

Songs of the Saddest Thoughts: A study of Pathos in Selected Odes of John Keats

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Abstract

Romantic poetry is chiefly marked by imagination, subjectivity, love of nature, passion for beauty, attachment to the past or the medieval ages, simple diction and often a note of melancholy. John Keats is, no doubt, one of the most important Romantic poets in English literature. Apart from his long poems, he is renowned for his great odes – “Ode to a Nightingale”, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, “Ode to Autumn”, “Ode on Melancholy” and “Ode to Psyche”. All these odes, which were nearly composed in 1819, reveal the salient features of Keats’s poetry such as love of beauty, sensuousness, Hellenism, medievalism, pictorial images, subjectivity and, of course, an undercurrent of pathos. The present paper is going to analyse three great odes of Keats – “Ode to a Nightingale”, “Ode on a Grecian urn”, and “Ode to Autumn” and it will shed ample light on the pathos that reigns supreme in these poems.

Keywords: pathos, odes, romanticism, harsh realities, human sufferings.

Introduction:

The word ‘pathos’ in Greek used to refer to passions, sufferings or deep feelings. But it has acquired a narrow meaning in modern literary criticism. Now-a-days, the term ‘pathos’ is “applied in a much more limited way to a scene or passage that is designed to evoke the feelings of tenderness, pity or sympathetic sorrow from the audience” (Abrams and Harpham, 270). To put it differently, pathos is the quality in a literary work, which makes the readers feel sad. It is something that tends to bring tears to our eyes. It may spring from personal loss, national crisis, natural disaster or the assault of misfortune. Abrams and Harpham have rightly pointed out:

“To many modern readers, the greatest passages of pathos do not dwell on the details of suffering but achieve their effect by understatement and suggestion”.
 (270)

The publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge in 1798 signalled the beginning of the Romantic Period in the history of English literature. While

Wordsworth and Coleridge belonged to the older generation of Romantic poets, the younger generation included Lord Byron, P.B. Shelley and John Keats. *The Oxford Companion To English Literature* has described Romanticism in the following way:

“In the most abstract terms, Romanticism may be regarded as the triumph of the values of imaginative spontaneity, visionary originality, wonder and emotional self-expression over the classical standards of balance, order, restraint, proportion and objectivity. Its name derives from romance, the literary form in which desires and dreams prevail over everyday reality”. (856)

Edward Albert has beautifully commented on the Romantic Age:

“This was indeed the golden age of the lyric, which reflected the Romantic spirit of the time in liberal and varied measure. It comprised the exalted passion of Shelley, the meditative simplicity of Wordsworth, the sumptuous descriptions of Keats and the golden notes of Coleridge”. (360)

C.M. Bowra has laid special emphasis on the imagination as a distinguishing feature of Romantic Poetry:

“If we wish to distinguish a single characteristic which differentiates the English Romantics from the poems of the eighteenth century, it is to be found in the importance which they attached to the imagination and in the special view which they held of it”, (1)

Bowra also avers that the Romantic poets “were concerned with the things of the spirit and hoped that through imagination and inspired insight they could both understand them and present them in compelling poetry”. (10)

However, John Keats was the last romantic poet and, of course, he was “the most perfect of the Romantics”(William J. Long,418). He spent his short life worshipping beauty, for he believed that “beauty is truth, truth beauty”. Though he died a premature death at the age of twenty five, he had succeeded in composing some of the best poetry in the English language, which secured for him a prominent place in the world of literature. William J. Long has aptly described Keats’s poetic creed:

“Keats lived apart from men and all political measures, worshipping beauty like a devotee, perfectly content to write what was in his own heart, or to reflect some splendour of the natural world as he saw or dreamt it to be. He had, moreover, the novel idea that poetry exists for its own sake, and suffers loss by being devoted to philosophy, or politics or, indeed, to any cause however great or small”. (418)

While going through Keats’s poetry, one often comes across such characteristics as a passionate love of beauty, sensuous imagery, a liking for the Middle Ages, attachment to the Hellenic culture and of course an undercurrent of heart rending pathos. David Daiches has observed:

“He (Keats) is ‘Romantic’ in his relish of sensation, his feeling for the Middle Ages, his Hellenism (very different from Shelley’s), his conception of the role of the poet, but the synthesis he made of these elements was very much his own”. (915)

There is no denying the fact that Keats was far from being happy in his personal life. The loss of his parents, the premature death of his brother, Tom, and his failed love affair with Fanny Brawne made his life miserable and painful. He, therefore, sought an escape into the ideal world of art and beauty. But he failed to secure a permanent relief from his sorrows, sufferings and despair. As a result, his poetry bears the sign of grief and gives rise to tender feelings of pity in the hearts of the readers. Despite celebrating beauty and the charms of the ideal world, his greatest odes are soaked in heart rending pathos. A close examination of his major odes will reveal how pathos dominates his poetry.

Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" is indubitably one of the finest odes in English literature. Though it appears to celebrate the sweet song of the nightingale, it actually brings to the fore the conflict between the real and the ideal. Besides offering a telling picture of the grim realities, the poem hints at the poet's personal grief and despondency. William J. Long has observed:

"Those who study only the "Ode to a nightingale" may find four things – a love of sensuous beauty, a touch of pessimism, a purely pagan conception of nature and a strong individualism, - which are characteristic of this last of the romantic poets". (423)

The poem begins on a note of celebration:

"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 Lethewards had sunk:
 Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
 But being too happy in thine happiness"

("Ode to a Nightingale")

Having been captivated by the sweet melody of the nightingale, the poet has become so happy that he feels pain in his senses. He wishes to escape from the real world of pain, despair and death into the ideal world of the nightingale where eternal happiness and absolute beauty reign supreme.

However, Keats has given a description of human sufferings in the mundane world:

"Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
 Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs
 Where youth grows pale, and spectre thin, and dies;
 Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
 And leaden eyed despairs;
 Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
 Or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow"

("Ode to a Nightingale")

There can be no doubt that the above quoted lines are steeped in deep pathos. While going through these lines, one cannot help feeling sad and pensive. These lines not only delineate the real world of death, decay and impermanence but also throw a great deal of light on Keats's personal misery and torment. The world has been aptly portrayed as a place ruled by "the weariness, the fever and the fret". Here each and every person is subjected to pain and misfortune. Here, young people grow thin and pale, and finally die a premature death. Paralysis continues to torment the few old people. Beauty and love are destined to fade away very soon. Apart from the presentation of the harsh realities, the poem hints at the untimely demise of Keats's brother, Tom, in the line "Where youth grows pale, and spectre thin and dies". The "beauty" in the line "Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes" may allude to Keats's one time beloved Fanny Brawne. Moreover, his unrequited love affair with this lady has been suggested in the line – "Or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow". Thus, it is quite clear that these lines are certain to bring tears to the eyes of a sensitive reader.

Unable to bear the burden of painful life, the poet has decided to escape into the world of the nightingale with the help of wine. But he realises that wine is not strong enough to achieve the desired effect. He, therefore, changes his mind and resolves to fly to the bird's world on the wings of 'poesy':

"Away! Away! for I will fly to thee,
 Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
 But on the viewless wings of poesy,
 Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
 Already with thee! ..."

("Ode to a Nightingale")

Despite enjoying the ecstatic melody of the nightingale, the poet cannot get rid of the painful realities which he always seeks to abandon. The thought of death does not desert him even in the moment of ecstasy. He is so exhausted with his painful existence that he wants to breathe his last. Death alone can deliver him from the misery and agonies of life. Keats lets us know how he has been enamoured of Death and how he has invoked it on many past occasions:

"Darkling I listen; and for many a time
 I have been half in love with easeful death
 Called him soft names in many a mused rhyme'
 To take into the air my quiet breath"

("Ode to a Nightingale")

The poet's ecstasy occasioned by the nightingale's melody, however, fails to bring the poet back from the spells of death. He seems determined to escape from the mundane world through death. Now, he wishes to pass away while listening to the bird's song so that he may die a painless death:

"Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
 To cease upon the midnight with no pain,

While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
 In such an ecstasy
 Still would thou sing, and I have ears in vain
 To thy high requiem become a sod”

(“Ode to a Nightingale”)

The poet proceeds to call the nightingale an “immortal bird” and while doing this, he cannot but draw a contrast between the bird and the human beings. In the line “No hungry generations tread thee down”, Keats hints at the tragic fact that one generation of human beings treads down and forgets the preceding generation. Thus, this line accentuates the tragic futility of human existence.

