

Analysis of Keats's Odes through the Lens of Imagery

Iftikhar Haider Malik¹ Usman Ahsan² Bushra Iqbal³



Abstract: Among all the Romantics, Keats is the one who is known as undisputed king of Odes. He has decorated his odes with the gems of pictorial images. Decidedly Imagery is a key weapon in the hands of Keats to satisfy his sense of sensuousness. He expresses his thoughts through this art. He does not use this art for the purpose of conveying truth and moral teaching but for its intrinsic values. As compared to the other Romantic poets like William Wordsworth, P.B. Shelley and St. Coleridge, Keats odes are grounded with beautiful mental images and sensory details. He has used vivid and concrete images to win the laurels in the world of Romanticism. These images are strongly linked with one another in layers which, reflect a dazzling array of sensory impressions like beads and pearls. His odes are really food for aesthetic sense which brighten the light of vision and strengthen the sense of smell and improve the taste of tongue. Hence, Keats uses his knack of Imagery to heighten the effect of his Odes in the world of Romantic poetry. It is beyond the doubt that no other romantic poet could enjoy such peak of popularity as Keats enjoyed through his Odes. His odes are granary of sensuousness and mental images.

Key Words: Sensuousnes, Odes, Imaginations, Images, Aesthetic Sense

Introduction

Among all the Romantics, Keats was the last to be born and the first to die, but quite surprisingly, he achieve all in 26 years, what others got in 70 or 60 years. As a romantic poet he stands supreme today. Keats was votary of Beauty. Beauty was his religion as Nature was Wordsworth's religion. Beauty was all and all for Keats. He was deeply soaked in sensuousness. Beaing a man of lovable nature, Keats wanted beauty to rule the world. But it was impossible; so he became escapist who wanted to escape into the world of beauty – indolence, nightingale, etc. but at last, he concluded that one could not shun the memories of life– the escape was impossible. Keats appreciated beauty through all his senses, while others enjoyed it through eyes only. He widened the scope of beauty, bringing it with in the fold of five senses. He did not employ poetry for any purpose; his purpose of composing poetry was just to create beauty and to appreciate it. He approached nature for its beauty only and did not find any hidden message in it.

Keats is king of pictorial images. He used these pictorial images in his odes to heighten the emotional effect of readers. Through the use of imagery in his universal notable odes he removes the differences between sequential and undying, physical and metaphysical boundaries for evoking emotional and sensuous sense of readers. His odes like "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Ode on Melancholy," "Ode to Psyche," "Ode on Indolence," and "To Autumn are hall marks of pictorial images. Through this research article, it is intended to analyze Keats's odes through the Lens of Imagery. The stud also aims to grow readers understanding about Keats creative process and his worthy contribution to the romantic tradition.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze Keats's odes through the Lens of Imagery.
2. To understand Keats's creative process and his worthy contribution to the romantic tradition.

¹ Associate Professor, Department of English, Mukabbir University, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan.

✉ dr15ihmalik@yahoo.com

² Head QEC, Mukabbir University, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan. ✉ Cvpost1@yahoo.com

³ PhD Scholar, Government College Women University, Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan. ✉ dr15ihmalik@yahoo.com

▪ **Corresponding Author:** Iftikhar Haider Malik (✉ dr15ihmalik@yahoo.com)

▪ **To Cite:** Malik, I. H., Ahsan, U., & Iqbal, B. (2025). Analysis of Keats's Odes through the Lens of Imagery. *Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 6(2), 49–54. <https://doi.org/10.55737/qjssh.vi-ii.25345>



Research Questions

1. How can Keats's odes be suitably analyzed through the lens of imagery?
2. How does Keats's poetic process contribute to the romantic tradition?

Review of the Literature

Over the past thirty years, there has been a lot of research and critical discussion on Romantic poetry, especially with reference to the Keats's odes. However, despite this scholarly attention, there are still many gaps that need to be filled. Keats' immense poetic genius and productive life attracted many biographers to expound and illuminate the source of his amazing excellence which he achieved in his short span of life. Unluckily, this fact-based analysis of these biographers prompted some critics to criticize Keats' work with an antagonistic effect. Again, it is a great grave issue for the literary critics to understand and comprehend the true nature of Romantic poetry, especially Keats' services which he rendered for the sake of Romanticism. Since this research article is concerned with the use of imagery in Keats's odes, it is vital to study two core styles and perceptions regarding the nature of Romantic imagery which gained momentum during the last two few decades.

