

Štěpaník, Karel

## Summary

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## SUMMARY

The main object of the present study of Keats's poetry is a critical examination of the reflection of objective reality in the poet's mind and work. The research has been undertaken because the author is convinced that its results will furnish a sound basis for a better understanding and evaluation of Keats's contribution to English poetry. As it is the first monographic study of the poet in Czech since F. Chudoba's essay written in 1913 many facts and *loci communes* of later Keatsian research have been introduced for the benefit of those readers who cannot read English. It was also necessary for the author to translate many poems and letters of which no Czech translation has been published.

Keats's poems and verses reveal clearly enough three principal sources of inspiration, three different aspects of objective reality reflected in their ideological content and artistic form: (1) nature and society, (2) the poet's private life, and (3) literature and art. This has suggested to the author the three principal parts in which to deal with the main problem of his research. The first, *Keats and His Age*, examines the reflection of natural and social reality in Keats's mind and poetry; the second, *Keats's Poetic Autobiography*, examines and illustrates the influence of Keats's personal life, experience, and character on his views and creative development; and the third, *Literary Sources of Keats's Work*, examines Keats's indebtedness to literary and artistic influences in general, and his relation to Spenser in particular.

This purely methodological division obviously does not imply any real separation of the three indivisible aspects either of objective reality or its subjective reflection and expression in Keats's poetry.

### I

The first part consists of six chapters, of which the first two form a general introduction to the whole book. The first chapter called *The Historical Development of England between the French Revolution and the Reform Bill of 1832*, characterises the age in which Keats and the other English romanticists lived as a period of great revolutionary changes in economic, social and political life of the people. As a result of these changes Great Britain was transformed from a mainly agricultural country into an industrial and commercial state, while in the political sphere it changed definitely from an aristocratic-bourgeois monarchy into a bourgeois democratic colonial empire.

The second chapter called *The English Romantic Movement*, sums up the corresponding ideological and literary development of the age. It discusses the attempts at a definition of romanticism and the romantic method of artistic creation, and gives a brief outline of the principal representatives of English romanticism. Adopting the division of the English romanticists into two politically and ideologically antagonistic camps (reactionaries and revolutionaries), the author points out what Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott etc. have in common with their younger contemporaries Byron, Shelley, Keats etc., and why they could favourably influence, and often were on friendly terms with, one another. The place of Keats is, preliminarily, shown to be among the ranks of progressive and revolutionary writers of his time. The progressive character of his views and poems is illustrated and corroborated in the following chapters.

The third chapter called *The Reflection of Social Reality in Keats's Early Poems*, proves (the author hopes, convincingly) that Keats was neither apolitical nor escapist. His greatest ambition was to do some good to the world. He walked through life with his eyes and ears eagerly open to whatever was going on around him. And he prepared himself conscientiously for his future career, first as doctor, then as professional writer. If he did not take a more active part in public life, it was not for lack of good will or interest, but for want of experience when he was young, and of health when he reached maturity. Several among his earliest poems show his keen interest in contemporary social problems and political struggles. And all through his life he openly took sides with the democratic forces of progress, peace, and liberty.

The fourth chapter called *Keats's Social Criticism*, presents and analyses documents from Keats's poems and letters which show the poet's increasing hatred of oppression, exploitation, injustice and political reaction in the years following Waterloo, as well as the growth of his social and poetic ambition to assist the people and the friends of liberty in their struggle against tyrannical rulers, governments and classes.

Keats's sincere love of the people (shown for instance in his »Robin Hood« etc.) and his militant humanism form the main object of discussion in the fifth chapter called *Keats's Humanism*. Though he had doubts and misgivings about bourgeois progress, Keats never lost his deep faith in the final coming of a better future for men and women all over the world. This faith was based on his conviction of the essential goodness and selflessness of man. But his own experience taught him that the obstacles in the way of a better future for all, i. e. tyranny, capitalistic exploitation, militarism, religious superstition and clericalism etc., had first to be annihilated. As the most important factor in the struggle of the poor and oppressed for improvement of their condition he regarded education. In educating the masses a progressive writer could be of great assistance, and Keats hoped to become such a writer and thus ensure to himself the only kind of immortality in which he seems to have believed in his last years.

The sixth chapter called *Keats's Progressive Romanticism*, vindicates Keats's place among English progressive romanticists and discusses his personal and literary relations with Byron, Shelley, Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt. The last two, being among his intimate friends, exercised the most potent influence on his political and aesthetic views. As to Byron and Shelley, Keats shared many of their political ideas and convictions, and to a certain extent admired their poetry, but he differed from them in one essential point; he never reached their conviction that existing social contradictions could be solved by a violent revolution. Keats's idea of revolution (as embodied for example in his fragmentary epic poem »Hyperion«) is not based on scientific historical knowledge and shows that Keats had not transgressed the limitations of bourgeois critical reformism.

## II

There is practically no single poem of Keats's into which his personal life or character have not penetrated, directly or indirectly. That is why the second part of this study is the longest. Another cause of its extensiveness is the fact that for the use of Czech readers it was regarded necessary to register and discuss some data

of Keats's biography that are not reflected in his poems but help us to understand them and bring up to date our Keatsian literature.