William Henry Hudson has aptly observed:

“With him (Keats) poetry breaks away from the interests of contemporary life, returns to the past, and devotes itself to the service of beauty”. (204)

In “Ode to a Nightingale”, Keats’s love for the past manifests itself when he refers to the Biblical character Ruth to prove the immortality of the bird:

“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;”

(“Ode a Nightingale”)

The reference to the sad heart of Ruth is, no doubt, soaked in pathos. After the death of her husband, Ruth moved to an alien land and started working in corn fields in order to earn a living. On some occasions, she felt homesick and shed tears in the corn fields. Keats argues that Ruth was consoled by the song of the nightingale. However, the pangs of homesickness and loneliness experienced by Ruth invariably make the readers feel sad and sympathise with the hapless woman.

Tender feelings of sorrow and pity are again aroused when the poet proceeds to make a reference to some medieval princess held captive in the castle of an enchanter:

“The same that oft-times hath
 Charm’d magic casements, opening on the foam
 Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn”

(“Ode to a Nightingale”)

These lines enable the readers to visualise a captive princess waiting for her lover to rescue her from the magic castle. The pangs of confinement, separation and abduction prevail in these lines, thus keeping the undercurrent of pathos alive in the poem.

The concluding stanza of the “Nightingale” ode is overtly marked by heart rending pathos. The very word ‘forlorn’ reminds the poet of his lonely existence and brings him back from the bird’s happy world to the harsh reality:

“Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
 To toll me back from thee to my sole self”

(“Ode to a Nightingale”)

The bird flies away and consequently its song dies down. The poet is immediately thrown back to the real world of sorrows, sufferings, despair and death. Now, he has no option but to bid ‘adieu’ to the nightingale:

“Adieu! Adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
 Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
 Up the hill-side, and now ‘tis buried deep,
 In the next valley-glades”.

(“Ode to a Nightingale”)

In the end, he has to come back to the place where he stood in the beginning. But he finds it difficult to come to terms with the real world. He cannot understand whether he has met the nightingale in a dream or in reality:

“Was it a vision or a waking dream?
 Fled is that music:- Do I wake or sleep?”

(“Ode to a Nightingale”)

If the bird’s song stands for joy, its disappearance obviously suggests the transience of happiness and the permanence of human sufferings. It brings to the fore that man is a complete stranger to pure and eternal happiness. To quote Thomas Hardy, “happiness is but an occasional episode in the general drama of pain”. Thus, the ending of the poem is the most pathetic part of the poem. It once again proves that man is born only to suffer on earth.

The Oxford Companion To English Literature has beautifully described the poem in a nutshell:

“Briefly, the poem is a meditation on the immortal beauty of the nightingale’s song and the sadness of the observer, who must finally – as the price of his humanity – accept sorrow and mortality”. (728)

Thus, pathos runs through the entire poem and the ending accentuates the bitter truth that human beings are eternally tied to the world of sorrows, sufferings, despair and death.

Carter and McRae have pointed out:

“A main theme of Keats’s poetry is the conflict between the everyday world and the eternity: the everyday world of suffering, death and decay, and the timeless beauty and lasting truth of poetry and human imagination”. (214)

“Ode to Autumn” or “To Autumn” is another outstanding ode by Keats, that deals with the beauty and bounty of nature during autumn. This is “a brilliant rendering of a scene and a season and a mood, the final perfection of English landscape poetry” (David Daiches, 920). Despite its mood of celebration, the poem has a hidden note of melancholy which becomes prominent at the end.

The Oxford Companion To English Literature has aptly described the central theme of “Ode to Autumn” in the following way:

“The poem, in three stanzas, is at once a celebration of the fruitfulness of autumn (lightly personified as a figure in various autumnal landscapes) and an elegy for the passing of summer and the transience of life, and its mood has been generally taken to be one of acceptance. Keats’s association of autumn and early death is poignantly revealed in a letter to J.H. Reynolds (21 September, 1819), written immediately after the composition of the poem, in which he says, ‘I always somehow associate Chatterton with autumn’”. (995)

A close analysis of “Ode to Autumn” will reveal how pathos prevails in the entire poem. The opening lines set a mood of celebration at the surface level but lay bare the imminence of decay and death at the deeper level:

“Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
 Close bosom friend of the maturing sun;
 Conspiring with him how to load and bless
 With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;”

(“Ode to Autumn”)

Apparently, Autumn brings the fruits and flowers to maturity. In a deeper sense, maturity is followed by decay and death in human life. Keats seems to hint that human life attains maturity just before the eternal silence, i.e. death.

