

Polytheism in Keats' Poetry: A Confluence of the Hellenic and the Pagan



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ABSTRACT

Nature-adorers look forward for inspiration beyond cult and practices. The excessive use of Hellenic legends and myths in his poetic expressions, reveal his outlook of world and nature. The literary world has acknowledged the Greek influence in Keats' poetry. At times, where the ideals of Romanticism were already established, it wasn't easy enough to practice and find an objective co-relative with a spirit of unification of sensibility. Keats' poetries are a culmination of spirits. They are adorned with the Romantic spirit of simplicity and blended with the cult practice of Hellenic spirit. The research paper focusses on the themes of personification of objects, powers of nature and Keats' poetic leanings with the Greek myths and legends.

Keywords : *Personification of Objects, instinctive familiarity with Nature, Hellenic myths, attitude towards nature, polytheistic outlook, Keats' poetry and Hellenic outlook*

In terms of the synoptic guideline, the subject—matter for this research paper could be processed in terms of (a) **Attitude towards Nature**; (b) **Instinctive familiarity with Nature**; and (c)

Personification of the Objects and Powers of Nature. This research paper deals with Keats' interest in Hellenic myths and the usage of these poetic expression in his poems.

(a) **Attitude towards Nature**

In terms of his absorbing pursuit of Greek myths and the pastoral atmosphere linked to them, Keats came to develop a typical Hellenic outlook of the world and nature. In the era before Christ, bounteous nature in its manifold manifestations provided man with myths and symbols, whereby the socio-cultural life of the pagan people in the Middle East, around the geographical territory of Greece and nearby areas, came to develop a polytheistic outlook. Consequently, Keats, developed his poetic sensibility, and pursued his study of the ancient world, came to accept the essential kernel of Hellenic pagan culture. Keats understood this cultural background with its polytheism fairly well and used it in his poetry. As is now too well known, this opened a new realm in English romanticism.

From the biographical studies of Keats' early life, it is made out that Keats did not feel at ease in the governing cultural ethos prevailing in early nineteenth century England. He found himself cribbed and cabined in the money-conscious utilitarian society of his day. This was primarily because Keats had become aware, from his early poetic life, of the creative and life-energizing power of Imagination, when he says, *'I am certain of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination — What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth. The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream -he awoke and found it truth'*.

Coupled with the powerful faculty of imagination, Keats had a marked perceptual trait in him. He was a 'Greek' in spirit through and through. By virtue of these mental attributes, Keats was able to see in nature the Hellenic figures — mythic or otherwise, on an actively dynamic and imaginative plane and this got expressed in his poetry in ample measure. This idea finds expression in the first stanza of *Ode on a Grecian Urn* when he testifies

Thou still unravished 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 haunt, about thy 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?

This not only pleased and fascinated the poet but also inspired him to give his word somber pictures that creates living images of man dancing, merrymaking, celebrating life itself, in the deep forest, beneath the cool shade of evergreen tree, on the meadows, in the lap of nature itself.

A more meticulous study would reveal that the words '*In Tempe or the Dales of Arcady*' are rich in mythic lore. Arcadia has many associations with Greek mythology. According to one account Zeus was born there, on Mt. Lycaeus. Hermes and Pan were originally Arcadian deities Arcadia also contains the famous temple to Apollo at Bassae near Phigalia, in a lonely and impressive situation which heightens the effect of the beautiful ruins..... The Arcadians derived their name from a legendary Arcas, son of Zeus and Callisto. *Callisto was a nymph in the train of Artemis.*

Similarly, *Tempe* connotes the valley of the Peneias in Thesally, praised by the classic poets for its matchless beauty. The first stanza *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Keats projects a mythopoeic vision of ancient Greece in which nature is historicised with a fine blend of interaction between aesthetics and mythology. From the last three lines of this stanza, one can discern that the poet is both enchanted and intrigued by the mad pursuits of men or gods as if they were ecstatic in going beyond their limited range of existence. By an extended analogy, it may also be observed that Keats had set before himself the higher aims of life. Since he was not satisfied with a mere paltry existence in the English society of his day, he got lifted

up, like a meteor, by the sheer power of imagination to dwell in the ancient Hellenic world where he could live in harmony with nature, men and gods, in utter naiveté, without any kind of divisiveness.

