

## The Role of Love in the Making of John Keats' Early Poems and Letters

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### Abstract

*The present paper examines Keats' early poems and letters from a particular perspective to demonstrate how love found its way in his poetic career. The study depicts his philosophy of love in his relations with women, his relatives and other groups of people. The primary source of this study comprises of John Keats' first volume of poems, sonnets, and letters and scattered pieces published in 1817. The research showed that Keats' view on the concept of love is partly different from both Romantic and Neo-Classical treatment of love. It also proved that his treatment of love has played a significant role in his poetry and life. It also revealed that the concept of love, as a universal force, is conveyed in different ways and the poet attempts to reflect an ideal world in which love is materialized and fulfilled.*

**Keywords:** John Keats, Early poems and letters, Treatment of love, Beauty and truth

### 1. Introduction

Keats was born at a time when the restrictive traditions of the Neoclassicism were weakening and Romantic model of emotions came into fashion. Neoclassic writers and artists used classical patterns to pronounce their ideas about courage, sacrifice, and love of country while Romantic writers focused on issues like individuality, personal freedom, spiritual and supernatural elements, imagination, nature, ancient Greek and Roman elements, simple and pastoral life, idealized women and the poet's inner feelings.

The Romantic love emerged in the early medieval ages, resulting from Aristotelian, Platonic love, and the writings of Ovid. This kind of Romantic love was usually described as not to be consummated, but as transcendently motivated by a profound admiration for the lady and followed by chivalric conducts than by erotic relationship. In Romantic

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perspective, this relationship generally indicates a vigorous expression of one's love, or his deep passionate yearnings to unite with another person without the intention of marriage. This treatment of love may put forth questions about the place of ethics in Romantic relationships. Emanuel Levinas believes that "the erotic relation to the other often stands as the highest example of the search to establish a truly ethical relation: the relation that respects and responds to the other's absolute alterity." (*Totality and Infinity*, 261). "Plato translates love in terms of virtue but Aristotle interprets it on the basis of justice. The concept of justice plays the central role in his theory of ethics and love". (Begum and Mushtaq, 3) In *Nicomachean Ethics* he equates love and justice as: "How a man should live in relation to his wife, and in general how one friend should live in relation to another, is the same question as how they can live justly." (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 156)

The concept of love is conveyed in different ways by different poets; Shelley envisages love as a universal force, Byron as revolt and Keats as beauty. Besides, Keats and other Romantic poets attempt to reflect an ideal world, which they cannot succeed to attain in their material realm. Thus, they portray this ideal world at a transcendental level. Although Keats and his Romantic counterparts attempt to idealize human beings, they show a human paradox which displays the thirst to live forever.

Some critics believe that in spite of Keats' long expedition into the Lake District and Scotland and his journey home by the sea, he had exceptionally little of the Romantic flavor for the wild and amazing manifestations of nature (for seas, mountains, wastes, storms and tempests, etc.) What Wordsworth enjoyed in nature he enjoyed with a simple, passionate sensuousness. Keats might have relatively departed from Romantic traditions and his departure from the central principles of Romanticism is indicated by his own remark in a letter dated February 27, 1818 to John Taylor as: "Scenery is fine but human nature is finer." His poetry may sometimes lack common Romantic tendency to identify scenes and landscapes with subjective moods and emotions; With the exception of one or two controversial passages of *Endymion*, his poetry may lack Wordsworthian conviction of some spiritual significance in nature; it has no scene of mystery at all.

Love has always played an important role in igniting or confining man's social activities, and it is a decisive impulse to create, recreate or to retain

whatever man has in his mind. The drive of self-preservation reveals itself by means of love and this drive creates the essence of love which establishes a permanent joy and the object of beauty. Meanwhile, the love of God, woman, nature and human beings has been the object of all works of art and literature.

