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KEATS AS A POET OF SENSATIONS: SENSUOUSNESS IN KEATS'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT



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Poetry is an art that originates from sense impressions. Sense impressions are the centre of poetic process and most of the poets are more or less sensuous. It is what the poet sees and hears that excites his emotions and imagination. The emotional and imaginative reaction to these sense impressions generates poetry. Romantic poetry is characterized by heightened sensibility and imagination. It creates the kind of beauty, which is strange, mysterious, and uncommon and which appeal to the senses. Among all the romantic poets, Keats remains incomparable for the sensuous impact of his poetry. John Keats is one of the most typical representatives of romantic poetry. He was the youngest of the romanticists. Even though he inherited some of the qualities of his contemporaries, he had his own distinctive style. Keats poetry is rich in freshness, sensuousness, and suggestiveness and his vision of beauty has the finest essence of what the senses gather from his environment.

The term 'sensuous' usually refers to the enjoyment and delights borrowed from the senses. Sensuousness is that quality which is derived from five senses- sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. It is a way of perception through five senses. A sensuous poet uses those word pictures that help the reader to understand the sights and sounds expressed or suggested in a poem. John Keats is best known for his use of such images that appeal to human senses. The poetry of Keats is characterized by the use of sensuous language. Keats is a worshipper of beauty and apprehends beauty everywhere. It is his senses that first reveal to him the beauty of things. All his works, including his great odes contain rich sensuous appeal. The richness of Keats language widely influenced poetry throughout the nineteenth century.

Key Words: John Keats, Sensuousness, Sense Images

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O, for a life of Sensations rather than of
Thoughts! (Keats's letter to Bailey, 22
November 1817)

"Poetry, according to Milton's famous
saying, should be 'simple, sensuous, impassioned.'

No one can question the eminency, in Keats's poetry, of the quality of sensuousness." (Critical Introduction by Matthew Arnold-
<http://www.bartleby.com/337/1060.html>).
Sensuousness is the unparalleled quality of Keats's

poetic genius. Keats is known as the most sensuous of the English poets. Sensuousness is a quality in poetry, which affects the senses such as hearing, sight touch, smell and taste. Sensuous poetry usually does not present ideas and philosophical thoughts. It gives delight to senses, appeals to our eyes by presenting beautiful and colourful word pictures, delights our ears by its metrical music and musical sounds, and incites our nose by arousing sense of smell and so on.

Keats is a poet of sensations. His thought is encompassed in sensuousness. He is more a poet of senses than a poet of contemplation. The nucleus of Keats's poetry itself is sensuousness. The sense perceptions of Keats are quick and alert and he has a rare gift of communicating these perceptions by concrete sound imagery. It is through these sense perceptions that Keats communicated the beauty of things, the beauty of universe from the stars to the flowers of the woods. Keats's pictorial sense is not only suggestive but also is full of artistic detail. Every stanza and every line is replete with sensuous beauty. No other poet except Shakespeare could show such a mastery of language and felicity of sounds. His effectiveness lies in the exercise of five senses.

Keats's imagery ranges among all our physical sensations: sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell, temperature, hunger, thirst, sexuality, movement etc.. . Keats repeatedly combines different senses in one image, and attributes the traits of one sense to another, a practice called synesthesia. Richard H. Fogle calls these images the product of his "unrivaled ability to absorb, sympathize with, and humanize natural objects". (<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=>) Keats's sensuous verse has a content which may make a strong appeal to the senses and employs techniques which simultaneously exploits all aspects of language. The sensation of living and the experience of poetry are inseparable for Keats. His poetry is particularly successful at depicting reality and his poetic language displays a kind of solidarity or concreteness, which is capable of convincing the readers of the reality that it communicates.

As Garrod points out, "not in political thinking, nor in tears given to human suffering, but

in something which, though it seems easier,... far harder, lies Keats's real effectiveness; in the exercise, I mean, of the five senses." It is apparent that Keats valued sensations over a methodical quest for truth. He felt it to be immediate and more accurate than any other values of writing poetry. In one of his letters to Bailey, he says: For it has come auxiliary to another favourite speculation of mine that we shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we call happiness on earth repeated on a finer tone. And yet such a fate can only benefit those who delight in sensation... (<http://www.john-keats.com/briefe/221117.htm>)

In his earlier poems, Keats disclosed himself as a hedonist intent on feasting his senses. Thus, poetry to Keats was not a spiritual vision as in Wordsworth, nor an emancipating vision as in Shelley, but a joy wrought out of sensations. His senses were transfigured by imagination, which made the 'loveliness of the real world still lovelier.'(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/john-keats>)

Thus, Keats is a poet of senses and their delights. The odes, which represent the greatest poetic achievement of Keats, are full of sensuous imagery. No one can question the quality of sensuousness in his poetry as it obviously works by encouraging us to perceive, to feel vivid and distinct sense impressions. For example,

"I cannot see what flowers are at my feet
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs'

.....

The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves."

These are the lines from *Ode to a Nightingale*. In these lines, we get the senses of sight, touch and smell. By the end of the verse, with the evocation of 'the coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine/the murmurous haunt of flies', the senses of taste and hearing have also been incorporated. In this ode, Keats seems presenting a personal experience for general recognition. Under the spell of nightingale and by means of the imagery of flowers, the poet is able to contemplate his thoughts with serenity.

