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A Critical Study of Classical References and Poetic Dictions in Poem

***Ode To A Nightingale* By John Keats**



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ABSTRACT :

John Keats is known as a Romantic poet who made everlasting contribution to the Romantic School of Poetry. His poetic works deal with Hellenic spirit and he has taken the classical references from Greek mythology to point out his sensuousness for nature. The present study delves the classical references and allusions used by the poet to create poetic rapture. The study discusses the poetic dictions which have created the everlasting impressions on the readers. His poetic dictions become proverb likes to the readers. As the readers saunter throughout this ode, they get overjoyed with poet's use of classical references and do their best to explore more and more meanings. It lights on how Hellenic spirit was incarnated in Keats. The study explores the causes of the tranquility of poet's mind by analyzing the

classical references which are contextualized by him. The state of solitudeness of Keats' signifies the occult relations with material world. The song of Nightingale to the poet seems to be a divine through which he derives heavenly pleasure. He feels that his soul is enlightened with the spellbound song of the nightingale. For the understanding of the poem it is necessary to analyze the allusions and classical references in the context of this poem. This study paves way to understand the obscure and occult relations between nature and the pessimistic state of the poet's mind. These references make the poet very enigmatic at spiritual level.

KEYWORDS : *Classical, Allusions, Poetic Dictions, Mythology etc.*

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction:

John Keats, a romantic poet belongs to the second generation school of Romantic poetry. His poetic work deals with projection of human feelings and ideas on natural objects. It may be animate or inanimate objects. The Ode to a Nightingale is one of the finest odes written by John Keats. It was written after the death of his brother. The present paper sought to analyze the ode in the context of the poet's use of allusion and classical references to express his optimistic approach to life. Before the discussion of the major aspects of the study it becomes need to clear the concept of viz. allusion and classical references. The term allusion implies the passing references. Literary scholar and critic J. A. Cuddon defines this terminology in his book "Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory" as "allusion usually is an implicit reference, perhaps to another work of literature or art, to a person or an event. It is kind of an appeal to a reader to share some experience with writer. According to him, allusion may enrich the work by association and it gives depth." (Cuddon, J. A.p-17).

After this definition, we have to focus on the key term "classical references". Martin Gray a writer in his book "A Dictionary of Literary Terms" discusses the terminology of classical references by focusing on the adjective classical which is derived from the Latin word 'Classics' which means writing of the highest quality. It becomes well established term since the Renaissance until the 18th century works of Greek and Latin writers which were considered models of excellence"(Gray,Martin.p-58). John Keats wrote this poem in 1819 when he visited to his close friend Charles Brown at Homestead. It is supposed that he wrote this poem in the garden of Brown when he listened to spellbound song of tiny bird nightingale. As he listened to that song, he forgot earthly worries and sorrows. He enjoyed heavenly rapture. He felt that bird is mysterious to him. To compare, analyze and interpret the poetic rapture the poet derives the allusions and classical references from Greek mythology. Another feature of his poetry is spirit of Hellenism which is very dominant throughout his Odes.

According to renowned critic Dr. Raghukul Tilak "Hellenism comes from wellness meaning inhabitants of Hallas or ancient Greece. Hellenism, therefore implies, a love of Greek way of life, of Greek art, culture, literature and mythology. It attempts to express this love in one's writings" (Tilak, Raghukul.p-201).As we will proceed to the research area, we will come to know that John Keats has derived his sources for allusions and classical

references from Greek and Latin classics. So, this study minutely explores allusions, references and far-fetched images used by Keats. He habitually has chosen Greek stories and legends such as Endymion, Lamia and Hyperion etc. Apart from this, Keats' poetry contains features such as the enjoyment of beauty, tone of melancholy, negative capability, mutable and permanent nature of life and disillusionment.

Literature Review :

The present study is only confined with analysis of allusions and classical references in the poem. It becomes need to take reviews of different critics in the context of John Keats work. According to Critic Long, "Keats poetic expression or the harmony of thought and word is generally more perfect than theirs. He emphasizes on the poetic dictions and the application of it but didn't contemplate on the allusions and classical references." According to Mathew Arnold, "He is abundantly and anciently sensuous." He emphasizes only Keats' love for beauty. Roger Shamrocks works discusses the Keats selected poems and Letters which also focuses on the concept of negative capability and Hellenic spirit of him. According to P. B. Shelley, "Keats was a Greek in the sense that he was very much interested in Greek mythology." Prof. Hales says that "There was Keats the keenest sense and enjoyment of beauty and this gave him a fellow feeling with great Greek masters. He recognized in them. The most perfect representation of the beautiful and so far his literature went, through translations. He saw its beauty, only one side of the Greek art that he saw." Prof. Herdford comments that "Keats was born out of time."

Theoretical Discussion :

"Ode to a Nightingale" is a poem addressed to a nightingale bird. When the poet listens to bewitching song of nightingale, his imagination flight takes place. He goes in the state of tranquility. Through this poem, he shows a contrast between the immortality of the nightingale and mutability of human life. To differentiate the earthly worries and sorrows, he uses allusions and gives classical references. He discusses the material world and the world in imagination.