Keats claimed he loved the principle of beauty in all things. He sensed the idea of beauty in everything and in his last days he wrote, "If should die I have left no immortal work behind me, nothing to make my friends proud of my memory; but I have loved the principle of beauty in all things, and If I had time I would have made myself remembered." (*Keats: Life and Times*, 47) To seeing things in their beauty means to see them in truth and nobody knows it better than Keats himself. He believed that beauty and truth are very analogous to each other. Accordingly, he wrote, "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the heart's affection, and the truth of imagination. What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth." (Ibid. 49) Bate states: while embracing reality, Keats urged the necessity of abiding in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts. (*Negative Capability*, 184) Eliot also proclaimed that "There is hardly one statement of Keats about poetry which... will not be found to be true..." (Ibid. 132) Hafsa Zia and Sadiq Zia state that "The conception of negative capability and the wholesome concept of exquisiteness are the idiosyncratic characteristics of Keats poetry, which distinguish him from his contemporary poets. ("Stylistics in Keats", 2)

Keats' language is also very striking, making his poetry foregrounded in English literature. The imagery, figurative, allusions, sensuousness, various sound patterns and overall structure of the poems prove them to be unmatched masterpieces in literature. Ridley believes "his odes are a group of works in which the English language finds ultimate embodiment". (*Keats' Craftsmanship*, 289) Bate states his view about one of Keats' odes To Autumn as: "Each generation has found it one of the most nearly perfect poems in English" (*Negative Capability*, 58) and Ridley claimed the ode "is the most serenely flawless poem in our language." (201) A thorough study of the stylistic and linguistic features of his works makes the readers' interpretation valid and deepens their gratification of his poetry. He systematized language resources to illustrate his unparalleled experience in a conclusive and skillful way. Keatsian style is renowned from his contemporary era. Garrett Stewart writes in his article, 'Keats and Language' as:

John Keats was trained as a physician, self-schooled as a poet, and was an intuitive anatomist of language, closely articulated structure of poetry, ligaments and fibers of the language and its muscular tensions and release, rhythmic corridors of breath, a genetic and God-gifted specialist of poetic art in its origins and mutations. His pen was rather a stethoscope by which he took the phonetic pulse of the diction through the listening ear of script.” (*Cambridge Companion*, 135)

## 2. Methodology

Most of Keats’ early critics--Crawford, Bridges, Arnold, De Selincourt, and Thorpe-- thought that Keats attempted to progress toward a philosophy of love. This study will consider the treatment of love in Keats’ early poems and his letters in so far as they affect his poetic works. The method of this study will analyze descriptively the concept of love in Keats’s poetry. The tools of research will be, for the most part, primary sources such as his early poems and his letters, and the critical works as secondary sources.

## 3. Discussion

Keats’ early collection of poems establishes a suitable platform for his masterpieces. His early collection was published when he was only twenty one years old. Soon after, as it is noticeable from his poems and letters, Keats’ intellect surged to the level of the great pioneers of romantic poetry. His world of imagination displays poems picturing worldly love, combined with material experiences. That is to say, Keats was neither a sentimentalist/celestial lover, nor a skeptic. His life also comprises special characteristics which can help the readers perceive how Keats observes his craft, acquires it gradually and agonizingly transforms his experiences into poetry.

Love has enhanced itself in Keats’ letters and poems. His letters envisages his true philosophy of love. Keats devised ideas and promoted insights in his letters to provide a background for his poetic works. Robert Pack observes that “whenever there was a delay in writing poetry; many of the letters function as a catalyst for ideas which later are realized in his greatest works.” (New England Review, 176) Keats's letters depict a sense of delight which enabled him to write, and reveal the vigorous searching of a youthful and ever-dynamic mind. The letters are filled with individuality, potency and quality; making them essential reading for an

insightful understanding of Keats's thought and works. In a love letter to Frances (Fanny) Brawne, he writes:

You have captivated me. I have a sensation for the moment though I was dissolving...I have been astonished that men could die martyrs for their religion...I have shuddered at it. I shuddered no more... I could be martyred for my religion. Love is my religion and I could die for that. I could die for you. My Creed is Love and you are its only tenet. (October 13, 1819)

In Keats' view, love is a religion and this suggests that there exists a sense of worship in love. This metaphor implies that love must be as pure as religion and there must not be any imperfection in this holy love, and for preserving this sacredness a lover should be martyred. Therefore, he believes love is his creed and Fanny Brawne is its tenet.

In his poem 'I stood tip toe' published in the first volume of 1817, he hopes to stagger upon a theme that might be developed and might be a framework in his poetic world. He assumed to use the parable of Endymion and thus he called the poem "Endymion". On December 16, 1816, Keats wrote to Charles Cowden Clarke as "I have done little to Endymion lately- I hope to finish it in one more attack." (*Keats: Life and Times*, 47) The fulfillment of love is visualized here by means of Endymion and Cynthia, and the poet expresses his grief over the despair of beauty. Keats was an assured lover too who stood on Latmus' top:

Soft breeze from myrtle vale blew:

And brought it faintness solemn sweet and slow  
A hymn from Dian's temple, while upswelling,  
The increase went to her own starry dwelling.  
But though her face was clear as infant's eyes:  
Though she stood smiling over the sacrifice.

