

Comparison and Contrast: Shelley and Keats and their Nature Poetry

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Abstract

Though P. B. Shelley and John Keats were mutual friends and were very much similar in thoughts, imagination, creation and also in their lifetime but they have possessed somewhat opposite qualities in their creativity. Keats is the poet of senses, and he loves Nature because of her sensual appeal, her appeal to the sense of sight, the sense of hearing, the sense of smell, the sense of touch. He was not much attracted by the mysteries in nature but rather found reposeful and concrete beauty in nature. He wanted to leave the world of sorrow and escape into the world of imperishable beauty where his nightingale sings. He treats nature as an observer, as a traveler. He finds interest to appreciate the physical beauty of Nature. P.B. Shelley tends to invoke nature as a sort of supreme metaphor for beauty, creativity, and expression. He treats the natural objects as the supreme elements of inspiring him. This paper attempts at a comparative study of Shelley and Keats and their Nature Poetry.

1. Introduction

Keats and Shelley represent the same age in the history of English Literature. They were very much similar in thoughts, imagination, creation and also in their lifetime but they have possessed somewhat opposite qualities in their creativity Both men were great lovers of nature. Keats's sentiment of Nature is simpler than that of other romantics. Shelley remains absolutely influenced by the Pantheism of Wordsworth. It was his instinct to love and interpret Nature more for her own sake, and less for the sake of the sympathy which the human mind can read into her with its own workings and aspirations. Natural elements are successfully glorified by Shelley. He worships Nature and wants some of power from nature to enrich his poetical power to transmit his message to the people in this older world. Keats was not much attracted by the mysteries in nature but rather found reposeful and concrete beauty in nature. He wanted to leave the world of sorrow and escape into the world of imperishable beauty where his nightingale sings. One can say that Shelley is not a pure artist. There is an inherent vagueness in his temperament. He is suggestive rather than pictorial like Keats. He lacked the closeness of grasp of nature which Keats had, but he had the power in a far greater

degree and describing the cloud scenery of the sky, the doings of the great sea and the vast realms of landscape thus, he has an eye for the subtle colors

scattered in nature. Shelley tends to invoke nature as a sought of supreme metaphor for beauty, creativity and expression. His treatment of nature was related to large landscapes which are of another world. To him nature conveyed an impression of something deeper than sensuous beauty. He endured nature with intellect and regarded that nature could feel and think like a living being as the clouds and the west wind in his poem. His passion for the beautiful was not that of a sensuous or sentimental man, it was an intellectual and spiritual passion. There was a deep melancholy about it too or it can be said that pain and beauty were the two interesting experiences of his mind.

Keats and Shelley stand together in their time as the two prophets of beauty. Beauty for Shelley was metaphysical, it was his intellectual idea, spirit working through and sustaining the universe and indistinguishable from love. But Keats approached beauty from the other side. For him it was an exaltation of the senses of the finest experiences that life brought to him. "Oh, for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts!" he cried. On this exaltation of senses he, as a lover of beauty built, his philosophy of

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beauty, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty- that is all ; Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.". Or it can be said that for him a thing of beauty is a joy forever. Where Shelley intellectualizes nature, Keats is content to express her through the senses. The color, the sound, the touch, the pulsating music are the things which stir him to his depths. There is not a mood of earth he does not love, not a season that will not cheer and inspire him. The autumn appeals to him because it is the season of plenty. It presents multicolored pageants. He is charmed by a Grecian urn because on it are perpetuated the sentiments and feelings of ages gone by. It is emblem of beauty rather than the metaphysical that appeals him. Keats stands in contrast with Shelley as he is more profoundly, more centrally human and the more realistic and philosophical. A lack of common humanity and a certain unreality is Shelley's strength and his weakness as Shelly does not return as often as Keats to the simple flowers of our spring.

Both of these poets have drawn ample of their images from nature but Shelley's range was greater as he had seen nature in far rarer and sublimer forms than Keats had. He was fond of contemplating the changing and dissolving aspects of nature and also objects with the bright even glittering surfaces as his "blue isles and snowy mountains wear the purple moons transparent might". Keats on the other hand preferred to contemplate the more restful and lovelier aspects of nature as "mid hushed, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed blue silver white and budded Tyrians". So one can find out that Shelley could imagine so rich and manifold visions in sensuous beauty as Keats did.

