

RHETORICAL DEVICES IN THE EARLY POETRY OF JOHN KEATS

Dr. Dhananjay Kumar Singh

Reader in English,

Thakur Biri Singh Mahavidyalaya, Tundla (Firozabad)

ABSTRACT

An attempt has been made in this paper to discuss rhetorical devices in the early poetry of John Keats (1795-1821). That he is regarded as a poet of verbal felicity and sensuous evocation reads like stating the obvious. His literary output is simply awesome. In order to understand the use and functions of the odes in the Keatsian oeuvre, it is necessary to divide them into three groups. The first group is comprised of the six great odes- Ode to Psyche, Ode to Nightingale, Ode to Melancholy, Ode on Grecian Urn and Ode to Autumn. The second group includes Ode to Apollo, Hymn to Apollo, Ode to Fancy, Ode to Poets, On the Mermaid Tavern, To Fanny, On a Lock of Milton's Hair, and to Mai. And to Pan (Book i). To Neptune (Book iii), To Diana (Book iv), and To Sorrow (Book iv) constitute the third group of the odes and are taken from Endymion. Here it is worth mentioning that the second and third groups of the poems share some common characteristics. They are treated as minor poetry, lacking in substance. They are denied profundity of thought and are also denounced as Keats's indulgences in his fancies. All the same none can deny the rich, concrete, and sensuous imagery of these poems. No one can ignore their vivid descriptions and their mythical illusions that occur frequently in the poems of John Keats.

Keywords: *Fancy, Imagination, Nature, Personification, Enjambment etc.*

Ode to Apollo is one of the early attempts of Keats to write an ode when he was not more than twenty. It was written in praise of the Greek God, Apollo variously described as God of Light, as God of Music and poetry. The poem opens with a vivid description of Apollo sitting state in his "western hall of gold", where great poets – Greek, Roman, Italian and English, particularly Elizabethan are ready to play on the lyre of poetry. First Homer sings of heroism and war which transforms Apollo's Palace into fiery red. Then comes Vergil with his love-song of Dido, Queen of Carthage, for Aeneas and her burning on the funeral pyre when her lover deserted her. Milton's "tuneful thunders", Spenser's "hymn in praise of feminine chastity", and Shakespeare's "whole multitude in human passions" make profound effect on the audience. As to Tasso, he sings of high devotion and gallantry and love stories that lighten his heroic subject. Finally Apollo himself takes to his lyre and his music surpasses the music of all. Apollo's music is heavenly music. It is unsurpassed and unsurpassable. Here is an extract.

But when Thou joinest with the Nine,

And all the powers of song combine,

... From thee, great God of Bards... that

Apollo performs with his Nine Muses to the wonderment of all.

(The Poetical Works of John Keats- 430)

However, some of the components like the silted poetic diction, artificial conceits, personifications and classical allusion in this poem recall those of the odes of Dryden and Gray.

Both Shelley and Keats wrote hymns to Apollo, Shelley's Apollo is a symbol of eternal power over Nature. He writes as though he is himself omnipotent Apollo. Keats compares his Apollo to Delphi, the ancient Greek oracle in Delphi. In fact Keats himself wrote Ode to Apollo and Hymn to Apollo. In the ode the scope is wider. World famous poets from Greece, Rome, and England appear on the scene, among those are numbered Virgil, Milton, Shakespeare, Spenser and Tasso. A point to note about this poem is that the poet treats his theme objectively in the manner of Dryden and Pope. On the contrary the hymn is offered in a personal romantic style. Hymn to Apollo is built around a single idea. The poet is confessing his guilt of wearing Apollo's laurels, which is a blasphemous act. He volunteers for his punishment. He knew that he might have been decimated by Jove for his act of intervention and intermission in his favor. So the poet expresses his sense of gratitude towards his great God.

Keats used three major rhetorical devices – allusion, personification and symbolism in Hymn to Apollo. The poem is rich in music and imagery. Successive pictures of Apollo, of Jove as Thunderer add to the beauty and excellence in the second stanza of the poem.

Keats begins On A Lock of Milton with an address, an invocation to Milton. To him Milton was the chief of poets and had the command of harmonious verse. As a scholar, he wrote great epics like Paradise Lost, whose scenes were laid in both, heaven and hell. The poet was most willing to pay him tribute but he became hesitant and would not rush. So he took a vow to write a hymn glorifying Milton and his works. He promised to improve his faculties so that he would do justice to the beauty in both heavenly and earthly things- "Beauty in things on earth and things above". When he wrote the hymn, he would think of the hour he saw and was thrilled by a lock of Milton's "bright hair". Keats has blended his feeling of humility with his thought of his poetic gifts. The poet's reverence for Keats goes with his deep admiration for Milton's achievement.

