



Scan to know paper details and
author's profile

Keats's Sufferings and His Poetry

Dr. Sandeep Ojha

INTRODUCTION

Our understanding of Keats's poetry would remain myopic without having a comprehensive view of his chequered life which was reduced woefully to a tragical tale of the sufferings of an unfortunate child, a loving brother separated from his siblings, an extraordinary poet persecuted by spiteful criticism, and a passionate but dejected lover consumed precociously by the dreaded Tuberculosis!, Misfortune relentlessly haunted him with a vengeance and his poems and letters are replete with examples which provide valuable clues to grievous sufferings sustained by him. James Reeves makes an appropriate observation about this very crucial subjective aspect of Keats's poetry when he writes, "His poems are very rarely autobiographical in any direct sense, as Coleridge's often were; yet we feel that his best things are informed throughout by his personal joys and sufferings."¹ This paper attempts to analyse the correlation between Keats's sufferings and his poetry.

Classification: FOR code: 190499

Language: English



London
Journals Press

LJP Copyright ID: 573341
Print ISSN: 2515-5784
Online ISSN: 2515-5792

London Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences

Volume 19 | Issue 5 | Compilation 1.0



© 2019 Dr. Sandeep Ojha. This is a research/review paper, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 Unported License <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>, permitting all noncommercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Keats's Sufferings and His Poetry

Dr. Sandeep Ojha

Author: Asstt. Professor of English, P.M.B.Gujarati Arts & Law College, Indore (M.P.) India.

I. INTRODUCTION

Our understanding of Keats's poetry would remain myopic without having a comprehensive view of his chequered life which was reduced woefully to a tragical tale of the sufferings of an unfortunate child, a loving brother separated from his siblings, an extraordinary poet persecuted by spiteful criticism, and a passionate but dejected lover consumed precociously by the dreaded Tuberculosis!, Misfortune relentlessly haunted him with a vengeance and his poems and letters are replete with examples which provide valuable clues to grievous sufferings sustained by him. James Reeves makes an appropriate observation about this very crucial subjective aspect of Keats's poetry when he writes, "His poems are very rarely autobiographical in any direct sense, as Coleridge's often were; yet we feel that his best things are informed throughout by his personal joys and sufferings."¹ This paper attempts to analyse the correlation between Keats's sufferings and his poetry.

Destiny had a host. of sufferings in store for Keats and inflicted upon him a body blow at the tender age of nine when his father Thomas Keats, who was the owner of Swan and Hoop livery stables, passed away in a riding accident in 1804. Before Keats could redeem himself from this grave shock, he received yet another jolt when his mother Frances Jennings, barely two months after her husband's death, got married to a stablekeeper named William Rawlings who transferred Keats's father's stables in his own name.

This marriage is one of the most quaint episodes in the entire range of English Literature and it gave Keats the mental agony which j'has a striking resemblance to the trauma of Hamlet's life. It would be impossible to discover such a parallel

between literature and life which Robert Gittings explains, "He instanced Hamlet, significantly since Hamlet's mother had married within two months of her husband's death, a pattern which Keats's own mother had followed! so exactly that he could actually say to a friend that the tragedy of his life was that 'he had no mother'." It was a drama in real life and for Keats reality ' become stranger than fiction. Callous Providence bestowed Keats with such sufferings during this formative phase of his life that it remained perpetually embedded in his subconscious and kept on reminding him intermittently of the hollowness, misery and brevity of the mortal existence; the manifestations of which are scattered throughout his poems and; letters one of which written to J.H.Reynolds on 3rd of May, 1818!states, "...World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and Oppression.."

Sufferings continued unabated and Keats's grandfather died just one year after his father's sad demise. His mother's second marriage terminated in separation from Rawlings and she moved from London along with her children John, George, Tom and Frances Mary to her mother's house at Edmonton as she was left without any source of sustenance. Keats's mother expired in 1810 and just four years later, in 1814, death engulfed Keats's maternal grandmother Mrs. Jennings, the lady who had looked after all the children with affectionate care. This spate of death devastated Keats's childhood and all the elders in his family were wiped out before he attained the age of twenty and the children became virtual orphans forced to subsist on the mercy of their guardian Richard Abbey who was a tea dealer. The reason why the issue of death permeates Keats's poetry is not far to seek.