The poet wept at her piteous fate, wept that such beauty should be desolate. So in fine wrath some golden sounds he won, and gave meek Cynthia her Endymion. Endymion himself can stand for Keats. In fact, here Keats presents Endymion as a poet and a true lover. Therefore, if Keats stands for Endymion here then he can be a lover too, and the above lines echo his own life.

In 1817, he published *Calidore* whose name is taken from *Faerie Queene* and was considered as a youth whose knighthood is yet to win. In this poem, there exists an indication of contrast between ‘luxury’ on the one hand and what may be called the ‘actual’ world on the other as Calidore hears “the kind voice of good Sir Clerimond” it comes to his ears “like something from beyond this present being”. As his present being is the state of an embrace in which we last saw him, he is obliged, if he is to show Sir Clerimond’s fitting attention, to abandon his present being; at any rate for a time.

When the kind voice of good Sir Clerimond  
Came to his ear, like something from beyond  
His present being: so he gently drew  
His warm arms, thrilling now with pulses new,  
From their sweet thrall, and forward gently bending,  
Thank'd heaven that his joy was everlasting;

The contrast is not only between Calidore’s abandonment to the “sweet thrall” and the need to withdraw from it, it is in the contrast between “warm” and “thrilling” which offers something brilliantly physical and real and the extensively dream-like condition of the path. He is fascinated by the idea of bravery and heroism and the notion of charming women is so forceful that he could not resist approaching the ladies in the neighborhood:

From lovely woman: while brimful of this,  
He gave each damsel's hand so warm a kiss,  
And had such manly ardour in his eye,  
That each at other look'd half staringly;  
And then their features started into smiles.

In another sonnet, “To My Brothers”, the poet shows his ardent longing to live with his brothers in a happy and prosperous environment. He composed the above poem on the birthday of his younger brother, Tom:

.....  
This is your birthday Toe and I rejoice  
That thus it passes smoothly, quietly,  
.....  
May we together pass, and calmly try,  
What are this world’s true joys—ere the great voice.

In another sonnet he describes the English maidens.

.....  
Happy is England, sweet her artless daughters

Enough their simple loveliness for me.

.....

Yet do I often warmly burn to see,  
 Beauties of deeper glance and hear them singing  
 And flat with them about the summer waters.

Keats' middle period sonnets have some distinguished characteristics. For instance, the theme of the sonnet "To a Lady seen for a few Moments at Vauxhall" bears an entirely Shakespearean theme. Here, the beauty of the lady haunts Keats' imagination and it then turns to be a symbol of evaporating beauty of anything which is beautiful in the world. The poet understands that the lady's beauty is nothing but a means whereby he could give this idea "a local habitation and a name." Shakespearean metaphorical decoration is easily observed in the sonnet "Time's Sea":

Time's sea hath been years at its slow ebb  
 Long hours have to and fro let creep the sand  
 Since I was tangled in thy beauty's web  
 And snare by the glowing of thy hand.

"When I have fears that I may cease to be", is another sonnet which bears grim grandeur and an overflow of sadness. Here, the poet stands at the edge of the shore of life scanning the water of death that stretches endlessly before him, and while encountering the grim reality of death, everything such as love and fame disappear into an unreal world:

When I have fears that I may cease to be  
 And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,  
 That I shall never look upon thee more,  
 Never have relish in the faery power  
 Of unreflecting love—then on the shore  
 Of the wide world I stand alone and think  
 Till love and fame to nothing do sin.

In another poem, "Imitation of Spenser", Keats attempts to depict women as unpredictable in their conduct and childish in understanding who have no determination in themselves.

