

***The Embodiment of Sensuousness in The Eve of St. Agnes by John Keats***

*The Eve of St. Agnes* is one of the most beautiful poems of John Keats which describes the medieval romance. It is a story of two lovers and their families which have different view from each other. the present poem is a narrative poem which tells the story of two young lovers Porphyro and Madeline who love each other but their family does not like this. this poem basically reflects poet's own love story. Here, Porphyro resembles to John Keats and Madeline resembles Fanny Brown who Keats really loved in reality.

The commonest response to "*The Eve of St. Agnes*" has been the celebration of its "*heady and perfumed loveliness.*" The poem has been called " *a monody of dreamy richness,*" " *one long sensuous utterance,*" " *an expression of lyrical emotion,*" " *a great affirmation of love,*" " *a great choral hymn,*" *an expression of* "unquestioning rapture," and many things else.

In short, *The Eve of St. Agnes* can be read as the dramatic monologue of the anonymous speaker who addresses to both the audience and the characters in order to convey the attitude toward the organised religion, i.e. his disgust to the vulgar superstition.

The poem begins with an unequivocal depiction of what Keats does not want in life; he does not want Christianity or anything it stands for. He assaults our senses with his description of an icy cold chapel on a January night; indeed, Keats's embodied language is so forceful, that one could easily believe he is depicting a frozen ante-room to hell. Having already established the picture of gelid misery in the depths of winter outdoors, Keats moves swiftly to depict a scene of equal wretchedness inside the chapel:

*Numb were the Beadsman's fingers while he told*

*His rosary, and while his frosted breath,*

*Like pious incense from a censer old,*

*Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,*

*Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.*

Keats establishes the deathly sound of silence in the first three stanzas of the poem: the sheep are huddled and silent; although the Beadsman is praying, his physical act of speech lacks force or substance. His frosted breath floats upwards like the last wisps of smoke from an old censer. Keats's likening of the Beadsman's breath to incense is the only hint of smell—and that, by inference—in these stanzas. As he leaves the chapel, the old man passes by silent statues “*praying in dumb orat'ries*”. This is not so much a contrast with his own feeble

prayers, as a juxtaposition that serves to emphasize the equal futility of both mimed and living gestures. There is little to attract the eye in this cold Christian world; the colours are those of death and winter: black, grey, and white. They are also the colours of a film negative—insubstantial, waiting to be developed and brought to life. Keats has no need to mention the whiteness of snow: the hare and owl in their winter camouflage and the huddled sheep are the living embodiment of the colour “white” and the suspended animation of winter. The Beadsman’s breath is white or light grey in the frosty air, and he is “wan” . suggesting an image of a “pale, colourless, bloodless” body. The final touch in this grim negative of life is the “black purgatorial rails”, that imprison the statues in the chapel. Presiding over it all is the “sweet Virgin’s picture” . Keats writes nothing by accident, so it is worth noting that in all the descriptive lines about the chapel, there is no mention of cross, crucifix, or pictures of Jesus: the only picture mentioned is that of Mary the Virgin. Keats lays out in specific, concrete language, that which offends and repels him—his anti-ideal—which includes the Christian Virgin Mary, whose presence in *The Eve of St. Agnes* is crucial in establishing one aspect of his contrasting view of women.

The theme of embodied female sexuality is developed fully in stanzas XXV and XXVI, in which Madeline completes the final act of the ritual, and then disrobes. Jeffrey Baker, who reads Porphyro as a duplicitous and “besotted spy”, contends that the young protagonist himself has “two visions of Madeline”, essentially a

variation on the virgin/whore schematic; he argues further that Porphyro's swooning fit is caused by the disjuncture of the two images of Madeline he sees when spying on her. That may indeed be the case from Porphyro's point of view; however, Keats may have a deeper purpose here than just invoking a pure and saintly image to be contrasted in the following stanza with a more sensual one. Consider the embodied language of sensuality in these lines:

*Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,  
And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast  
As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;  
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,  
And on her silver cross, soft amethyst,  
And on her hair a glory, like a saint*

Both Porphyro and Madeline experience various stages of reality and fantasy, waking and dreaming; they react differently to the jarring, and at times, "painful change", of moving from one state to another, especially when their separate realities collide: she weeps and moans "witless words with many a sigh" , he kneels with "joined hands and piteous eye". Both young lovers intensely wish for their union to become reality; that it does so is "testimony to the power of human desire to realize itself, to transform awareness" . Keats uses his deeply embodied language in the poem to heighten and emphasize all life's contrasts: youth and

age, heat and cold, life and death. His constant use of contrast as a poetic device is a clear indication that he knows there is always a cost to be borne; he knows that change and transformation required by life are painful and inevitable: from pupa to tiger moth, from girl to woman, and from youth to old age. He knows death comes to all living things. Yet, knowing and accepting all life's negatives, and despite his self-doubt, conflicts, and weakness, Keats is still able to create a moment of—a monument to—life-affirming beauty in *The Eve of St. Agnes*.

**By, Arshad Khan**

**Dept. of English**

**J N College Madhubani**