In the second stanza of this ode, there is a description of the gustatory sensation of drinking wine. There are references to the visual and auditory senses too. The poet also paints the picture of a drunken whose mouth is purple stained because of the red wine he has drunk:

"With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth;"

Some other examples of sensuous imagery in the ode: Sense of hearing - The music of the nightingale produces pangs of pain in the poet's heart.

"The voice I hear this passing night was
heard
In ancient days, by emperor and clown."

Sense of taste - Keats describes different kind of wine and the idea of their intoxication as;

"O for a beaker full of warn South
Full of the tree of blushing Hippocrene
With beaded bubbles winking at the brain."
Sense of smell

In the ode, when the poet mentions about the flowers, he experiences a mingled perfume of many flowers. He explains this in the lines:

"I cannot see what flowers are at my feet'
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the
boughs
But in embalmed darkness, guess each
sweet."

The sensuous images used by Keats have frequently been regarded as expressive of certain characteristics of author's personality or philosophy of life. Some of the hostile critics of Keats's poetry suggested that the sensuousness in his poetry is a kind of vice or moral weakness and it is evidently inferior to intellectual abstraction, moral wisdom and spiritual enlightenment. But it is evident that the sensuous quality in his works is a legitimate poetic medium, directing the poetic imagination towards the pursuit of truth. This is truly evident in the odes like *Ode to the Autumn* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

Keats *Ode to Autumn* is a perfect embodiment of concrete, sensuous experience. The poem presents a detailed description of the season with all its variety and richness.

"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-eves run;

.....
.....

Until they think warm days will never
cease, For summer has o'er-brimm'd their
clammy cells"

The poem begins with the wonderful description of the season. When we read the first stanza, we get a sensuous imagery of stillness and an attained fulfillment. A sense of touch comes to our mind and can imagine a symphony of colours. The *Ode to Autumn* is a clear illustration of Keats's sensuous language.

Another example of his sensuous style is his most beloved and immortal poem, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

"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:

.....
.....

Heard melodies are sweet, but those
unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play
on;"

The urn itself is described as a 'sylvan historian', its tale 'flowery' and its legend 'leaf fringed'. The images of trees, lovers and song are drawn in the first stanza itself. In the lines, 'heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter', the visual language has achieved more perfect realization of human experience reconciling the nostalgia of morality with the beauty of the eternal. The famous lines which closes the ode, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty...' is often considered as the statement of Keats's personal philosophy. More than the sensuous effect in these lines, there is an emotional communication and a blend of ideology, which together communicates the objective truth of the poem.

In the *Ode to Psyche*, we have the picture of Cupid and Psyche lying in an embrace in deep grass in the midst of flowers of varied colours. This evokes a sense of sight in anyone who go through the lines:

"Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers fragrant-eyed,
Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian"

Ode on Melancholy describes the poet's perception of melancholy through a lyric discourse between the poet and the reader. Along with the introduction to ancient Grecian characters and ideals, the beginning of the poem brings pictures of objects of death and misery.

"Though you should build a bark of dead men's bones,

.....
.....

To fill it out, blood-stained and aghast;
Although your rudder be a dragon's tail"

In *Ode on Indolence*, the speaker describes a vision he had one morning of three strange figures wearing white robes and "placid sandals". The figures passed by in profile, and the speaker describes their passing by comparing them to figures carved into the side of a marble urn, or vase. The description has a very sensuous effect.

"One morn before me were three figures seen,
With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced;
And one behind the other stepp'd serene,
In placid sandals, and in white robes graced;
They pass'd, like figures on a marble urn
When shifted round to see the other side;"

Not only in the odes but in the longer poems of Keats also we can find the use of sensuous imagery. For example, the description of the dainties in the chapel in '*The Eve of St. Agnes*'. Here we get a sense of touch. The readers can also experience the bitter cold explained in these lines.

"St. Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was! The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;
The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:"

Another example is the description of the disembodied delight of sweet odour in '*Isabella*' as in the lines:

"Then in a silken scarf, - sweet with the dews
Of precious flowers pluck'd in Araby,
And divine liquids come with odorous ooze
Through the cold serpent pipe refreshfully,
- She wrapp'd it up;"

Again, in '*Lamia*', we get a sense of sight from the description of Lamia as a serpent.

"She was a gordian shape of dazzling hue,
Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue;
Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard,
.....
Dissolv'd, or brighter shone, or interwreathed

.....
Their lustres with the gloomier tapestries"

Keats is a painter of words. In a few words, he presents a concrete and solid picture of sensuous beauty in the poem '*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*'

"I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful—a faery's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild."

Thus, Keats is a poet of sensations. His thoughts are enclosed in sensuousness and this sensuousness is linked to the great pictorial quality of his poetic art in which he equals the excellence of Spencer. Keats is a mystic of senses. He sought to reveal the ultimate truth of the universe through aesthetic sensations and not through philosophical thoughts. As he became a mature poet, Keats began to see not only the beauty of things but also their truth. The sensuousness of Keats's poetic language is a heroic attempt to stabilize and appreciate an ultimately unattainable reality. That is why Keats's poetic genius is unparalleled for all ages.

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