Keats's love for Greece occurs too often in his poetry. In the Fragment, To Mala he expresses it clearly. The poet knows that Maia, Mother of Greek God Hermes. The poet knows that Maia is 'hymned' in places as different as ancient Roman and Greek cities. But the poet would seek her as a subject of this poem in the Greek isles. Further he would like to follow in the footprints of the

Roman and Greek poets. His model might be like Theocritus, who wrote of the local people in the local dialects. The ancients preferred their own: "clan" to the nation at large. Keats did not want to immortalize himself by seeking to appease his countrymen. The idea of his readership was rather limited to the local people. The poet contemplated "quite prime roses and stretches of heaven and few ears as his subject of his poem,

... quite prime rose and the span

Rounded by thee, my song would die away

Content as theirs,

Rich in simple worship of a day. (TPWOJK 290)

In *On the Mermaid Tavern*, Keats paid tribute to the tavern. Located in London, this Tavern used to be famous meeting-place of the great Elizabethan poets and dramatists such as Beaumont, Fletcher, Ben Jonson and Shakespeare among others. They used to gather there to eat, drink, and exchange their pleasantries when they were alive. The poet was baffled to think whether their dead soul had access to the same canary wine and venison in their heavenly abode- the Elysium as they had at Mermaid Tavern. Strange as it might sound, an astrologer answers this question thus,

Said he saw you in your glory.

Underneath a new old sign

Sipping beverage divine

And pledging with content smack

The Mermaid in the Zodiac. (TPWOJK 270)

The answer was that – "on a day, the host's sign board flew away". The sign board "Mermaid" of the tavern disappeared to appear later as "The Mermaid in the Zodiac" which makes certain the dead soul's "sipping beverage divine". Such was the glory and grandeur of the Mermaid Tavern.

The poem is a little more than a trifle done in a lighter vein. Yet the poet has used some thought provoking phrases to contrast "Elysium", the abode of the dead soul, a place for perfect happiness as "happy field" with moss'd cavern" signifying the Mermaid Tavern. Keats used the rhetorical device of enjambment where thought began in one line and ended in the next. Critic's conjecture that Keats was nearing his death and was pondering how Elysium would be if compared to what he had seen and experienced.

To Fanny is another popular ode written by John Keats. It opens with an invocation to Nature, seeking a theme for this poem. But he already knows the theme. His theme is blending of his desperation for the love of Fanny and his jealousy of other amorous admirers who were hanging

around her at the night dance party. The poet's appeal to nature is followed by his address to Fanny "the sweat home of all my fears, and hopes and joys, and panting miseries". She looked a paragon of beauty that night. What Keats wanted was that no lover or admirer should be seen near her. She should spurn them. She should keep her love reserved for him only. Yet he was oppressed by the idea of inconstancy of women. To him a woman was like a feather floating in the sea, swayed to and fro by every wind. His final to her was that even if she had least affection for him, she would take pity on him and reject the proximity of her other admirers or her not rejecting them would spell his death.

Keats expresses no profound thought in this poem. His depiction of his hopes and fears and his appeal to Fanny to take pity on him to a beggar of love. However some figures, descriptive passages, some repetitions (I gaze, I gaze) are typical of Keats's handling of language. To describe his love as feast and silver moon, though, look incongruous. Symbolism of seasons is too apparent.

Fancy and imagination were the two literary terms which became very popular with the poets and critics during the Augustan period. These words acquired great force with the poets and critics of the Romantic Revival. William Wordsworth drew attention to them and gave them equal prominence. His collaborator, Coleridge made a distinction between Fancy and imagination. He rated Fancy as a lower faculty and placed imagination on a higher pedestal. He did not regard Fancy as a creative power. According to him, Fancy combines two things into pleasing shapes instead of fusing them like Imagination to give them shapes of its own. As far as Keats was concerned, he did not enter into controversy and found them identical and made no difference between them.

Ode to Fancy according to Keats, is about fancy or imagination as the perennial source of unsurpassed and unsurpassable pleasure. Reality however beautiful it may be is never too satisfying or pleasing. The pleasures of reality begin to diminish with the passing of time. Seasons like spring, summer and autumn have their beauty. But before long they fade and are forgotten. Contrarily, the pleasures of imagination are ever fresh and ever-lasting. Keats links imagination to winter. Lying by the fireside on a wintry night the poet can conjure up all the boons and blessings of nature and be happy. Pleasures of reality are not permanent. Even a paragon of beauty loses her charm of delighting, fascinating people over time. But a sweat-heart whom the imagination has created would be an embodiment of perfect beauty like Proserpina of Greek mythology.

Ode to Fancy is noted for its sensuous appeal and its numerous pictures of beautiful things. Appropriate similes and felicitous words and phrases add to the beauty of the poem. Poets is a poem addressed to the dead poets. Keats amplifies this one idea as in a rondeau. The poem opens with the following words,

Birds of Passion and Mirth

Ye have left your souls on earth I

Have your souls in heaven too,

Double- lived in heaven too. (TPWOJK 268)

The poets who made Passion and Mirth their l'amor are dead. But they are very much alive in their poetry they left on earth. It is possible to say that they lived a double life- one on this earth and the other in heaven. Further Keats describes how the souls of the dead in heaven commune with different planets .They enjoy all the blessings of Elysium.