In this connection, Earl Wasserman is of the view that Romantic poetry is void of concrete and patent objects. Rather full of vague and imprecise images. So to say a body of literary critics either showed no concern to examine and analyze true nature of imagery used in Romantic poetry or floundered in it just like an aromatic bath full of romantic aroma (Wasserman, 1953). They are least interested to know the aesthetic worth and value of imagery used by Keats in his remarkable Odes. It is the reason Wasserman criticizes those critics who have adopted imprecise and vague method of gauging the real worth of Keats' Poetry. The second major approach ranging from last three decades, used for viewing the depth of Keats' Poetry was much more challenging and difficult.

Two notable critics namely as Kermode and Bayley have underscored a main apprehension in modern literary criticism: regardless of its recurrent denial of Romantic principles and beliefs, it is still indebted to the Romantic belief of poetry. Hence they consider it a product of personal emotions and sentiments value for its own sake and having nothing to do with true realities of life. Anyhow there are many reasons to justify true relevance of Keats' poetry and his use of imagery in his Odes in the world of present existence. His odes hold their value among the notable poets of Romanticism due to their sensuousness and rich imagery. Every ode of Keats expresses and hold the same impression, though they have not been appreciated and welcomed as true archetypal of Romanticism.

Wilson says, the Romantic poet inclines to evade using real things of concrete nature, out of concern that they might make relations with the physical world. Instead, Keats attempts to improve the intangible form, because he wants to create obscure and hazy images that are refined, vague, and missing in discrete description.

One significant trait of Keats's odes is composing them on his own style which has nothing to do traditional Romantic setting. His odes are fully charged with his negative capability and sensuousness. They present true picture of tangible mental images. Such style makes his odes challenging to understand because they are roped with various layers of images which reflect and echo one another.

Robert is of the view that, many writers and readers count Keats in the same line of other romantic poets. They think him having the same belief regarding Nature, Imaginations, Sensuousness, concept of Beauty etc., as William Wordsworth, St. Coleridge, and P. B. Shelley etc. But these assumptions regarding Keats are falsified. Keats is matchless poet of Romantic Era. His concept of Beauty, Nature and Sensuousness has its own weight and value, which other Romantic poets do not enjoy (Spiller, 1955).

Keats's writing style is unique and powerful as compared to style of other Romantic poets of his time. He presents Nature and other concepts regarding romanticism with different experience and belief. He does not paint the picture with mere beautiful words rather his words have different connotations. This makes his imagery unique and full of sense as one can easily see, hear, touch and smell what he narrates. This mixture is called Sensuousness, which is life and blood of Keats 'Odes. This is what we can say that Keats is more modern than his contemporaries.

It is fully comprehended that Keats uses strong images which attract the senses strongly. His use of imagery in his odes is all pervasive. It is because that he uses all the senses i.e. hear, feel, taste, and smell etc.

Finney speaks two things about Keats's imagery. First, he describes that Keats poetry is granary of sensuousness as he includes all the five senses to make his poetry more appealing. He does not describe things as they look rather the readers feel them with all their senses (Finney, [48](#)).

It goes without saying that Keats' use of imagery in his odes is very rich and concrete in every aspect which attracts the readers to understand it with his own senses. Finney appreciates use of Keats imagery because it covers all forms of sense experiences. It reveals that when a reader reads his poems, he can easily understand as what things like (sight) sound like (hearing) feel like (touch) etc. They can even affect your interior body system, like happiness, pain, hunger and excitement. The use of imagery in Keats Odes becomes much prominent when a reader comes to understand what Keats actually wants to make him comprehend. Caldwell explains Keats fascination of escapism from the real world to the world of visions. This sense of escapism can easily be seen in his poems Ode to a Nightingale and Lamia (Caldwell, [1945](#)). Here is a brief introduction of Keats odes with his creative process.

Ode to Psyche

Ode to Psyche which serves a preamble for the later odes, is no doubt is one of the finest poems of Keats. This Ode is purely fanciful, a piece of lovely decorative mythology. Psyche is the soul, not recognized as a goddess either in the classical sense or in a Christian sense. It magnificently expresses his love of the classical legend. It is remarkable for his imagery and sublimity of style, the felicity of compound epithet e.g. fragrant-eyed, cool-rooted, the glow and music of its verse, splendor of its invocation and artful interaction of vowels. Keats is inspired to sing, seeing the goddess. He intends to be Psyche's priest and to build a fane in some untrodden region of his mind. (Bloom, [1961](#), p. 390).