Woman! When I behold thee flippant, vain,  
 Inconsistent, childish, proud, and full of fancies;  
 Without that modest softening that enhances

The downcast eye, repentant of the pain  
That its mild light creates to heal again;

In the above lines, the speaker expects the lady to be modest in her conduct and this behavior will protect her at the moments of collapse. Here, he wants to replace modern form of love which has no consistency with that of antiquity of the ancient knights. Old knights were devoted lovers regardless of all hardships while the love of modern times is only transitory. This implies that there may always be problems in a romantic relationship which reminds the readers of what Shakespeare says in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "The course of true love does never run smooth." (Murry, 93.1968) Although Keats thinks of enjoying sensuous attractiveness, he prefers physical attractions be combined with intelligence because this blending leads to good conducts. This kind of love and delight echo divine voice.

Yet this is vain--O Mathew lend thy aid,  
To find a place where I may greet the maid  
Where we may soft humanity put on.  
And sit and rhyme and think on Chatterton.  
With reverence could we speak of all the sages,

Keats composed poems in Shakespeare's style to depict the great turmoil of his heart in a disciplined passage. In his sonnets, he reveals his deep worry for his relatives, friends and art. His art does not follow the motto of art for art's sake but his art mirrors the realities of life. Although, Keats occasionally expresses his feelings directly, he has also tried to achieve negative capability on other occasions. He presents very affectionate feelings which draw tears into one's eyes in his sonnets written to his brother George and the one written on the birthday of Tom. Such affection towards his brother characterizes Keats as a father figure. Here he addresses George as:

Many the wonders I this day have seen:

.....  
But what, without the social thought of thee  
Would be the wonders of the sky and sea?

His poem "Sleep and Poetry" is a very mighty poem with a very ambitious language expressing the poet's artistic motivations. The poem also attacks forcefully the typical poetic ideals of 18<sup>th</sup> century. To Keats, poetry was



not a spiritual revelation as it came to Shelley, but a joy shaped out of sensations and as wonderful as it was in Coleridge's view. While Shelley intellectualizes 'nature', and Wordsworth spiritualizes it, Keats attempts to depict Nature through senses. Thus, Keats writes in "Sleep and Poetry" as:

What is gentler than a wind in summer?  
 What is more soothing than the pretty hummer  
 That stays one moment in an open flower,  
 And buzzes cheerily from bower to bower?  
 What is more tranquil than a musk-rose blowing  
 More full of visions than a high romance?  
 What, but thee Sleep? Soft closer of our eyes!

In Keats' view, love of families and friends was a very soothing drive at hard times. In that case he says:

For sweet relief I'll dwell  
 On humbler thoughts, and let this strange assay  
 Begun in gentleness die so away.  
 Sure now all tumult from my bosom fades:  
 I turn full hearted to the friendly aids  
 That smooth the path of honour; brotherhood,  
 And friendliness the nurse of mutual good.  
 The hearty grasp that sends a pleasant sonnet

Another poem "To George Felton Mathew" shows that there exists a love in Keats' heart for all human beings. Like Mathew, Keats has a miserable destiny and attempts to share his agony with other human beings.

Yet this is vain — O Mathew lend thy aid  
 To find a place where I may greet the maid —  
 Where we may soft humanity put on,  
 And sit, and rhyme and think on Chatterton;  
 Thus mourn the fearful death of human kindness.

In another well-known poem, Endimion, Keats approves the quest of beauty as a 'goal' if it goes along with the notion of commitment to human service. An amorous irony and regretful anguish with a strong sense of romance has been synchronized with an image of Greek beauty and wild notes in the tune of the Indian maid whom Endimion loved. Keats' goddess represents sublime feature of perfect beauty which stands for perfect love. He has admired ideal beauty in a particular way in his works:

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever:

Its loveliness increases; it will never  
 Pass into nothingness; but still will keep  
 A bower quiet for us, and a sleep  
 Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

Together with Keats' poems, his letters disclose the role of sensation and feelings rather than thoughts in understanding the reality of 'truth'; this perception, of course, does not take place through mere sensuous pleasure or even emotionalism. Matthew Arnold, however, expresses a different view. He wrote that "the yearning passion for the beautiful", which was with Keats, as he himself truly says, 'the master-passion', is not a passion of the sensuous or sentimental poet. It is an intellectual and spiritual passion."(<https://www.uni-due>)

