

## Brief Evaluation of the Element of Sensuousness in John Keats' Poems

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### Abstract

John Keats has been considered the epitome of what is called the sensuous poetry, but this should never be assumed that his poems are anywhere or any sense any less aesthetic or could be even called divine to their core. This supernova of English literature though lived a very short life but left enough content for the coming centuries to contemplate and learn the deep sense of beauty from his perception. Though his poems are largely occupied with feminine beauty but one never feels any sense of vulgarity in his expressions, for him, 'a thing of beauty is a joy forever.' The due credit must be given to the genius of Keats that he is the only of his kind who could make most sensual imagery into sensuous one.

**Keywords:** Sensuous, abundant, sensual, beauty, love, feeling

Keats is primarily a sensuous poet. Sensuousness is a paramount bias of his genius. Sensuousness is the poet's responsiveness to the impressions of external nature on his mind through the sense organs of sight, smell, touch and sound. Keats reveals the beauty of the world and actually experiences even the most abstract things, through his senses. He does not just admire beauty, but feels it and his poetry is so abundant with this feeling and sensuousness that all who read it cannot miss the pleasure.

Keats delights and luxuriates in all those objects which please the senses. If he saw a landscape, he revealed in the colors, if he heard a song, he got lost in the music and rhyme, if he saw flowers; he drowned himself in their fragrance. Hence, he actually felt all aspects of beauty with his senses. Only a poet of such magnificent imagination can feel and at the same time express it so beautifully and perfectly.

All romantic poets are bound to be sensuous, but Keats poetry is hardly anything else but sensuous. All his senses are always awake to catch and feel every kind of beauty around him. Keats as a poet is abundantly and enchantingly sensuous; the question with some people will be, whether he is anything also. There is the exclamation in one of his letters 'For a life of sensations rather than of thoughts'. There is the thesis in another that with a great poet the sense of beauty overcomes every other consideration. But whatever the critics and reviewers might have to say, his poetry has rarely been equaled in descriptions of beauty which can be perceived by the senses, and to call Keats a more sensualist would be wrong.

The beauty of Keats poetry lies in the fact that the aim of his poetry, is to please and provide pleasure, other than this, there is no external design. Shelley used his poetry for political aims, Wordsworth also preached through his poetry, but Keats' poetry did not preach any politics, religion or philosophy. Not in political thinking, nor in tears given to human suffering, but in something, which, though it seems easier, is, in fact, far harder, lies Keats' real effectiveness in the exercise of the five senses. Keats had the ability to feel, more than other people. He revealed the physical enjoyment of all sensory delight, and his poetry abounds in descriptions of all types of sensuous experiences. His poetry is marked by an impassioned sensuous contemplation of the concrete world, enjoyed in self contained, timeless moments; in his poetry the moments become eternal.

A sensuous apprehension and appreciation of life and its beauty is the key – note of Keats' poetry. Every feeling, every thought is transmuted by him into a picture which is rich in sensuous appeal. His sensuousness is not limited or confined to one or two senses only; all his five senses collaborate and work in union, and lead to this utmost happiness. In his concreteness of imagery, conception and the founded felicity of diction, he is the least abstract among all the romantic poets.

Sensuousness is the most conspicuous quality of Keats' poetry. All his senses were always alert and responded quickly to all kinds of beauty. Sensuous beauty and meditation on sensuous beauty was the central experience of his life. Comparing

Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats from the point of view of sense perception, H. W. Garrod writes, "In Wordsworth 'the life of sensation' hardly goes beyond eyes and ears. Coleridge and Keats alone of the poets of the Romantic Revival, have five senses; and all the five operate everywhere across their poetry" <sup>(1)</sup>

In Keats it is not the surrender of the sense or escapism about the world, but a conscious or sub-conscious awakening as one sees in 'Ode to a Nightingale' or even in the last stanza of 'Ode to Autumn'. Therefore, professor Garrod considers Keats more than Coleridge, as the greatest and the purest expositor of the romantic ideal, perhaps because of Keats' sensuous penetration into the mystery of human suffering very close to the Shakespearean world.

Commenting on Keats' power of sensuous perception in his odes, Peter Westland, "Perhaps his most notable divergence, as a poet, from his contemporary Shelley, is that he elects, as a rule, to deal with sensations rather than ideas, with concrete life than with abstract imaginings-sight and hearing respond to ideas; touch to sensations. The Metaphysical power that charges with intellectual fire the visions of Shelley is outside his scope." <sup>(2)</sup> Many passages can easily be cited from his poetry which is rich in sensuous appeal. The following lines from 'The Eve of St. Agnes' give the very sense of touch:

"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." <sup>(3)</sup>

Further down in 'The Eve of St. Agnes', the description of the dainties is very vivid and real. It shows the relish in the delicious things which give pleasure to the senses of smell and taste:

"While he from forth the closet brought a heap,  
Of candid apple, quince, quince, and plum, and gourd;  
With jellies soother than the creamy curb,  
And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon." <sup>(4)</sup>