After Keats's schooling and training with a local apothecary Abbey arranged his entry into Guy's Hospital at London in 1814 and Keats got his certificate on 25th of July 1816 to practice as a surgeon but poetry remained his first love and he

declined Abbey's offer to practice surgery at Tottenham in most unambiguous terms,

"I do not intend to be a surgeon. I mean to rely upon my, 4 crisis. I embraced sufferings and penury to serve the cause of poetry, which was his passion, speaks volumes about his devotion and zeal for this art.

This chosen path of poetic composition never lay smooth and it was strewn with sufferings and hardships. Keats had high hopes specially from *Endymion* which he published in May, 1818 but it invited torture as J.G. Lockhart and John Croker launched a very systematic vicious campaign against Keats in Blackwood's *Edinburgh Magazine* and *Quarterly Review* and heaped derogatory criticism which put paid to Keats's prospects of making a living from this poem. It was dubbed as 'Slipshod *Endymion*' and J.G. Lockhart addressed Keats as a representative of 'the Cockney School of Poetry'. The word cockney refers to men of low birth without any station in life.

Croker derided *Endymion* by expressing the view that it presented 'incongruous ideas' in an 'uncouth language'. They jeered at Keats by giving him this humiliating advice, "It is better and wiser thing to 'be a starved apothecary than a starved poet; so back to the shop, Mr. John, back to plasters, pills and ointment boxes."⁵

Keats was definitely overtaken by despair by such vindictive criticism.; Shelley points out that his response to it "resembled insanity"⁶ Haydon recalls that the first review of *Endymion* made him "morbid and silent"⁷. This account presents an identical situation, "(Fanny Brawne) and her sister say they have often found him, on suddenly entering the room, with that review in his hand, reading as if he would devour it - completely absorbed - absent, and drinking it in like mortal poison."⁸ In his preface to *Adonais* Shelley writes: "The savage criticism on his *Endymion*, which appeared in the *Quarterly Review*, produced the most violent effect on his susceptible mind; the agitation thus originated ended in the rupture of a blood-vessel in the lungs; a rapid consumption ensued..."⁹ Byron also held this criticism responsible for Keats's death when he wrote:

'Who kill'd John Keats ?'
'I', says the Quarterly
So savage and Tarterly;
'Twas one of my feats'¹⁰

It is beyond doubt that such attacks embittered Keats as he was a sensitive man but it would be an exaggeration to claim that this criticism was solely responsible for his death. This suffering gave him a temporary setback though it was not potent enough to humble Keats's morale for ever because he harboured an unusual instinct to make a poet of himself which is borne out by these letters written to Richard Woodhouse and George and Georgiana Keats on 27th of October and 16th of October, 1818,

"...I will assay to reach to as high a summit in poetry as the nerve bestowed upon me will suffer."¹¹

"...I think I shall be among the English poets after my death. Even as a matter of present interest the attempt to crush me in the *Quarterly*' has only brought me more into notice and it is a common expression among book men....

In another letter to J.A. Hessey written on 8th of October, 1818 he states that 'praise or blame' had only a 'momentary effect' on him. - His letter of 9th of June, 1819 written to Marry-Ann Jeffery seems to suggest that sufferings are indispensable to the process of becoming a great writer. In fact, suffering and greatness go hand in hand. He writes,

"One of the great reasons that the English have produced the finest writers in the world; is, that the English world has ill-treated them during their lives' and foster'd them after their deaths. They have in general been trampled aside into the bye paths life and seen the festering of society."¹³

Staging a come back Keats put up a brave front and worked with a renewed vigour between 21st of September, 1818 and 12th of September 1819 which Gittings addresses as 'The Living Year', probably the most productive period of Keats's life, when he composed the Great Odes which have placed him on par- with Shakespeare.

Sufferings were merciless in that they always visited Keats in hordes. Pain accentuated because separation/ sickness and bitter attacks on him coincided. It may be recalled that Keats's mother died of Tuberculosis/ the disease that was to wreak havoc on two of her children later on. It struck Keats family once again in 1817 and this time its victim was Keats's younger brother Tom. This proved to be a morbid year for Keats because his brother George, with whom he was deeply attached, decided to sail for America with his newly married wife Georgiana Wylie in search of better economic prospects; Keats nursed Tom for a while and embarked upon a pedestrian tour of Scotland. He returned on the advice of an Inverness' doctor completely fatigued only to find Tom seriously ill and End mion not being received favourably.

