary speech of man. Keats treats these mythological figures in a different manner. "Instead of presenting its imaginary persons under the trite and vulgar traits that belong to them in the ordinary systems, little more is borrowed from these than the general conception of their conditions and relations; and an original character and distinct individuality is bestowed upon them, which all the merit of invention, and all the grace and attraction of the fictions on which it is engrafted."²

Keats makes the mythological figures of his poems such as Saturn, Apollo or Oceanus in Hyperion speak like human beings. "The moments the Gods speak, we forget that they did not speak like ourselves. The fact is, they feel like ourselves; and the poet would have to make them feel otherwise, even if he could make them speak otherwise, which he cannot, unless he venture upon an obscurity which would destroy our sympathy."³

Keats is a lover of Beauty in the true Greek sense. The Greeks loved beauty and appreciated harmony. They created marvels in art, letters and sculpture. Keats also aims at the creation and expression of Beauty. Beauty for Greeks was not just a physical passion or intellectual concern; it represented the fullest development of the human personality. The perfection of loveliness in art and letters fascinated Keats. In his own way, he became a great lover of Beauty and could see it reflected everywhere in every season. To him the poetry of earth was never dead. In his poems he created sights of beauty, which will charm his readers for ever. Cupid and Psyche lying together is a sight like this-

*They lay calm-breathing on the trodden grass;
 Their arms embraced, and their pinions too;
 Their lips touched not, but had not bid adieu,
 As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber,
 And ready still past kisses to outnumber
 At tender eye-dawn of aurorean love.*

(Ode to Psyche, II, 15-20)

Through his treatment of Greek myths and allusions to Greek character, Keats creates a Greek atmosphere in his poetry. For this, he presents typically Greek objects, ceremonies, rituals and customs, shrines, altars, pipes, processions, and sacrifices. In the very beginning of the Ode on a Grecian Urn, such an atmosphere is conjured up by his various questions related to these things:

*What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about the shape
 of deities or mortals, or of both,
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
 What pipes and timbrels? what wild ecstasy?⁴*

Keats's *Hymn to Pan in Endymion* is, as Wordsworth called it, "a pretty piece of paganism" and illustrates what G. Wilson Knight terms "the natural realism of Keats's mythology",⁵ and celebrates "the unification of man and nature"⁶ along with a unification of Nature and mythology. Keats's treatment of Greek mythology is novel in the sense that he has maintained a close relationship between nature and mythology and given a human significance to mythological characters and situations. "No one in English literature", remarks Wilson Knight, "no Elizabethan even, focused to his own purposes. He (Keats) does not borrow; he sees what was seen by the race-mind that peopled woods with satyrs and rivers with nymphs, and knew the sun and moon as divine charioteers. So his Diana, Apollo, Neptune are real. In *Endymion* a river talks, as in *Comus* and *Lycidas*. But no English poet has so light a touch, so unswerving a tact in mythological treatment; for Keats never loses sense of the natural object, however precisely it be personified."⁷

If, thus, Keats is a pagan, like the Greeks, in his approach to Nature, like them too he is exclusively interested in its sensuous charms. He does not attach any spiritual or intellectual significance to Nature, but revels in its external beauty. He loves and interprets Nature for her own sake or for the sake of her beauty. This brings him closer to the Greek spirit as does his love of sensuous aspects of beauty. The Greek concept of the identity of beauty and truth appealed to him, and is expressed in the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* through the urn's message:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all
Ye know on earth and all ye need to know.⁸

Keats is thus a classicist because he has dealt with themes, subjects and situations related to ancient Greek mythology and literature. The world of classical Greece has become alive in his poems.

Keats's Hellenism and Classicism is revealed not only through his treatment of Greek, art, themes, legends and myths but also in his manner of this treatment. He has attempted to achieve the ideals of restraint and discipline. At places his poetry possesses the classical or Miltonic grandeur and sublimity such as in portions as in his *Odes*. He has also employed the heroic couplet which was a favourite verse-form with the classical poets like Homer. He learnt a lot from the Greek poet Pindar and the Roman poet Petrarch in respect of the building up of the stanza for his *Odes* and *sonnets* respectively.

However, it would be wrong to regard Keats's manner entirely Greek. He was mainly a romantic Greek. He was mainly a romantic poet and wrote in a manner differing from that of the classical poets. Although he is a Greek by nature and poetic in temperament, and frequently deals with Greek subjects in his poetry, his artistic method and mode of expression are not always Greek. "He does not", as Sidney Colvin believes, "write of Greek things in a Greek manner. Something indeed in *Hyperion*-at least in the first two books-he has caught from *Paradise Lost* of the high restraint and calm which was common to the Greek and Milton, But to realise how far he is in workmanship from the Greek purity and precision of outline, and firm definition of individual images, we have only to think of his palace of *Hyperion*, with its vague far-dazzling pomps and phantom terrors of common doom."⁹

The perfection of form, the beauty of shape, the purity and preciseness of outline, a restraint and reserve in expression-these qualities that are generally associated with Greek art and poetry, are found only in a few of Keats's poetry. In place of these traits of the classical manner Keats's poetry often exhibits romantic traits such as richness of imagination, ornateness of design, exuberance of imagery and luxuriance of style that we find in poems like *Endymion* and that are opposed to the Greek qualities of restraint and discipline. In fact, he adopts a romantic style and English manner for dealing with classical themes and legends of Greece. According to Sidney Colvin, "The Greek touch in not his, but in his own rich and decorated English way he writes with a sure insight into the vital meaning of Greek ideas."¹⁰

It may be concluded that Keats was a Greek in spirit but romantic in form. He treated the themes and myths of Greece in the romantic manner of the Elizabethans. His early poetry employs a romantic style and expression even in the treatment of classical Greek subjects as in *Endymion*, but in his mature works like *Hyperion* and the *Odes*, his manner has close affinities with the classical manner. By and large, however, he can be regarded a Greek in spirit but an Elizabethan in form, a classicist in the choice of subject but a romanticist in their treatment. He may be said to have thus brought about a fusion of the Romantic and the Classical.

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