The second stanza portrays the human activities seen during autumn. The third and final stanza begins with a lament for the passing of spring:

“Where are the songs of spring?
 Ay where are they?”

(“Ode to Autumn”)

Then, Keats proceeds to give an account of how the music of autumn is created:

“Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
 Among the river swallows, 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 redbreast whistles from a garden croft,
 And gathering swallows twitter in the skies”.

(“Ode to Autumn”)

These lines, no doubt, resound, with the symphony of autumn, and the readers can easily hear the music of celebration. But it is not without a tinge of sadness. The swallows that have gathered in the skies are actually preparing for their annual migration to a warmer place because the winter will soon replace the autumn. If autumn stands for fruitfulness and maturity, winter unquestionably represents decay and death. Thus, the poem ends with the sad awareness that the happiness of autumn is going to be replaced by the sorrows and sufferings of winter. The poet seems to suggest that man is not allowed to experience happiness and beauty for a long time, for he is destined to suffer on earth. The ending of the poem is, therefore, charged with deep pathos and pessimism.

Carter and McRae have nicely pointed out:

“Keats finds melancholy in delight, pleasure in pain, and excitement in both emotional sensations and intellectual thoughts. He contrasts dream and reality, the imagination and the actual, the tangible and the intangible. He celebrates beauty but at the same time he knows that all things of beauty must fade and die”. (215)

The concluding line of the poem thus laments that autumn is going to fade away very soon.

“Ode on a Grecian Urn” is another immortal ode by John Keats, which deals with the permanence of art symbolised by the urn and the carvings on it. The poet here describes the different pastoral scenes engraved on the urn and emphasises that art is eternal while human life and happiness are subject to transience, decay and death. *The Oxford companion To English Literature* has beautifully commented on this poem:

“While he (Keats) describes the pastoral scenes of love, beauty and joy illustrated on the urn, the poet reflects on the eternal quality of art – though its ‘cold pastoral’ is not without its ambiguities – and the fleeting nature of human love and happiness” (728)

David Daiches has pointed out:

“The other odes, especially the “Nightingale” and the “Grecian Urn”, show Keats in his last and greatest phase finding a way of handling poetically his growing concern with the relation between art and life, beauty and reality”. (920)

However, the poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” apparently deals with the carvings on the urn in which a youth is piping under a tree and another youth is chasing a young girl to kiss her. The urn also displays scenes of a procession led by a priest for the sacrifice of a heifer. As these scenes have been caught in the world of art, they have attained immortality. Keats implies that human passion, love and happiness are all short lived:

“Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
 Thy song, nor even can those trees be bare;
 Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
 Though winning near the goal – yet do not grieve;”

(“Ode on a Grecian Urn”)

Keats suggests that in our real life the piper will become exhausted and the passions of love will evaporate after a while:

“And, happy melodist unwearied,
 For ever piping songs for ever new;
 More happy love! more happy, happy love!
 For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d,
 For ever panting and for ever young”.

(“Ode on a Grecian Urn”)

Again, the picture of the rustic folk going to the forest to sacrifice a heifer unmistakably gives rise to tender feelings of pity and sorrow in the heart of the reader. The concluding stanza of the poem not only reveals Keats’s ambivalent attitude towards the world of art but also sheds ample light on the fact the people caught in art-world have been deprived of feeling, warmth and motion. This, no doubt, evokes the feelings of pitiful sorrow. However, the poem ends with the much debated lines:

“ ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’, - that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”

(“Ode on a Grecian Urn”)

Conclusion:

Thus, the three major odes of Keats are pervaded by heart rending pathos. Perhaps, it is the pathos that has turned these poems into sweetest songs for all generations of mankind. They are indubitably the songs of the saddest thoughts since they are concerned with the transience of human love, beauty, happiness and the mutability of life. The note of melancholy, however, does not diminish the sweetness and charms of the odes. It once again proves that “Our sweetest songs are those that of the saddest thought”, as Shelley puts it in his famous poem, “To a Skylark”.

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