Besieged by sufferings, Keats resolved, to give a fitting rebuff to his critics and worked with a feverish intensity to complete The Fall of Hyperion: A vision which he had previously attempted! as Hyperion. He worked without any respite in the sick environment of the room which he shared with Tom. Uninterrupted work and history of Tuberculosis in the family made him vulnerable to this deadly disease. He remained a helpless spectator to a gradual decline in his brother's health and Tom died on 1st of December, 1818. He had watched the suffering and mortal decay from a very close angle and it finds an echo in many of his works, more predominantly in Ode to a Nightingale,

" The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray 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 to-morrow."

(Stanza III, 23-30)

Keats, face to face with the starkest reality, seems to be giving the final estimate of his sufferings vis-a-vis that of the world at large. It is a grim fact that Fanny Brawne's beauty will decay. Keats's

'heart aches' because he finds it to be a world of 'sorrow' and 'despair' where men 'groan'. According to M.R.Ridley, "Here I think is just the vivid expression of his own feeling; he knows the weariness and fever and fret; he has watched youth grow pale and! spectre-thin and die five months before; he knows the lustrous [eyes of beauty and guesses that even the barren ecstasy of pining at them cannot be hxs beyond tomorrow."¹⁴

These sufferings have also been expressed in other Great odes as we see in 'Ode on a Grecian urn' where Keats refers to 'a burning forehead and a parching tongue' and talks of 'a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd'. The causes for the inclusion of this theme of suffering in these odes are very obvious. Kenneth Muir writes that in the weeks before the composition of the odes Keats, "...was filled with a desire to find a meaning in human suffering so that, his own and that of others could in some way be justified."¹⁵

The Great Odes give a very special message that beauty can not be enjoyed in isolation and there has to strike a chord between beauty on the one hand and reality of human life on the other. Keats expands the realm of his philosophy to include not only joys of life but also pain and sufferings. In the final analysis of the concept of beauty and truth and its application to life, Keats emerges to be a humanist and believer that sufferings are writ large on human life. Douglas Bush has paid a serious attention to this aspect of Keats's doctrine and makes a beautiful observation, "In a world of [inexplicable mystery and pain, the experience of beauty is one sure) revelation of reality; beauty lives in particular, and these pass, but they attest a principal, a unity, behind them. And if beauty is reality, the converse is likewise true, that reality, the reality of intense human experience, of suffering, can also yield beauty, in itself and in art."¹⁶

Keats is conscious of both art for the sake of art and art for the sake of life. He wants to reconcile poetry and life and identifies beauty with truth as well as reality. To Keats beauty, joy and ecstasy are just one step in the progressive journey of human soul to be made finally aware regarding strife of

human hearts. This is what he writes in *Sleep and Poetry*:

"And can I ever bid these joys farewell?
Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,
Where I may find the agonies, the strife
of human hearts: for lo! I see afar.

(122-25)

It establishes that Keats is very seriously occupied with the issue of pain and suffering in human life. He is very akin to Wordsworth who proclaimed in *Tintern Abbey* that he wanted to listen in his poetry 'the still, sad music of humanity';¹ Likewise, Shelley considers 'sweetest songs' to be those which tell of our 'saddest thoughts'. Keats strongly advocates that agonies of life must find an expression in poetry. Graham Hough has drawn attention to this aspect, "This is the earliest statement of the problem that haunts Keats throughout his short life -- the attempt to reconcile the loveliness of the world with its transience, its pleasures with pain, the longing to enjoy the beautiful with the suspicion that it can not be long enjoyed unless much that is not beautiful is faced.

Life has to be accepted in totality and the bright and the bleak, pain and pleasure, agony and ecstasy all co-exist. This realisation also marks Keats's gradual journey towards a humanistic outlook which makes him desirous of doing something good for the humanity which he expresses in his letters to John Taylor on 24th of April, 1818 and Richard Woodhouse on 27th of October, 1818,

"I find there is no worthy pursuit but the idea of doing some good for the world."¹⁸ and "I am ambitious of doing the world some good."¹⁹

Keats believes that the poet has a very special role to perform and this has been eloquently conveyed in *The Fall of Hyperion: A Vision* in which under the spell of a vision Keats finds himself in a lush garden and drinks a 'transparent juice' which awakens him to the tragic reality of life. He feels that poet can comfort humanity because he is a 'sage', 'humanist', and 'physician to all men' who 'pours out a balm upon the world'. The poem is full of expressions like 'gasping with despair', 'pale

immortal death', 'weak mortality', 'unchanging gloom', 'burning brain', 'dire events', 'giant agony of the world', 'human sorrow', 'immortal sickness'; and life becoming 'more gaunt and ghostly'. These all are integral to life. Instead of escaping from them one must participate creatively in this flux of life.

