

DEVELOPMENT OF THOUGHT IN JOHN KEATS' SERIES OF ODES

Mallika Singh

*Comparative Indian Literature Scholar, Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary
Studies, University of Delhi, India*

ABSTRACT

Much has been researched and written on one of the most renowned Romantic poets, John Keats' individual odes in his series of six odes. It is also significant to dwell on the gradual development in the thought process of the poet which is evident as one journeys chronologically along the odes. The paper postulates that John Keats has matured in terms of calmly accepting things as they are, in a state of confusion and uncertainty, by the time he writes the last in this series 'Ode to Autumn.' From the subjective poet persona who chases after answers, he evolves as an objective being admiring the beauty of state of things. His deep sense of individuality is discernible in his previous odes, whereas, towards the last ones, he has happily negated himself, quite like many other great literary figures of the likes of William Shakespeare. From a state of flux arises tranquility. Had it not been for the testing times and a restless quest for truth, peace would never have perched upon the poet. The odes must be studied for their own sake but one can also draw a bigger lesson for living life from those. Beginning from an urge to escape, the poet gradually succeeds in braving and gracefully living with absurdities. The paper discusses these odes as a cohesive whole, underlining the development of thought with each of the series of odes. This series of odes is exemplary of progression in one's thoughts and is more enriching when read as a complete organic whole, rather than being read as individual units.

KEYWORDS: *Escape, Evolution, Calm, Development, Flux, Pain, Truth*

Article History

Received: 15 Oct 2022 | **Revised:** 15 Oct 2022 | **Accepted:** 17 Nov 2022

INTRODUCTION

In the spring months of 1819, after the completion of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Keats was chiefly engaged in the composition of the unique odes which have no parallel and are a class by themselves. John Keats composed six odes, which are among his most famous and well-regarded poems. Keats wrote the first five poems, "Ode on a Grecian Urn", "Ode on Indolence", "Ode on Melancholy", "Ode to a Nightingale", and "Ode to Psyche" in quick succession during the spring, and he composed "To Autumn" in September. Robert Bridges praising the odes says, "Had Keats left us only his odes, his rank among the poets would not be lower than it is, for they have stood apart in literature. These odes are marked by a 'logical evolution of thought.' They are written in an intense strain but are meditative and brooding. He composed six immortal odes. 'Ode to a Nightingale' and 'Ode on Melancholy' are based on his own moods, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and 'Ode to Psyche' are inspired by ancient Greek sculpture and mythology and 'Ode on Indolence' is based on a mood of lethargy and languor. Followed by these spring odes, 'Ode to Autumn' composed in September 1819, is believed to be the most perfect in execution.

A remarkable development of the poet's thought is evident in these odes. Initially there is an exhibition of truth and pain, leading to questions and finding means to escape. It is followed by a calm acceptance of truth and pain, and consequently comes the realization of the various contradictory fluxes of life. Finally, the poet combats the world of harsh realities, celebrating symbols of negativity. He looks at symbols of mortality as symbols of beauty and beauty for him becomes a symbol of permanence, a source of solace and pleasure. It is this threefold development that lends immortality to these odes and that carves a special niche for these odes in the history of English Literature.

Some of the most analysed in English literature, these odes are replete with sensual imagery, a distinctive feature of the Romantic Poetry. Keats was one of the main figures of the second generation of English Romantic poets along with Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, despite his work having been in publication for only four years before his death. Although his poems were not generally well received by critics during his lifetime, his reputation grew after his death, and by the end of the 19th century, he had become one of the most beloved of all English poets. Not only that, he had a significant influence on a diverse range of poets and writers.

Of the great Romantic poets, Keats' life was the shortest and yet he had the keenest sense of himself as a developing artist. All his greatest works were accomplished within the incredibly brief span of one year- between his 23rd and 24th birthdays. Helen Vendler, a leading critic, considers development rather than achievement to be the hallmark of Keats' *annus mirabilis*. Each of the odes, she contends, should be read as a part of a larger structure, culminating in Keats' masterpiece 'Ode to Autumn.'

In 'Ode to Nightingale' and 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' which John Keats attempts to write first, truth and pain become predominant features. He questions and finds means to escape. The Nightingale ode is extremely subjective. The tendency to lapse away into a kind of swoon, the impulse to give up the battle by seeking oblivion dominates the opening, "My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains." This painful lethargy is not caused by jealousy of the nightingale's happiness but by an excessive delight in the bird's song of approaching summer. He longs for wine, expressing a desire for oblivion, a yearning to "fade away into the forest dim." He wishes to forget the "weariness, the fever and the fret of human existence." He surges ahead in his flight to the world of nightingale and reaches there then not with the help of wine, but with poetic imagination instead. The final lines of the poem "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music, Do I wake or sleep?" point out to his deliberate ambiguity. The reason is that he is striving towards a satisfying conception of permanence. The ode is about one of the fundamental concerns of nature of human existence. Keats sets up the nightingale as a symbol of permanence and immortality.

