



REPRESENTATION OF NATURAL WORLD IN KEATS'S "ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE"

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Abstract - The prime objective of this article is to explore the representations of the natural world as presented in one of the famous odes of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" published in 1819. This paper seeks to analyze this ode from the Ecocritical Perspective which deals with the study of man's relationships with his physical environment along with his perception and conception of it. This article concludes that nature plays a very prominent role to generate sheer pleasure in man. The nature is represented as an active force, whereas persons are represented as positively beneficialized entities. This article is expected to be significant to those who are involved in teaching and learning ecocriticism.

Keywords- Ecocriticism, Nightingale, Ode, Representation

I. INTRODUCTION

We reside in the lap of nature. We see a great deal of natural substances and natural phenomena influencing us pleasantly or unpleasantly every day. The influences of nature tend to give birth to diverse feelings, emotions, opinions and revelations in us. Creative and imaginative persons present their perceptions and conceptions of nature in their writings. They make others feel and realize nature through their work of art and literature. They make use of nature as a device to project their feelings, emotions and attitudes. Varied writers view nature from diverse perspectives according to their places, surroundings, backgrounds, preferences, education, professions, ages and so on. Some take nature as a source of pleasure; some take it as a source of inspiration and revelation; some take it as a dynamic force, some take it as a kind entity; and some take it as an ugly and dull entity.

Nature carries a great symbolic significance in creative writings.

"Ode to a Nightingale" is a romantic poem composed by John Keats (1795-1821), who was a great romantic poet. "Ode to a Nightingale" is one of the most highly admired regular odes in English literature. It reveals Keats's keen imaginative faculty, heightened sensibility and those aesthetic qualities for which Keats is much well-known. He was one of the greatest lovers and admirers of nature. His love of nature was solely sumptuous and he cherished the gorgeous sights and scenes of nature.

The article writer has attempted to explore the nature in the ode, and its influences on the poetic persona. The poet says that the nightingale sings a song and he is taken by its melody into a state of half-painful and half-delicious sensation. The poet begins by describing the effect produced on him by the song of the nightingale. It is like a magic charm cast on him.

A. Objective of the Article

The fundamental objective of this article is to explore the representations of natural world in Keats's poem "Ode to a Nightingale".

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Review of literature involves definition of ode, features of ode, concept of ecocriticism and presentation of nature in the ode.

A. Ode

The ode, which is of Greek origin, means a poem written to be recited to the accompaniment of music. It is a serious and dignified composition almost always in rhyme. It is longer than the lyric proper. It is often in the form of an address. It is a long lyric serious in subject, elevated in style and elaborate in stanzaic structure. "Ode" is a



lyric poem usually marked by exaltation of feeling and style, varying length of line, and complexity of stanza forms. Its stanza forms vary. Cuddon (1999) considers ode as “a grand poem; a full dress poem.” Abrams (1993) views that “ode is a long lyric poem that is serious in subject and treatments, elevated in style, and elaborate in its stanzaic structure.” Lennard (2010) defines ode as “a formal, stately, or grand poem of some length.” Harmon(1991) assumes ode as “a single, unified, strain of exalted lyrical verse, directed to a single purpose, and dealing with one theme.”

B. Forms of Ode

There are primarily three forms of ode. They are:

1. The Dorian or Pindaric ode (Greek poet Pindar 522-448 BC)
2. The Lesbian or Horatian ode (Latin poet Horace 65-8 BC)
3. Irregular or Cowleyan ode (poet Abraham Cowley)

The Dorian ode: It is choric and is sung to the accompaniment of a dance. Its structure is borrowed from the movements of the dancers. it consists of three parts: a first stanza form, known as the strophe, during the recitation of which the dancers make a turn from the right to the left; a second stanza form, known as the antistrophe, during the recitation of which the dancer make a counter-turn from the left to the right ; and a third stanza-form , known as the epode, during the recitation of which the dancers stand still.

Gray’s odes “The progress of poesy” and “The Bard” are among the most successful imitations of this form in the English Language.

The Lesbian ode: It is simpler in form than the Pindaric ode and has therefore proved to be easier to imitate. It consists of a number of short stanzas similar in length and arrangement. The treatment is direct and dignified. Collin’s “Ode to Evening”, Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”, Keats “Ode to a Nightingale” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn” are the successful imitations of this form in the English language.

Irregular ode: In the irregular ode, each stanza finds its own pattern of line-length. The number of lines and rhyme schemes are irregular. Collin’s “The Passions”, Wordsworth’s “Ode on Imitation of Immortality” and Tennyson’s “Ode on the Duke of Wellington” are good examples of irregular ode.

C. Main Features of Ode

The basic features of ode are as follows:

- The dignified subject matter.
- The ode is generally in the form of an address.
- Leisurely slow-winding movement.
- Over-elaboration and spacious planning.
- Subjective expression
- Musicality.
- It is longer than a lyric proper.