Keats' mind gravitated towards the Hellenic world because he came to share its attitude towards nature; he wanted a wholesome organic experience as, he believed, the ancients did. The main reason for his opting in favour of a Hellenic background and its myths stemmed from his reaction to the conventional value system of English society in the early nineteenth century. One can draw a parallel with the reaction of D.H. Lawrence to the twentieth century English society. The rationale behind Keats' reaction to his time can be explained in terms of Lawrence's observation where Lawrence is found blaming science and narrow-minded conventional values for depletion of human experience.

Keats wanted to escape from the prevailing social atmosphere. It is with this background in view that Keats' absorbing interest in Greek myths and the Hellenic view of life has to be explained. Keats' wrote poetry with allusions to Greek mythology, the well-entrenched literary personalities of the day sneered at him because they felt peeved at his introducing a new dimension in English poetry through the use of Greek myths and images. Keats' hostile critics, *Keats' verse*, Byron sneered, "*consisted merely of versifying Tooke's Pantheon and Lempriere's Dictionary*".¹ Byron continues to comment in *Hyperion*, "*Keats had without Greek / contrived to talk about the gods of late/ Much as they might have been supposed to speak.*" .² In his poetic sweep, Keats developed an incantatory attitude towards life and reality outside as also within himself; and in this mental framework, he holds aloft the multitudinous benedictions of poetic power. There is a stirring and a tumult in the poets' mind; and when it takes the shape of poetry, it brings in its wake a becalming effect on the general condition of man. Here, one can very well remember the few lines *Sleep and Poetry* in which Keats has shown the liberating role of poetry on man and nature.

Further, it could also be stated that W.B. Yeats praised Tagore's '*Gitanjali*' for its regenerating spirit in underscoring the importance of piety for human happiness. In the organic

manifestation of life, in nature as a whole, there is inter-connectedness between the realm of words, emotions and expression which could be perceived by the hovering spirit of nature. Keats understood that poetry gets into the lifeless rut of abstraction once it is ivory chambered and therefore, acknowledged change as the essential aspect of nature and reality. In the last stanza of 'Ode to Autumn', he clearly perceives the rhythm of change working in a subtle manner in nature, which shows his close familiarity with it, as he continues to say:

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?

Think not of them, thou host thy music too -

While barred clouds bloom the soft dying day.

And touch the stubble plains with rosy hue

Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn

Among the river shallows borne aloft

Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies

And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn,

Hedge crickets sing, and now with treble soft

The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;

And gathering swallows twitter in the skies

If one pays attention to the different images of barred clouds imparting bloom to the soft dying day, and rosy hue to the stubble plains, one would also appreciate the beauty of the river swallows, being '*borne aloft or sinking as the light wind lives or dies*'. One has a picturesque view of the inter-connected ensemble of different layers of life-movement linked to the changing moods of the wind, with full grown lambs bleating from hilly bourn while Hedge-crickets sing. '*The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft with the 'treble soft' and 'gathering swallows twitter in the skies*'. Here the poet lives with the world of nature instinctively, which is a tribute to

the poetic genius of Keats. In fact, it is a mythic version of life in subtle movement whereby the poets' power of sensuousness gets amply crystallised.

If one makes a close study of the third and fifth stanzas of *Ode To a Nightingale*, one is similarly familiarised with the unhappy human life as it is contrasted with the unbidden growth in "the grass, the thicket and the fruit tree wild", with a variety of fragrances, as if making the joy universal.

Hence, it could be clearly seen that reality embodies contrasts. This springs from the variety imbedded in the essential nature of the universe. If in the third stanza in *Ode to Nightingale*, the poet refers to the fret and fury of human life, in the fifth stanza, the poet has depicted nature in its natural mood of subdued joy and growth. The theme in this stanza is the flora with its natural rhythm: its silence enlivened by the murmurous haunt of flies on summer's eve. Overall, it conveys the message that in nature there is hardly any place for any kind of shrill or shrieking sound. Life gets enriched when the audible sound is in a subdued tone and harmonious. Man's fret and fury gives rise to immediately loud noise that violates his own sense of sound. On this basis it is possible to say that Keats understood the different facets of life and reality in an ample measure and was aware of the becalming effect of nature on man—that his knowledge of myths made nature come alive.

