

Keats' Poetic Character

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Keats was primarily concerned with questions of fundamental nature, man's destiny on earth, the problem of human suffering in a time haunted death ridden world, and the significance of this suffering in realising identity and selfhood. There is also realisation that mutability world haunt mankind even if an ideal social order were realisable. Together with this the thought of flux and mutability became increasingly oppressive since Tom's illness. Tom's illness also marked an inward tendency in Keats (the focus shifted from external arena of action to the inner world of thought). The poet came to perceive that to achieve salvation, man must release his own spiritual energy and realise that sorrow is wisdom.

Anyone familiar with Keats' letters will be struck by his humour, presence of an alert intelligence to discern the ludicrous and the absurd.

Wodehouse wrote a letter to Keats urging him not to give up writing, and the poet in reply explained the inconsistencies of the poetical character; 'As to the poetical character itself...it is not itself—it has—it is everything and nothing—it has no character—it enjoys light and shade, it lives in gusto... It shocks the virtuous philosophy, delights the poets...a poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence ... by an art like that of the ventriloquist he throws his imagination out of himself... one might suppose that he has stood by at that time and overheard what passed.'

Keats has contrasted men of achievement with men of power. In 'Hyperion' he has shown the victory of the men of achievement. Elsewhere Keats explains that Intelligence, the Human heart and the World act upon each other for the purpose of 'Forming the soul or intelligence destined to possess the sense of identity.' Then follows the parable of the world as a school, the heart of the hornbook, and the soul of the child (read the passage on soul-making in 'Hyperion'). The Vale of soul-making is the same as the vale in which Apollo meets Mnemosyne.

In the autumn of 1818, Keats has described the poet as having no identity. Apollo being a poet likewise has no identity. Identity is the static character which the poet must avoid at all cost.

The destination of Apollo symbolises not only the transformation of a dreamer to a great poet but also the work of a soul in ordinary man by the oppression of suffering. Keats made identity to mean individuality which must be added to intelligence to make it a soul.

All of Keats theories about poetry were developed from the remarks made by Hazlitt. Nevertheless, Keats' originality cannot be denied.