D. Examining the Features of Ode in “Ode to the Nightingale”

“Ode to the Nightingale” is an ode in which the speaker addresses the nightingale which he considers to be carefree, immortal and happy. This poem deals with the dignified subject matter: transience of the human life or the mortality of the human life or suffering in the human life. Therefore the speaker likes to escape from this suffering world of the reality to the pleasing world of imagination. It is a longer poem in which the poet addresses a nightingale. We find slow-winding movement of the plot. It employs the over-elaboration and spacious planning. It is longer than a lyric proper. Plenty of reference items are added to elaborate the main thesis of the poem.

“ My heart aches”, “ a drowsy numbness pains”, “too happy in thine happiness”, “testing of Flora”, “ dissolve and quite forget”, “half in love with easeful Death”, “the voice I hear this passing night”, “ vision or a walking dream” etc are the personal feelings or experiences of the speaker . These are the subjective projections of the speaker. The musical quality in this poem can primarily be realized through rhyme. The rhyming pattern in this poem is ababcdecde in each stanza. The above mentioned features form this poem a good ode in English literature.

E. Ecocriticism

The term ecocriticism was first coined by William Rueckert in his critical writing “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” in 1978.

Ecocriticism is a rapidly emerging field of literary study that considers the relationship between the human beings and the environment. Environmental critics explore how nature and the natural world are imagined through literary texts. Fenn (2015) asserts that “ecocriticism is a rapidly changing theoretical approach, which is different from the traditional approach to

literature.” According to Love (2003), ecocriticism focuses on the “inter connections between the material world and human culture, specifically the cultural artifacts language and literature.” Frederick (2007) assumes ecocriticism “to give human beings a better understanding of nature.”

Ecocriticism is the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, where literature scholars analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. Ecocriticism is a term used for the observation and study of the relationship between the literature and the earth’s environment. It takes an interdisciplinary point of view by analysing the works of authors, researchers, and poets in the context of environmental issues and nature. Ecocriticism is an emergent research field that, according to Heise (2008), “has evolved in literary criticism and cultural studies since the early 1990s.” Clark(2011) talks about the space of ecocriticism as a “crucial, exciting but sometimes bewildering intersection of issues.”

Ecocriticism is the study of representations of nature in literary works and of the relationship between literature and the environment. Ecocriticism as an academic discipline began in earnest in the 1990s, although its roots go back to the late 1970s. Because it is a new area of study, scholars are still engaged in defining the scope and aims of the subject. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) in *The Ecocriticism Reader* define ecocriticism as: The study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of its texts, eco criticism takes an earth centered approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty and Fromm)

F. Representations of Natural World in the Ode

Nature involves all the animals, plants, and other things, that are not made by people; and all the events and processes that are not caused by people. Emerson defines nature as “essences unchanged by man,” and art as a “mixture of man’s will with what is

unchanged by man.” A nightingale is a major word in the ode. The nightingale is a small passerine bird best known for its powerful and beautiful song. Seeing a nightingale is always difficult, as it is famous for its ability to lurk in thick cover where it is difficult to mark.



Figure 1: Nightingale

In this ode, the poet addresses the nightingale which he considers to be carefree, immortal and happy. He hears the nightingale singing somewhere in the garden. He is so charmed by its song that he feels as if he has drunk hemlock or emptied the Lethe-ward.

One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
 ’Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
 But being too happy in thine happiness.
(4-6)

The poet tells us that he has become restless to hear the song of the nightingale. He has become lethargic just as he takes hemlock or some sleep producing drug in large quantity. He has just drunk the water from Lethe-wards. According to Greek mythology, Lethe-wards is a river in the lower world. Its water makes people forget when they drink it. The water of Lethe-wards is assumed to have the intoxicating power that makes the poet forget the bitter reality of life. He takes the nightingale as a light-winged Dryad of the trees. Dryad is a wood nymph, also called hamadryad, in Greek mythology, a nymph or nature spirit who lives in trees and takes the form of a beautiful young woman. Dryads were originally the spirits of oak trees (*drys*: “oak”), but the name was later applied to all tree nymphs. It is believed that they live only as long as the trees live in.

That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees
 In some melodious plot
 Of beechen green, and shadows
numberless,
 Singing of summer in full-throated
ease. (7-10)



Figure 2: Dryads

He takes the nightingale as a light-winged Dryad of the trees. Dryad is a wood nymph, also called hamadryad, in Greek mythology, a nymph or nature spirit who lives in trees and takes the form of a beautiful young woman. Dryads were originally the spirits of oak trees (*drys*: "oak"), but the name was later applied to all tree nymphs. It is believed that they live only as long as the trees live in. For him, the song of the bird is a source of pleasure. The place of solitude is presumed as a place of pleasure and peace. Dryads are represented as peace loving beings.

Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
 With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
 And purple-stained mouth;
 That I might drink, and leave the world
 unseen,
 And with thee fade away into the forest dim.
 (16-20)



Figure 4: Hippocrene source on Mt. Helicon



Figure 3: Beech

The poet thinks that he has drunk the water of Hippocrene. Hippocrene is a spring on Mt. Helicon. It is sacred to the Muses and it was formed by the hooves of Pegasus. Its name literally translates as "Horse's Fountain" and the water is supposed to bring forth poetic inspiration when it is drunk. Pegasus is a mythical winged divine stallion who is one of the most recognized creatures in Greek mythology. He desires to disappear into the dark forest as an indispensable component of nature.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
 Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
 But on the viewless wings of Poesy, (31-33)



Figure 5: Bacchus, a Roman god of wine

The poet rejects the idea of seeking inspiration by drinking wine. He prefers to be transported by poetic imagination into the world of dreams. He soon finds himself with the aid of imagination in the company of the bird. He does not need the aid of Bacchus, the Roman god of wine. Poetry alone shall transport him. It reflects his love for

Hellenism in poetry that shows the use of wild animals for our benefits.

Already with thee! tender is the night,

And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,

Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;



Figure 6: The moon

The poet pinpoints the night that is affectionate, attributes the moon by regarding her as Queen. The moon is surrounded by Starry fays -fairies in the form stars. They create a beautiful natural vista. He is sitting in the thick garden where the light has been unable to penetrate the thickness of the trees. But he feels the gentle air coming from heaven through the green dark mossy way.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,

Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet

Wherewith the seasonable month endows (41-44)



Figure 8: Flowering thick forest

But here there is no light,

Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown

Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways. (35- 40).



Figure 7: Starry fays (fairies)

The poet cannot see the flowers on the ground of the garden, but he is aware of the late spring flowers that surround him. He feels them through their fragrance and imagines them in the darkness. He is listening to the song of the nightingale.

The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;

White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;

Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;

And mid-May's eldest child,

The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,

The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves. (45-50)



Figure 9: Grass flowers



Figure 10: Thicket



Figure 11: Fruit tree



Figure 12: Hawthorn



Figure 13: Eglantine



Figure 14: Violet



Figure 25: Musk-rose



Figure 16: Flies (Bees)

Although the poet cannot see the flowers due to the thickness of the garden, he recognizes them through their fragrance. He comes to identify that the grass, the thicket, and the

fruit-tree wild, white hawthorn, the pastoral eglantine, violets and the musk-rose are blooming there. Different sorts of flies are flying round these flowers. They are sucking

nectar of the flowers for making honey and they are merrily producing murmuring sound in the summer evenings.

Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,

She stood in tears amid the alien corn;



Figure 17: Corn field



Figure 19: Fairy land

The poet believes that the nightingale is an immortal bird. Her song has been heard since time immemorial. It is the bird that gave joy to Ruth, who was a widow and whenever she wept in the memory of her husband, the sweet song of the bird consoled her. In the alien country, she became a gleaner in fields of



Figure 20: Meadow

The same that oft-times hath

Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam

Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn. (66-70)



Figure 18: Sea

Boaz. (Biblical Reference). The poet further mentions that in ancient times, the maidens, who were locked up in high towers by evil men, would open the windows (casements) and look over the terrifying seas and hear the nightingale singing in the solitary lands of fairies.

Past the near meadows, over the still stream,

Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep

In the next valley-glades:

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?

Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep? (76-80)

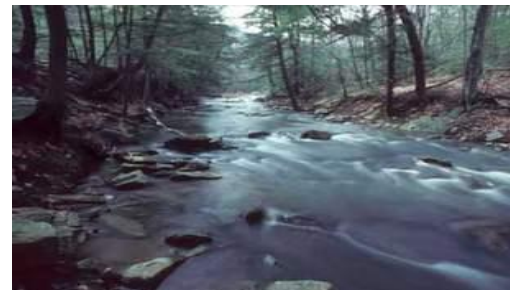


Figure 21: Stream



Figure 22: Valley-glades



Figure 23: Elf

The poet realizes that imagination and an elf (an imaginary small being with magic power) cannot cheat him for a long time. The song which was regarded as joyous seems to be melancholic. The song of the nightingale starts subsiding and fading away gradually from the meadow, the stream, hill-side and valley-glades. The illusion which his imagination had created now vanishes. The song of the bird also becomes fainter and fainter, and the poet is left in doubt whether he was dreaming all this time or his experience was real. The nature, especially the song of the bird had mesmerizing effect on the poet.

G. Theme of the Ode

When we analyze the ode from the ecocritical point of view, we come to realize that the major theme of this ode is nature as a source of creating feelings of pleasure and eccentricity in man.

III. CONCLUSION

“Nightingale” is represented as a central entity in the ode. It is such a singing bird which is hardly seen, but her mellifluous song is distinctively perceived. The song of the bird is so affective that the human heart is stirred and moved. The world of the bird is assumed to be a unique world of pleasure, peace and purity. The world of the bird is nature that is always spontaneous, inspiring, pleasing and enigmatic. The bird is also a part and parcel of nature. The ode reveals that the nature / song of the bird influences the human beings, but it does not explore whether nature is influenced by human beings or not. Therefore, natural world is represented as an active force, whereas the poet, the emperor, the clown and a biblical character Ruth are represented as positively beneficialized persons in this ode.

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