Some of his best descriptions are on the sensuous beauty of his beloved. There is the touch of the naked skin in many of his best passages. He is the poet of:

"Light feet, dark violet eyes, and parted hair,  
Soft dimpled hands, white neck and creamy breast',  
He wants to lie down:  
"Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,  
To feel forever its soft fall and swell,  
Awake forever in a sweet unrest,  
Still, still to hear her tender – taken breath,  
And to live ever.....or else swoon to death." <sup>(5)</sup>

In the 'Eve of St. Agnes', the stanzas describing Madeline's undressing in sensuous but not at all vulgar. This description communicates the very sensation of flesh:

"Anon his heart reviews; her vespers done,  
Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;  
Unclasps her worn jewels one by one;  
Loosens her fragrant bodice; by degrees,  
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees;

Half – hidden, like a mermaid in sea weed.”<sup>(6)</sup>

The odes, which are his highest achievements, are also full of sensuous pictures, in the ‘Ode to Psyche’. The poet weaves the exquisite natural scenery with the beautiful myth of Cupid and Psyche. The ode is full of descriptions showing his brilliant imagery and his love of beauty. The poem opens with the delightfully sensuous picture of Psyche and Cupid, lying in an embrace in the deep grass, in the mist of flowers of varied colors:

“They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass,  
Their arms embraced, and their pinions too;  
Their lips touch’s not, but hand not bidding adieu,  
As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber,  
And ready still past kisses to outnumber,  
At tender eye-dawn of aureorean love.”<sup>(7)</sup>

The sexual imagery is worked out in the closing line of the poem also, where the poet says that the temple of Psyche in his mind will have a window; open at night, to ‘let the war love in’.

Keats sensuousness is not merely, confined to the theme of love, nor is it in any way light and frivolous. It is serious, comprehensive and full blooded. In some of his finest poems he succeeds in communicating the very feelings of lethargy, physical languor, fatigue and dullness. In the Ode to Nightingale, he describes the feeling of fatigue and intoxication produced by the enchanting song of the Nightingale:

“My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains,  
My sense, though of hemlock I had drunk,  
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains,  
One minute past, and Lathe-wards had sunk.”<sup>(8)</sup>

He wishes to prolong this sensation by drinking a cup of wine which has been “Cool’d a long age in the deep-delved earth”, he says.....:

“..... A beaker full of the warm south,  
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,  
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,  
And purple stained mouth.”<sup>(9)</sup>

Further down in the poem, the poet creates a picture of fragrant night. The atmosphere is heady with the fragrance of the flowers, fruits and grass. But his sense of smell is so acute that he can smell each flower and plant:

“I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the bough,  
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet,  
Wherewith the seasonable month endows,  
The grass, the ticket, and the fruit tree wild.”<sup>(10)</sup>

In the ‘Ode to a Grecian Urn’, the poet has painted full concrete and sensuous images and pictures. The poem abounds in sensuous phrases and concrete images like ‘unrevised bride’, ‘foster child’, heifer, lowing at the skies’, Bold lover, never, never, canns’t thou kiss’.

In this ode, he has contrasted the permanence of art with the transience of earthly life. The carved figures of men and women on the urn enjoy eternal youth and vigor. The ecstasy of passion of love and youth, and the eternity of life in art beautifully described in the following lines:

“More happy love, more happy, happy love,  
For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d,  
For ever panting and for ever young.”<sup>(11)</sup>

In the ‘Ode to Autumn’, the poet has shown the beauty of this season, Autumn is a season of apples on mossed cottage trees, of fruits which are ripe to the core, of flowers and busy bees making honey, till their cells are oozing with it:

“Until they-think warms days will never cease,  
For summer has O’er-brimm’d their clammy cells.”<sup>(12)</sup>

Sensuousness is abundant in the following lines from his ‘Ode on Melancholy’:

“Ay, in the very temple of Delight.  
Veil’d melancholy has her Sovran shrine,  
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue,  
Can burst Joy’s grape against palate fine.”<sup>(13)</sup>

It should, however, be remembered that Keats’ sensuousness is not mere sensuality. Though he has a tendency to dwell too much on the attractions of the feminine body, and describes, too elaborately the female anatomy, but on the whole, he escapes from mere sensuality and depicts his pure and healthy enjoyment of the beauties of nature, of feminine body and of all the charms of life. He is sensuous in the sense that he delights and luxuriates in all those objects which please the senses.

Thus, it is seen that, Keats, is a poet of perception rather than of contemplation. In his poetry, particularly in the odes in ‘Hyperion’, sensuousness is permeated by vitality, and aestheticism is tempered by intellectualism. In Keats’ palace of poetry, the nucleus is sensuous; but the superstructure has chambers, more abiding things and more permanent colors. His poetry is not a record of sense impressions, but it is a spontaneous overflow of imagination kindled by the senses.

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