(b) Instinctive familiarity with Nature

Keats' interest in Greek myths and other tales of antiquity was inspired by his desire to live a fuller life. He wanted to escape from the life corroding atmosphere of his time. In fact, Keats expresses his own longing for a life of joy and permanence when in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, says, *What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?* There is in these lines a slight touch of envy and a note of dissatisfaction with the contemporary world of which he is a part.

In the Hellenic culture, Keats saw a wider canvas of life and opted for it on the plane of his poetic imagination. The twentieth century anthropological researches have

confirmed that ancient Greeks saw the presence of God everywhere. The modern notion of pantheism is derived from this Hellenic belief. Even etymologically, it is proved that the Greeks had a word *enthousiasmos* which meant god-inspired zeal. It is from this word that the English word 'enthusiasm' is derived.

As a part of this perusal, it is worth-while to say that Keats, out of a truly hellenic inspiration, writes:

*A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases,
it will never pass into nothingness:
but still will keep :A bower quiet for us,
and a sleep full of sweet dreams, and
health, and
Quiet breathing.*

The extract just cited constitutes the first few lines from *Endymion*, Book I, and immediately thereafter Keats is in intimate company with noble nature in its multi-fangled manifestations from which one gets to know the poet's *instinctive familiarity with nature*, for he also has a flair for personifying the objects and powers of nature. This can be well evinced in the following lines where Keats is found to argue:

*Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing,
A flowery band to bind us to the earth,
Spite of despondence of the inhuman dearth
Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,
Of all the unhealthy and over-darkened ways
Made for our searching; yes, in spite of all
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
From our dark spirits. Such the sun, the moon,*

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*Trees old and young, sprouting a shady boon
 For simple sheep and such are daffodils
 With the green world they live in; and clear rills
 That for themselves a cooling covert make
 'Gainst the hot season; the mid-forest brake,
 Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms.*

Critically examining this extract would show how felicitous and rich Keats was in his poetic expression even as early as 1817, when he composed *Endymion*. Those rich tapestry of images from the wonderful world of nature prove it. It was out of sheer peevishness that his critics called him an uneducated cockney who strayed into the realm of poetry. In fact, they were alarmed by the manner in which John Keats chose to express his poetic feelings for the world, nature, and, even, the inscrutable nature of the destiny of man and gods.

Keats, had vividly portrayed the living inter-relationship in his poetry. Keats is concerned with the wreathing of a flowery band that links man not only with his immediate surroundings but also with the sky-watchers such as the sun, the moon and the unfathomable stars. Besides, Keats has also evoked the blessed role of trees with their canopy of shades to ward off men, animals, and other creatures from the fury of the warm season. Then again, clear rills are linked to 'a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms' through the ecological role of the mid-forest brake. It is equally made palpable that Keats set a higher aim for his poetic abilities. Both the underworld and the higher world of gods along with this world of fret and fury have a place in the poetic vision of John Keats

Keats had set for poetic utterance higher aims going beyond mere fame and recognition. In this pursuit, he harmonized man with nature and also with man's abiding relationship with other worldly concerns. His approach towards environment in which nature remains only an eternal fixture, Keats, in his poetic vision was capable of establishing an organic relationship with the multi-faceted nature.

Keats had developed an instinctive familiarity with Nature' together with his poetic flair for personifying the objects and powers of Nature' make possible because imaginatively, he could relive in the mythic world of ancient Greece, as Milnes comments:

Yet Tooke's Pantheon', Spence's Polymetis'. and Lempriere's Dictionary', were sufficient fully to introduce his imagination to the enchanted world of old mythology: with this, at once, he became intimately acquainted, and a natural consanguinity, so to say, of intellect, soon domesticated him with the ancient ideal life, so that his scanty scholarship supplied him with a clear perception of classic beauty and led the way to that wonderful reconstruction of Grecian feeling and fancy, of which his mind became afterwards capable.

In much likeness , Herbert Warren has said of Keats:

Various attempts have been made to broaden the acknowledged base of Keats' direct familiarity with classical literature, but most subsequent studies have agreed that the poet succeeded in revivifying the old mythology through a natural sympathy with the spirit in which it originated.