A similar stream runs in *Endymion* which represents Keats's search for, ideal beauty but he never becomes oblivious of sufferings and underlying realities. To him good poetry is like a friend 'to sooth the cares' of man and the aim of poetry is to explore the mystery of human existence. Life is a tale of 'despondence' and 'gloomy days', 'unhealthy and over-darkened ways', 'the bitterness of love', and 'The disappointment, the anxiety'. Keats writes,

'...though no great ministering reason sorts
Out the dark mysteries of human souls
To clear conceiving; yet there ever rolls
A vast idea before me, and I glean
Therefrom my liberty; thence too I've seen
The end and aim of Poesy.

(II, 288-93)

and,

Pleasure is oft a visitant; but pain
Clings cruelly to us, like the gnawing sloth
On the deer's tender haunches.

and

Endymion: woe! woe! is grief contain'd
In the deeps of pleasure, my sole life?

(II, 823-24)

Similarly, in the letters of the spring of 1819 he suggests that one cannot escape from sufferings. In a letter written to George and Georgiana Keats in April, 1819 he writes that man "...is destined to hardships and disquietude of some kind or other..." and this world is "A place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways"²¹ Among his most important letters outlining Keats's outlook is this and /written to George and Georgiana Keats on 19th of March, 1819 when he declares,

"This is the world— thus we cannot expect to give way many hours to 'pleasure -- Circumstances are like Clouds continually gathering j and bursting -- while we are laughing the seed of some trouble is put into the wide arable land of events — while we are laughing it sprouts is (for it) grows and suddenly bears a poison fruit which we must pluck."²²

Seeds of more trouble were sprouting for Keats. Keats's tuberculosis, his affair with Fanny Brawne and failure to get consummation in love are the last painful happenings which caused him a great deal of physical and mental suffering. Fanny and Keats got acquainted at Browne's house where she lived as a tenant with in her widow mother and their love deepened. Despite mild resistance from Fanny's mother they got unofficially engaged in May, 1819 and later on officially in October, 1819. As the luck would have it, Keats's health started declining and he suffered two attack of the haemorrhage of lungs on 3rd of February, and 22nd of June, 1820. On both these occasions he was looked after by Fanny but he could foresee that separation from her was imminent. What he feared most occurred at last and it became practically impossible for him to with stand? the cold climate and docotrs advised him to sail to a warmer pace. Keats released Fanny from engagement and what suffering^ this phase of separation gave Keats is contained in these letters wllitten to her in May, June and August, 1820:

"Past exprience connected with the fact of my long separation from you gives me agonies which are scarcely to be talked of....I cannot live without you."²³

"I long to believe in immortality I shall never be ab(le) to bid you an entire farewell.... I wish to live with you for ever.... I shall feel so much pain in parting with you again."²⁴

"I feel it almost impossible to go to Italy -- the fact is cannot leave you A person in health as you are can have no conception of the horrors that nerves and a temper like mine to through..... I do not think my health will improve while I am separated from you." ²⁵

Keats had to separate from Fanny and Keats had to separate from Fanny and sailed for Italy but his health never improved and he died on 23rd of February 1821.

Keats's life is a saga of suffering and his valiant struggle to make a | poet of himself. He succumbed to the ultimate conquerer death in tlhe finale of the drama of his painful life that eventually liberated him from a streak of sufferings which remained his most faithful companion from his early childhood till he breathed his last. He .refused to be cowed down by any atrocity of circumstances and displayed rare perserverance to remain dedicated to his artistic pursuit. C.W.Dilke, the editor of Athenaeum, wrote in 1832 that Keats "...had a resolution, not only physical but moral, greater than any man we ever knew; it was unshakable by everything but his affections."²⁶

Every suffering served to whet his appetite for poetry wheah became one with his existence. Keats's Herculean endeavour exemplifies his heroic courage against most trying circumstances and shatters the prevalent myth that he was a sensitive weakling. It is amazing that he composed 150 poems and wrote 300 letters outlining his aesthetics in a short span of just three years that too in the face of severe mental and physical sufferings. It is a laudable feat by any literary" standards and F.R. Leavis rightly regards him as 'a hero and martyr of poetry.'