Ode on Melancholy

Ode on Melancholy principally discovers the relationship between pain and pleasure, which is one of a recurrent theme in Keats's later works. There are extreme measures that the mood cannot survive. Melancholy falls suddenly lie an 'April shower', it has own reviving virtues. He recognizes that sadness is inevitably complement of the moments of intense happiness. Melancholy springs from the transience of joy and the transience of joy is a part of its nature, but it can be enjoyed by those" whose strenuous lounge can burst joy's grape against his palate fine", only their souls shall taste the sadness of her might and be among her cloudy trophies hung.

Walter Jackson Bate admires writing styles of John Keats, he says although Keats spent a very short span of life on this planet, but that was enviable for his contemporaries. He composed poetry under different styles. Every styles was splendid in tone and nature. His purpose was not to introduce something newness rather to introduce himself as an honest and open-minded poet in the world of Romantic Poetry (Bate, [1957](#)). Mayhead another critic argues that Keats art of imagery revealed in his odes is matchless. His art of imagery conveys a sense of restitution and liveliness. This quality of his style is seen throughout the odes.

Ode on a Grecian Urn

John Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* determine the superiority of Art on human life. Art knows no decline and death while human life is short lived. Keats realizes that Art has the ability to capture and preserve moments of human life, depicted on the Urn. Life is temporary. People come and go while Art is permanent without growing old tasting death. Time can not affect Art. According to Keats, the prime purpose of Art is to keep the important places and special moments alive.

Keeping the value of art in mind G. Wilson concludes, it has the ability to bring time and space together. It removes their differences and organize them together, either through t physical shapes which we can see or through other things that grow gradually but time does not affect them, like music we listen or tales we read (Knight, [259](#)).



In this ode, Keats strengthens his belief regarding Art which he considers superior to life. Art in his view has a higher purpose, which directly touches inner recesses of human heart and soul.

The figure shown on the Urn might be recognized as human beings or those of gods. No matter who they are, the interesting thing is that they are looking very joyous full of excitement. Similarly, Keats used splendid imagery in the second stanza, which is continuation of the first stanza. Theme presented by the poet is utter silence. First stanza of this ode is well structured having some sort of intense and compact poetic excellence. William Walsh says that the language of this stanza is spell-bounded. It ensnares the readers in its splendid poetic expression colored by splendid imagery. Readers not only enjoy the beauty of language but the beauty of Urn along with its form and structure (Walsh, 235)

Contrary to the first stanza of this ode on the Grecian Urn, the second stanza reveals the concept of both heard and unheard melodies but supporting the later one:

*Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.* (Ode on a Grecian Urn, lines 11–14)

The music refers to the “Pipes and Timbrels is not real one, it cannot be heard by physical hear but that of ears of imaginations. Such type of music directly hits the spirit not the physical ears. Keats gives more value to this kind of music as compared to the music which we hear by our physical ears. Similarly, the pictures of lovers depicted on the vase in the third stanza are more meaningful because Keats confirms them as full of restitution and liveliness. Although they are frozen by time on the Urn but they are vibrant and full of energy.

Ode to a Nightingale

Ode to a Nightingale is a loveliest poem of Keats, and decorated with fine imagery. It is an ode of midnight sorrow and beauty. ‘My heart aches and drowsy numbness, pains my sense’ is the poet’s condition. He listens to the song in the dead of the night. Headache comes from the excess of happiness in participating in the bird’s happiness, but drowsiness steals over him as if he had drunk death poison. The draught he longs for would carry him out of the world into forgetfulness of human sorrows. These ideas reflect his particular and personal grief. The youth that ‘grows pale’ and ‘lustrous eyes’ refer to his own experiences. Poetic genius transports him “not charioted by Bacchus and his pards” he hopes to fly on the ‘viewless wings of poesy’. Her perch amid the leaves is a heaven of eternity. Indeed in the ode, he has imaginatively passed through death, flown on the wings of imagination to the nature’s immortality, and his soul is poured forth with her soul in his ecstasy but the recoat comes, ‘forlorn’, and the very word like a bell, tolls him back from nature to his own self. Melancholy is reasserted against immortality of which the bird’s song is at once the symbol and the clixer. ‘Thou was not born for death, immortal bird’ an observer, ‘No hungry generations tread thee down’. The poem is fall of imaginative vistas of that eternity, the bird’s song is a symbol, but the poem is not a poem of despair. Its marvel is that it holds suspended in a moment of absolute beauty, the tension of between: time and eternity, joy and sorrow, mortality and immortality, life and death. The organic unity, vivid pictures, its rapturous music, its verbal magic, its concentrated epithets, such as ‘sunburn mirth’ ‘beaded bubbles’ etc., all make it marvelous piece of art.