The first stanza of the ode contains the melancholic state of mind of the poet. The poet's heart gets afflicted and lacks sensation of earthly life after listening of nightingales' song. To express his tranquility of mind Keats' uses the reference of "Hemlock", which stuns

the readers it is not common diction but it refers back to the Greek mythology. It refers to the poisonous plant and the reference of it finds in biblical scriptures. These plants were grown at hillside when Jesus was being crucified. This poisonous plant in liquid form was given to Socrates a great philosopher for the spoiling of the young people for which he was accused. It shows the tranquility of poets mind which makes him to forget the material world. In the same stanza he gives word 'dull-opiate' which implies the medicine that lessens pains and produces sleep. To get relief from the sorrowful state of mind he gets overjoyed with song of nightingale.

A classical reference of 'Dryad of the trees' refers to the 'wood nymph'. The poet compares the bird with nymph from Greek mythology. Nightingale pours a song of joy spontaneously from its vibrant throat which fills the earth with sweet music. He compares the tranquility of mind by using the apt term 'Draught of Vintage' which implies the wine which is prepared with flora and fauna by delving it under the ground. It refers to the Greek and Roman tradition. He becomes drowsy after listening to the song of nightingale as the man becomes drowsy after drunk of vintage. The divine power of nightingale's song rules on his mind.

In the second stanza of the poem Keats uses allusion of 'Hippocrene' which gives reference to sacred fountain in Greek mythology. The reference of Hippocrene goes back to the Greek mythology which deals with the tale of spring on Mt. Helicon. It was supposed to be sacred and holy to muses. It was created by the hooves of Pegasus. A literal meaning of the word is 'Horses' Fountain'. The water from the springs of Hippocrene supposed to be motivational to the poetic creation. The poet compares the song of nightingale with spring of Hippocrene which becomes inspirational to him.

In the fourth stanza of the poem Keats uses the allusion of the 'Chariot of the Bacchus'. The god of wine in Greek mythology. This classical reference goes back to the God Dionysus, a son of supreme God Zeus and Semele the daughter of king. Dionysus was supposed to be the God of fertility. Later on he was named as the God of wine and pleasure. The Romans named him as Bacchus .The poet likes to go away from febrile activity of the world but he would not come to the nightingale in an intoxicated condition conveyed by the chariot of god's of wine which is drawn by leopards.

He gives another classical reference of 'Queen Moon' which refers to 'Diana', the Goddess of moon in Greek mythology. He imagines that the Queen moon of the night is in her chair of state and grouped around here are the stars like fairies. In the seventh stanza

John Keats uses biblical figure of Ruth which is referred in the genealogy of Jesus. She was sorrow stricken woman. The poet alludes tears of Ruth after the death of her husband very effectively. She was Moabite woman who married an Israelite. After the death of her husband, she stays with her husband's mother. Ruth wins the love and compassion of her wealthy relative Boaz. She lives in Solitude as she was exiled. Through these classical references he sharpens the contrast between the immortality of the nightingale's song and the material life on his earth. He points out contrast by referring back with legend of Ruth in tears from Greek mythology.

The references from Greek mythology work as launching pad for the poet's flight of imagination. The words used by Keats are very apt and convincing. The poetic diction in the context is very symbolic and gives concrete as well as abstract ideas effectively. The dictions like 'numbness', 'light-winged', 'Beechen green', 'Leaden-eyed', 'starry fays', 'Vendurous glooms', 'mossy ways', 'alien corn' and 'the plaintive anthem' effective and suggestive in the context of the poetic description given by the poet. The last stanza of the poem works as stepping stone to the poem.

“Was it a vision or waking dream?”

“Fled is that music.....Do I Wake or Sleep?”

The ending lines break the poetic dream and toll the poet back to self. Professor Kenneth Muir has rightly remarks that “Fancy, the muse of escape poetry, is deceiving elf. Keats expresses with maximum of intensity the desire to escape from reality, and yet he recognizes that no escape is possible. (Roger, Sharrock. p- 34).

Many critics remark that Keats' poetry suffers from a number of other marked lacunas. His heavy overloading with obscure farfetched poetic diction and references from Greek literature and mythology are likely to confuse the average readers and present insurmountable difficulties for him. He lacks taste and artistic self control. A critic Kenneth Muir points out that “Ode To A Nightingale is not merely an expression of a single mood but succession of moods From being too happy in the happiness of the bird's song, Keats becomes aware of the contrast between the bird's apparent joy and the misery of the human condition, from the thought of which he can momentarily escape by wine, by poetry, by the beauty of nature or by the thought of death" (Roger, Shamrocks. p-34).

Conclusions :

The present study discusses the Hellenic spirit reflected in the poem of John Keats. Though the poet belongs to romantic school of poetry, he used references in his poem to enrich English poetry at level of highest quality by referring the classics from Greek literature. The study focuses on the poetic diction and imagination which are very obscure to the average reader. It analyzes the classical references in his poem which makes his poetry classics. In accordance with, Mathew Arnold's touchstone method real beauty of his poetry lies with classical references and allusions given by him.

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