... Divine melodious truth; d soul

Philosophic numbers smooth;

Tales and golden histories

Of its heaven and mysteries (TPWOJK 268)

The dead souls that span both the worlds left the message for the people on the earth. The message is in the form of appeal to them in these words,

Thus Yea to Pan teach us every day,

Wisdom, though fled far away. (TPWOJK 179)

Ode to Bards is rich in verbal felicity. Repetitions occur as in a rondeau. The poem begins and ends with, Birds of Passion

To Pan is an ode, an extract from Endymion. It is a song sung by the shepherds on the occasion of a great feast in honour of Pan. Pan, the Greek God of Shepherds is variously portrayed in this poem. First he is a lover, the Arcadian nymph, Syrinx and is pinning for her love in his mighty palace in a forest. Next he is a protector of Birds and insects and "fosterer divine "and a caring custodian of animals and other denizens of woods and waters. But most remarkably he is an inspiring deity and fountain heads of musings for the poet. The closing lines of the poem carry the shepherd's appeal to Pan:

Be still a symbol of immensity,

A firmament reflected in a sea;

An element filling the space between

An unknown ---- but no more: We humbly screen

With uplift hands our foreheads, lowly bending,
And giving out a shout most heaven rending,
Conjure thee to receive humble Paean. (TPWOJK 187)

The poem is a long succession of impressive pictures of concrete images. The tree-nymphs dressing their ruffled hair, the milky brow of the fair Srinx, the golden honey combs are the cases on point. Wordsworth considered Endymion a pretty piece of paganism. The real value of the poem, however, lies in the poet's realization of the spirit of ancient pastoral life and worship.

To Neptune forms part of Book I of Endymion. It is a song sung in honour of "king of the stormy sea, " brother of Jove" and co-inheritor of the Elements. The singers are the dead lovers brought back to life by Endymion. Such is the majesty of King Neptune that frightful waves, stubborn rocks, dark clouds, even Aeolus, the God of winds and storms remain terror stricken and obey him most obediently. But the present occasion has made the difference. He has been so gracious as to be ready to hear the song sung by the dead souls. Further, these souls invoke Golden Venus and her son, Cupid to add to the beauty and solemnity of the occasion. The poem is remarkable for its vivid description and mythological allusions. However, it lacks sustenance and profundity of thought.

Ode to Sorrow is another extract from Book iv of Endymion. It is also a song. It is sung by a maid, who recounts the story of her life. It is meant to create conflict in the mind of Endymion between his love for her and his love for the moon goddess. The poem opens with the maid's questions to personified Sorrow, the gist of which is why Sorrow afflicts human life in diverse ways. She wants to bid farewell to Sorrow. So to be free from the shackles of Sorrow she joins the band of Bacchus and his followers who are on a journey across many islands, only to find that she was vainly seeking pleasure. At long last she is left with sorrow as her soul companion. Now on she would love, adore and worship Sorrow as her mother, her mother, her playmate and her wooer too. Here is her prayer,

Sweet Sorrow!

Like an own babe I nurse thee on my breast:

I thought to leave thee,

But now of the world I love thee best, not one

But thee to comfort a poor lovely maid

Thou art her mother,

And her brother,

Her playmate, and her wooer in the shade. (TPWOJK 163)

Pathos to these concluding lines is difficult to miss. There are several instances of sensuous description in the poem but there is one that seems unfair, if not outright reprehensible. Keats describes the wine-god, Bacchus on his journey across various lands at the apex of his power but runs into blasphemous excesses when he gives an attenuated version of the supreme Indian divinity.

Hymn to Diana occurs in Book iv of *Endymion*. It is a song sung on the occasion of marriage of Endymion and Diana. The singers are all gods and spirits of earth, air, and sea. No one would like to miss the celebratory feast on this occasion. All the divinities have gone to attend the feast. It is for this reason that the entire heaven is empty. Hesperus, Zephyrus, Flora, Aquarius, Lion, Bear, Centaur and Andromeda constitute the congregation.

The poem sounds much but does not signify as much. However, this nuptial ode has its own share of imagery, of the classical allusions, and of mythological –astronomical names that occur in Hymn to Diana.

Before proceeding to other striking features of Keats's early poetry, we may profitably turn to some of the characteristic features of the odes discussed in this research paper. It is generally thought that these poems are instances of Keats's minor poetry. The main problem with these poems is that their narratives are too brief. Their thought-content is rather slight. In most cases Keats seems engaged in a creative struggle of the art and craft of his small poems. In virtue of their concrete, sensuous image-patterns, vivid descriptions and mythological allusions and felicity of words and phrases, however, these lesser odes are closer to the great odes.

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8. All citations for Rhetorical Devices in the Early poetry of John Keats are taken from The Poetical Works Of John Keats edited by H. W. Garrod (Oxford at the Clarendon press) 1939 .