Ode to ‘Autumn’

Ode to ‘Autumn’ is a highly objective and impersonal poem of Keats. It was composed in 1819 and might be the result of independent poetic impulse, however, even this poem is very close to the whole sequence of the odes. Autumn is a poetic symbol which tags a message – try to discover a principle of beauty in everything and this can be done only if we learn to appreciate different types of beauty in different things. Here Keats developed ability to take the beauty of the present moment so completely into the heart that it seems an eternal possession. The evolution of thought in the poem is perfectly logical and distinct.

“Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?

Think not of them, thou hast thy music, too.”

These lines are highly memorable and a boon for the suffering humanity.

Discussion

1. After a deep analysis it can be safely argued that Keats odes are replete with thick and dense pictorial images. Of course Keats is uncrowned writers of odes using tangible and sometime intangible images in his odes to make them appealing and universal as well. All his odes like —“Ode to a Nightingale,” “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” “To Autumn,” “Ode on Melancholy,” “Ode to Psyche,” and “Ode on Indolence” are fine examples of poets genuine and authentic use of imagery.

In “Ode to a Nightingale,” Keats use of pictorial images goes without saying. Through the spell bounded melodious song of Nightingale Keats find shelter in a world which is full of pleasure and sensuous beauty. Keats sensuous images in his famous ode On a Grecian Urn is matchless having visual imagery because urn’s frozen scenes invite the readers to meditate about Beauty and immutability. In the same way “Ode To Autumn” is fine example of tangible imagery, seizing the ripeness and profusion of the season as a metaphor for maturity and unavoidable debility.

2. Keats’s creative process is deeply rooted in the Romantic ideals of imagination, individual emotion, nature, and the pursuit of beauty. His universal odes prove a thoughtful and extremely creative style to lyrical formation. In his odes Keats not only explains but also transmutes commonplace practices into excellent images. Keats’s engagement in traditional mythos, his understanding to natural beauty, and his logical considerations on life expectancy and mortality merge through his art of creative pictorial images.

Contrasting to other Romantic poets of his age who usually colored their poetry in the color with political engagement or ethical themes, Keats composed his poetry not on moral bases but believed in “art for art’s sake”—artistic involvement as a medium of truth and understanding. Keats’ support to Romanticism rests in his capability to reveal forceful peculiar sentiment while concurrently attaining for worldwide truths. His concept of "Negative Capability"—the ability to embrace uncertainty and doubt without the need for factual clarity stands him on the pinnacles of success in the world of Odes and Romanticism.

Conclusion

In a word it, the Odes are not only the product of what Keats himself called negative capability but, taken together, these project ta uniquely full account of what it is like and how it develops. Reading in a particular order, these odes reflect the growth of port’s mind too, who, growing from a sensuous escapist finally turned into a humanist. There is a stark difference among the Romantic poets about the concept of Nature. Wordsworth calls Nature as a mentor, a spiritual guide and a healing force, while Shelley uses Nature as an agent of change and for political ideal. Coleridge takes Nature as a Supernatural entity. Keats’ concept of Nature is not moral one rather it is a thing of beauty, joy forever. We find deep and beautiful pictorial images which adds beauty to his odes. Modern critics count him matchless and superb poet of Odes. Decidedly the analysis regarding Keats’s use of fine imagery approves that his images are not decorative but characteristically interlaced into the structure and meaning of the poems. It bridges the sensory and the philosophical, enabling readers to involve with the poems on both an emotional and intellectual level. Different types of pictorial images used in the Odes highlights the basic themes of odes with unique information.



References

- Bayley, J. (1957). *The Romantic Survival: A Study in Poetic Evolution*. Chatto & Windus, London.
- Bate, W. J. (1957). *The Major English Romantic Poets: A Symposium in Reappraisal*. Illinois: Illinois University, Press.
- Bloom, H. (1961). *The Visionary Company*. London: Cornell University Press.
- Caldwell, J. R. (1945). *John Keats' Fancy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Finney, C. L. (1954). *The Evolution of Keats' Poetry*. Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Knight, G. W. (1964) *The Starlit Dome*. London: Methuen.
- Mayhead. (1967). *John Keats*. Cambridge University Press.
- Spiller, E. R. (1955). *The Cycle of American Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wasserman, R. E. (1953). *The Finer Tone*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Walsh, W. (1981). *Introduction to Keats*. Methuen & Co. Ltd., London.
- Wilson, J. D. (1984). John Keats' Self-Reflexive Narrative: "The Eve of St. Agnes". *South Central Review*, 1(4), 44-52. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3189461>