W.J. Courthope, one of Keats' major critic recounts that *Keats' natural feeling for the mythological spirit of pagan times combined with a voluptuous perception of beauty in natural things, and a brilliant fancy which enabled him readily to abstract ideal forms from the objects presented to his eyes; led him towards a mythologised nature poetry which was essentially pictorial, and therefore static, and that his motive was the creation of an ideal atmosphere free from the dynamic social flux of his own age.*

Empowered by an unsullied imagination, Keats looked at life, reality and nature, from a very high altitude. His ethereal mode of expression could arrive at a unified perspective whereby it was possible for him to poetise a closely-knit texture of nature with instinctive familiarity and with personification of the natural objects and forces of nature. When Keats invokes mythical figures in the setting of nature, he is equally conscious that he aims at man in the human sense and not as a mere economic category, for in the latter scenario, man would be flouting the serenity of nature, as could be explicitly observed in the last stanza of *Ode to Psyche*.

Keats could convey his solemn intimacy with nature in his poetry because inspite of the unduly scathing criticism of his poetic style by his adversaries, he was able to maintain his creative equilibrium, even as he strove hard to know himself. Since he was deeply immersed in the Hellenic lore from mythic stories to platonic philosophy, he was clearly aware of *Gnothi Seauten* which in its English rendering means 'to know thyself' inscribed at the entrance of the Apollo temple at Delphi. A true poet sees life in nature; which was later proved scientifically, in the early twentieth century, by Sir Jagdish Chandra Bose.

This is how Keats celebrates the beauty and grandeur of the moon and its empyreal effect on the bounties of the earth and nature. In this way, a sage or a poet is able to express himself with serenity.

The Talmud, a religious scripture of the Jews, states that 'If you want to understand the invisible, look carefully at the visible'. With this yardstick, the subtle intelligence of John Keats, deciphering the subtle working of life and nature around him could well be measured. Keats, therefore, could render beautiful images of life, nature and reality in a dynamic ensemble, and that too, in a subtle vibrating intimacy.

(C) Personification of the Objects and Powers of Nature

By virtue of Keats' *myth making instinct* and by virtue of his intense liking for the moon and its resplendent shades, Keats was able to invest the moon with natural attributes. Personification of objects of nature in the course of describing nature is a common feature of Keats' poetry. He linked the objects of nature to any mythological reference found feasible.

From the standpoint of the projection of reality in all its comprehensiveness consisting of good and bad, kind and cruel, beautiful and ugly, serene and disturbing, as is amply evident in the extract just cited above, Keats depicted life in an epical sweep to cover the ghastly mythic story of Philomela and her double-assault by king Tereus. The poem is replete with the activated images of 'forest breeze' blowing aside the taper's flamer, and one's feeling grateful to the incense - smelling lime-tree flower, together with the trumpet's mysterious wild tone in the midst of the lovely atmosphere of the moon rising in ether with Hesperus or the evening star about to become visible on the horizon. Taken together, all these images, natural and mythic, go to

conduce a varied, dense texture of life.... beckoning man to be bold and affirmative in experiencing the cycle of destiny on a deeper level.

Keats was equally fascinated by Apollo, the symbol of the sun, and Moon as a symbol of love and beauty. The image of the moon is a recurring feature of Keats' poetry. The description of the moon goddess In *Ode to a Nightingale* seated on her throne clustered around with all her starry fays is well known. In it Keats brings alive the very skies by personifying the moon and the stars. His poem, *To Hope* and the sonnet *To Byron*, bear a deep-sighted fascination with the moon. For Keats, besides being a symbol of love and beauty, the moon is also a mythic and religious symbol as could be observed in *Endymion*.

Keats' mastery as a poet is also seen in his personification of the abstract aspects of nature. In *The Ode to Autumn*, he personifies the season. The ode begins with an apostrophe to the season, and thereupon, Keats unleashes his imagination to go on to speak of the season as a close friend of the sun, conspiring with him how to *load and bless* the earth with more fruit and flower. Interestingly, Keats not just personifies the objects of nature but also turns human beings into objects of nature. This is seen in the legend of Philomela where both sisters are mysteriously turned into birds.

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