Both writers happened to compose poems concerning autumn in the year of 1819, and although the two pieces contain similar traits of the Romantic period, they differ from each other in several ways as well. The real contrast between the two poets can be studied best by an examination of Shelly's 'Ode to the West Wind' and Keats' 'Ode to autumn', the fine specimen of their best art. Both poems contain potent and vivacious words about the season and both include similar metaphors involving autumn. However, the feelings each writer express in their pieces vary greatly from each other. Shelley's differs from Keats, who merely enjoys the season for what it holds and asks nothing from it. He thoroughly enjoys the "stubble-plains with rosy hue," and listening as "the red-breast whistles from a garden-croft". While Shelly charges every word of his ode with the language of longing, despair and prophetic passion, Keats loads every phrase with a kind of richness and imagery. While Keats present a happy and peaceful mood of the season, he does not philosophise but content to enjoy the mellow fruitfulness, happy

activities and harmonies of autumn. When he, the artist, merely says," Where are the songs of springs...? Think not of them, thou hast thy music to". But Shelley transmits a dynamic even destructive aspect of autumn when he as a philosopher cries out, "O, wind, If winter comes, can spring be far behind?" It is not possible to say, which is the better way of art, as, each is supreme in its own kind.

Another great difference in these poems is the intentions of the poets themselves. Keats and Shelley address nature in their poems with different intentions as well. Keats views autumn as "sitting careless on a granary floor, / Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind." Autumn is when, as Shelley writes, "the winged seeds" are placed in their "dark wintry bed" and "lie cold and low." And Keats writes that autumn is the time when the hazel shells are "plump with a sweet kernel; to set budding more." These similarities between the two pieces are interesting; however they express different emotions about the season. Shelley looks at autumn as being wild and fierce while Keats has a more gentle view of the season. Shelley perceives autumn as an annual death, calling it "Thou dirge/ Of the dying year," and looks upon the autumn horizon as being "the locks of the approaching storm". Also, he claims the autumn winds are where "black rain and fire and hail will burst." Lines such as this reveal the speaker's attitude that autumn is a ferocious and reckless season bearing an indication of the coming winter. On the other hand, Keats fills his poem with lighter words such as "mellow," "sweet," "patient," and "soft" which indicate a much softer emotion felt by the speaker. Thus, natural scenery is used by both the poets as a background to present human actions. While Keats used this natural background dramatically, as, in subtle harmony with the bleak mood of desolation in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' and of despair in 'Hyperion'. Shelley often treated this natural background in an idyllic or arcadian manner. Their songs differ only as the songs of a nightangle differ from that of a skylark. Both give expressions in their songs to the sufferings of they had to undergo as their shares of life. The lyrics of both are born in a large measure-out of sorrow. Shelley's out of a realization of a rejection of his ideals and Keats out of a consciousness of the frustrations of life. Keats knows that the world is a place where man sits and hears one another groans and for Shelley the world is full of thorns on which he falls and bleeds. The heavy weights of hours chains his spirit, out of their songs their sorrow spring like the songs of the night angle of bridges.

As lyric poets, both Shelley and Keats are said to be the sweetest singers of the romantic revolution. They both belonged to a generation which had already

imbibed several Rousseauistic and Wordsworthian ideas, regarding the loveliness and significance of nature. In 'Alastor' Shelley has sung that; "every sight and sound from the vast earth and ambient air, sent to his heart its choicest impulses". The West Wind in his 'Ode to the West Wind' becomes a symbol of the poetic faculty and the skylark in 'To a Skylark' becomes a symbol of the purest, most joyful, and most inspired creative impulse or one can say that skylark is not a bird, it is a "poet hidden." When Shelley thus idealized and spiritualised nature, Keats presented its manifold beauty with a kind of joyful appreciation. In both, the poets there can be found a contrast between the joyousness and permanence of

nature and the misery and mortality of human life. Shelley's skylark is a blithe spirit, "Bird you never wert" and Keats says about his nightingale; "thou wast not born for death immortal bird".

In conclusion it may be said that Keats was a painter while Shelley was a prophet. Shelley's imagination is always dissolving and transcending the natural world around him in search of a rare beauty or perfection. Keats's world is, on the other hand, full of color and perfume. He observed the pageantry of nature with an artistic delight while Shelley saw it in the glow of an unearthly idea of beauty or the dynamic aspects of nature- the aspects which grow, bloom, ripe and then fade away.

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