Keats believed that "the 'heart' was the minds' Bible" (*Book of the Heart*, 181), and he used more intuitive than reasoned approach to life. He tried to prove the truth on the pulses than in the brain. In fact, he thought he should think with the heart and feel with the mind. He believed in 'the truth of imagination' and the 'loneliness of the heart'. Hence, these two features became the leading basis of his happiness. Imagination was the pillar of his art and life, and in this case, he wrote to Shelley: "My imagination is a monastery, and I am its monk --you must explain my metaphorto yourself." For him inner voice is the only agent of all his findings and activities. This is what he says in a letter to Benjamin Bailey dated November 22, 1817 as: "What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth, whether it existed before or not- for I have the same idea of all our passions as of love: they are all, in their sublime, creative of essential beauty." (*British Literature*,146)

Soon after Keats met Fanny Brawne and his speedy bondage he understood that his bondage and his illusory optimism and hope had been false. Although some people with passionate natures announce such independence, Keats' self-sufficiency seems to be a form of unconscious cowardice. His love poem ("Sweet, Sweet Is the Greeting"... ) talks about love and the poet's sensuous motivation:

Sweet, sweet is the greeting of eyes,  
 And sweet is the voice in its greeting,  
 When adieus have grown old and goodbyes  
 Fade away where old Time is retreating. (28 June 1818)

Once he wrote to Fanny as: “I never knew before what such a love as you have made me feel was, I did not believe in it; my fancy was afraid of it, lest it should burn me up.” Keats’ natural fear of love had not been wrong because love of a woman for him was a fire which eventually consumed him. Thus, in another letter to Fanny Brawne, he wrote:

If I were to see you today it would destroy the half comfortable sullenness I enjoy at present into downright perplexities. I love you too much to venture to Hampstead. I feel it is not paying a visit—but venturing into a fire. (*Complete Works of Keats*, 92)

Keats’ love for Brawne had the most profound impact on his life and his art. In a letter dated October 13, 1819, he explicitly wrote to her that he would prefer dying martyr for love than for religion. He further added that “My creed is love and you are its tenet....” Keats’ profound appetite for love has flourished strikingly in his works. Love is an innate desire and emotion, but it is not obligatory that everybody needs to fall in love for writing passionate poems. Every penetrating individual finds suitable objects in the form of symbols, models or mythical stories to provide an outlet to this emotion. This is what Shelley truly proclaims:

I love tranquil solitude...,  
I love you, though it has wings.  
And like light can flee”  
But above all other things,  
Spirit, I love thee—  
Thou art love and life! Oh come. (*Poetical Works*, 39)

Keats had a normal sentiment of a decent young man before meeting Fanny Brawne or any other women. He has created objects of beauty which are more living than mortal man by means of his remarkable, sensuous imagination. While Keats is mostly known as a poet of sensuous beauty, love has been a leading drive in his life and works. Therefore, Keats, though known as the poet of ‘beauty’, he can also stand as a poet of ‘love’. In a poem to Fanny, “I cry your mercy—pity—love”! He writes:

O! let me have thee whole,—all—all—be mine!  
That shape, that fairness, that sweet minor zest  
Of love, your kiss,—those hands, those eyes divine,  
That warm, white, lucent, million-pleasured breast,—  
Yourself—your soul—in pity give me all,... (A8)

Although Keats believed in the sacredness of the hearts' affections he offered the same idea of all our passions as of love. Both the passions and 'the hearts' affections have played significant role in depicting love and beauty in his works. Love was the motivating power and a leading force in imaginative poetry of Keats, especially in his early poems "Endymion:

O Sovereign force of love! O grief! O balm!  
 All records, saving thine, come cool and calm,  
 And shadowy.... But touching thine,  
 One kiss brings honey dew from buried days.....  
 In our every soul, we feel amain....

#### 4. Conclusion

The present paper depicts Keats' early poems and letters to portray how he has dealt with the concept of love in his treatment of women, relatives and other groups of people. The instruments of the study included John Keats' first volume of poems, sonnets, and letters and scattered pieces published in 1817. The research also examined critical works written on Keats' poetry and his life. The study showed Keats' profound appetite for love has flourished strikingly in his poetic works and his letters. It revealed that Keats' view on the concept of love is relatively different -Classical and Romantic treatment of love. It also proved that his treatment of love plays a substantial part in his poetry--particularly in his early poems-- and life. The investigation displayed that for Keats love is a universal power which is innate in man's heart for enhancing his desires and passions. This study showed that the mechanism of love in his early poems and letters can help the readers and the scholars to get more familiar with Keats' inner world towards other fellow human beings.

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