It will be naive-to regard Keats only as a poet of beauty or label him as an escapist which he is not because Keats pick's up the gauntlet and confronts every odd that comes his way. In fact, Keats is an aesthete turned humanist in whose poetry there is an undercurrent of the awareness of human sufferings about which he expresses a grave concern transcending his desire to take a delight in sensuoujs experiences. MacLeish points out that Keats "was a great poet precisely in the most human sense." He adds: "His humanity is at *oiice so* broad that it. can be compared only with Shakespeare's...."²⁸

It is, therefore, no surprise that every stroke of genius in Keats shares some intimate or distant correlation with his sufferings? which have thus

elevated his poetry to a higher and philosophical plain and refined him into an immortal 'poet-humanist'.

REFERENCES

1. Reeves, James. A Short History of English Poetry: 1340-1940, (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., first pub.in 1961, quoted from 1964 edition), p.169.
2. John Keats: Poems ed.Gerald Bullett. (London: Everyman's Library, first pub.in 1906, quoted from 1982 edition), p.ix.
3. Letters of John Keats ed.Robert Gittings. (London:Oxford University Press, 1970), p.95. All letters quoted subsequently are from this edition and only page numbers will be given in references to follow.
4. Blunden,- Edmund. John Keats (London: Longman's, Green & Co., 1950), p. 14.
5. Evans, I, for. A Short History of English Literature (Harmondsworth: Penguin iBooks Ltd., first pub.in 1940, quoted from 1978 edition), ' p.91.
6. Keats: The Critical Heritage ed. G.M. Matthews. (Bombay: Vikas Publications, 1971), p.17.
7. Ibid., p.17
8. Ibid. , p. 17
9. Inglis, Fred. Literature in Perspective: Keats (London: Evans Brothers Limited, first pub. in 1966, quoted from 1969 edition), p. 4 4 .
10. Richardson, Joanna. The Everlasting Spell: A Study of Keats and His Friends (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963), p.157.
11. Gitting's, p.158.
12. Ibid. , ip. 161
13. Ibid., pp.258-59
14. Ridley,1 M.R. Keats's Craftsmanship: A Study in Poetic Development (London!: Methuen & Co.Ltd., first pub.in 1964, quoted from 1965 edition), p.220.
15. Fraser,IG.S., ed. Keats: Odes (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., first pub.in 1971, quoted, from 1985 edition), p.223.
16. Abrams, M.H. ed. English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism (London: Oxford University Press, first edition pub. In 75, quoted from 1980 edition), p.335.
17. Hough, Graham. The Romantic Poets (London: Arrow Books Ltd., first pub. in 1958, quoted from 1964 edition), p.162.
18. GittingS, p.88
19. Ibid., p.158
20. Ibid., p.249
21. Ibid., p.250
22. Ibid., p.228
23. Ibid., pp.376-77
24. Ibid., p.379 25
25. Ibid., P.385
26. Matthewl, G.M., ed. Keats: The Critical Heritage (Bombay: Vikas Publications, 1971), p.3.
27. MacLeish, Archibald. Poetry and Experience (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Lid., 1965), p.163.
28. Ibid., 41).163.



Read more and apply for membership here:
<https://journalspress.com/journals/membership>





GO GREEN AND HELP
SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT

JOURNAL AVAILABLE IN

PRINTED VERSION, INTERACTIVE PDFS, EPUBS, EBOOKS, INDEXABLE DOCUMENTS AND THE AUTHOR MANAGED DYNAMIC LIVE WEB PAGE ARTICLES, LATEX, PDFS, RESTRUCTURED TEXT, TEXTILE, HTML, DOCBOOK, MEDIAWIKI MARKUP, TWIKI MARKUP, OPML, EMACS ORG-MODE & OTHER



SCAN TO KNOW MORE

support@journalspress.com
www.journalspress.com

 *THIS JOURNAL SUPPORT AUGMENTED REALITY APPS AND SOFTWARES