Similarly, in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' Keats establishes the urn, addressed as 'Cold Pastoral,' as a symbol of permanence. He brings to the fore the fact that though "When old age this generation waste," it will be replaced by another generation of suffering human beings, the urn "shall remain midst of other woe" and will continue to exist as an unchanging thing of beauty in the midst of changing woes of rising and passing generations. The urn has been projected as "unravished bride of quietness" and "foster child of silence and slow time" as these metaphors have the effect of stressing the calm, non-human purity and detachment of the urn. There are subsequent suggestions of the urn's remoteness from what the poet regards as impure, unrewarding, and distressing in the human lot. But the urn despite its beauty is non-human. This work of art may be exquisitely beautiful and satisfying as life can rarely, if ever be, but life, despite its woes, has its warmth that creeps into poet's contemplation of the marble figures. The last lines "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all ye know on Earth, and all ye need to know" are significant in the sense that momentarily, the poet can accept the

proposition- a natural development of his earlier aphorisms- that beauty is an image of truth and therefore if life is seen as a whole, the disagreeables will evaporate as they do in a great work of art. The poem is objective and neutral and unlike 'Ode to a Nightingale' has no element of uncertainty.

In 'Ode to Psyche,' the myth of Psyche provides the poet with a framework to work out the substance of poetry as he would like it to be. He nostalgically remembers the Hellenic days when the subject of poetry was the mystery of and exploration of human nature. That is missing now and he promises to Psyche to create poetry which will celebrate human love indistinguishable from Nature. Psyche is the Greek word for 'soul,' so the love story of Cupid and Psyche is also an allegorical account of how the human soul achieved immortality. The soul is discovered by love, suffers because of its own disobedience, and is eventually reunited with love and given eternal life. Psyche also means a butterfly, so represents the lightness of the soul as it rises from the body after death. Poetic imagination fails him in 'Ode to a Nightingale' but in 'Ode to Psyche,' it crowns him with success because he himself becomes creator of temple for Psyche in some untrodden place.

Thereafter, the poet calmly accepts all he has questioned earlier. There is peace and calm and most significantly he realizes the various contrary fluxes of human life- the coexistence of pain and joy, beauty, and ugliness. In 'Ode on Indolence' the poet feels "Pain heed no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower". Through the passage of the earlier odes, he has gained a level of maturity and is in a state of tranquility. There is a marked development in his thought, so much so, that he lets go of love, ambition, and poetry all alike. He emphasizes towards the end of the ode "Vanish ye Phantoms! From my idle spright."

'Ode on Melancholy' similarly depicts advancement in the thought of the poet. The poem opens with an urgent, emphatic command not to seek oblivion or resort to poison like in 'Ode to a Nightingale,' and not to indulge in thoughts of death as happens in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' in which he addresses the urn. Keats in this ode does not directly address Melancholy, rather makes a plea to an unnamed listener. This ode provides an insight into the complexities working and resolving in the mind of the poet. Keats states in the final paradox in this ode that only the man who is capable of experiencing intense happiness, the man "whose strenuous tongue can burst joy's grape against his palate fine" can actually see Melancholy and "be among her cloudy trophies hung". Closely linked as it is to the 'Ode to a Nightingale' and 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' this ode differs from each of the other two in tone. It is less personal than the Nightingale ode and more didactic than 'Ode on a Grecian Urn.' The 'I' persona that is so prominent in the Nightingale Ode goes completely missing here, making this ode totally objective. Robin Mayhood in his book 'John Keats' (1967) comments that 'Ode on Melancholy' represents a triumph of character and intelligence.

Finally, John Keats has evolved to celebrate the symbols of negativity. He looks at symbols of mortality as symbols of beauty. Beauty becomes a symbol of permanence. 'Ode to Autumn' becomes Keats' supreme triumph in the handling of poetic resources. This ode goes farther than the other odes. Here impermanence is accepted without the least trace of sadness, since Keats is able to see it as part of a larger and richer permanence. In the final stanza, the remembered sounds of springs are dismissed in favour of the distinctive music of autumn. The past is thus recalled but regrets for departed Spring are dismissed as merely vain, as autumn has its own music. "Where are the songs of spring? Aye, where are they? / Think not of them, thou hast thy music too."

This ode is a culmination of all the previous odes. Helen Vendler's reading of 'Ode to Autumn' is based upon her conviction that the previous odes all lead up to it. She affirms that at last in 'Autumn' Keats finds a figure and a season personifying change. By correctly "stationing" the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of the natural scene, he finally does

what he knew could be done in 'Melancholy' - he speaks of truth in the language of sensation and beauty.

Through the trajectory of these odes, Keats achieved what he himself termed as negative capability, and described as a writer's ability, "which Shakespeare possessed so enormously" to accept "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." It is the objective capacity of the greatest writers to negate themselves, in order to pursue a vision of artistic beauty even when it leads them into intellectual confusion and uncertainty, as opposed to a preference for philosophical certainty over artistic beauty. Downer correctly points out "In the odes, he is at his best, and they will live as long as English poetry is read."

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