Thus the first chapter called *The Period of Preparation*, recounts mainly those facts of Keats's life which preceded his earliest known attempts at original composition. The period in question covers the formative years of the poet (1795–1813). Unmistakable allusions to Keats's childhood and youth, however, are to be found in only a few of his poems, though the seeds and roots of the main characteristic features of his poetry, such as his love of nature, his love of the country, his hatred of cruelty and oppression, his admiration for beauty, etc., are to be looked for in that period of growth and preparation.

The second chapter called *Medical Studies and First Poems*, gives account of Keats's awakening to the pleasures of literature and poetry in the last few terms at school and during the first years of apprenticeship, and discusses also the possible influence of his medical studies and training on his poetry. Though Keats began writing rather late (in the author's opinion not earlier than in his nineteenth year), he made up for it by his rapid intellectual and artistic development, especially after his coming to London and finding many literary and artistic friends who recognized his talent and helped him to fulfil its promise.

Keats's friendly association with these men of letters and artists is discussed in the third chapter called *Keats's Friends*. The greatest part of it is devoted to Keats's relation with Leigh Hunt whose influence on Keats's poetry is often overrated or misjudged; among Keats's numerous other friends attention is paid to Haydon, Reynolds, Brown, Bailey and a few others, all of whom played an important role in Keats's life and affected also his artistic creation.

The fourth chapter called *Keats's Brothers and Sister*, discusses the poet's devotedness to his younger brothers George and Tom and to his sister Fanny. Their mutual affection may be traced not only in Keats's correspondence but also in some of his poems, e. g. »The Epistle to My Brother George«, the sonnet »Small, busy flames«, »Endymion«, etc.

The fifth chapter entitled *Keats and Nature*, illustrates and evaluates the realistic foundations and character of Keats's nature poetry and imagery, chiefly as shown in the poems published in 1817 and in »Endymion«, i. e. before Keats saw mountainous scenery and drew all his pictures of nature from his experience of the South of England countryside and seaside.

The sixth chapter called *The Scottish Tour* describes Keats's walking tour with Brown to North-West England and Scotland in 1818, and gives a detailed account of his impressions as known from his letters and expressed in his verses composed during the journey. From these documents we learn to understand better Keats's real attitude to nature and scenery – the inspiration of some of his greatest poetic achievements – but also his attitude to man, his sincere love of the poor and simple inhabitants of England, Scotland and Ireland, his interest in their way of life and their character, last but not least, in the improvement of their material and cultural conditions.

The seventh chapter *The Period of Mature Creation* (divided in two sections, »Trials of Life« and »Keats's Loves«) discusses Keats's experiences in the last two years of his creative career (from autumn 1818 to February 1820) and their reflection and influence on his last poems. The first section deals with his reaction to the critical attacks on his »Endymion« and to Tom's death. The second discusses his relation

to women in general, and to those with whom he was or may have been in love, in particular. Regarding his relation with Mrs. Isabella Jones, the author accepts the discoveries concerning the person of this friend of Keats's made by R. Gittings, but he cannot accept Gittings's hypothetical conjectures regarding Isabella Jones as Keats's mistress and inspirer of the »Bright Star« sonnet, »The Eve of St. Agnes« etc. Gittings's evidence is inconclusive and highly improbable. The author therefore agrees with Colvin, Murry and other biographers and critics of Keats who regard the above-mentioned poems as expressions of Keats's love for his fiancée Fanny Brawne.

### III

The third part of the present study concerned with the literary and artistic sources of Keats's poetry cannot deal with the subject as exhaustively as it deserves because the material is extremely copious. For want of space the author has had to content himself with a brief indication of his attitude to the much-debated question of literary influences in general, and with a vindication of his approach to the problem of Keats's indebtedness in particular (in the first two chapters). Then he proceeds to discuss in detail the generally acknowledged but not yet critically and fully examined influence of Edmund Spenser on Keats's work (in the fourth chapter).

The first chapter called *Keats's Relation to Literature and Art* illustrates and analyses in a few selected typical examples the effect of poetry and works of art upon Keats's senses, mind and creative talent. It shows that a poem or a picture that appealed to his sense of truth and beauty could inspire him as powerfully and effectively as nature or living men and women. Works of art were to him not only »things of beauty« to be enjoyed but also objects of serious and profitable study.

The second chapter called *Keats's Reading* tries to establish as fully as possible (on the basis of Keats's, his friends', and his students' evidence) the extent of Keats's knowledge of authors, artists, thinkers, scholars and scientists and their works. The alphabetical lists of writers and books etc. prove that he was a voracious reader, a frequent visitor of galleries, theatres and concerts. Several preserved volumes with his markings and notes prove that he was also a critical student who constantly compared what he read with what he knew from his own experience.

Keats's indebtedness to literary sources has been discussed by most Keatsian biographers and critics, though not always with due respect to objective evidence. The third chapter called »*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*« and »*Rhododaphne*« illustrates the unreliability of some suggestions or conjectures as to Keats's alleged sources or models. Many widely different parallels for nearly every line of Keats's famous ballad have been »discovered« by diligent source-hunters (Finney, De Sélincourt, Amy Lowell, W. Beyer, R. Gittings etc.) in Shakespeare, Spenser, Wieland, old English ballads and romances etc., but no one has suggested Peacock's mythological poem »*Rhododaphne*« (published shortly before the composition of Keats's poem) as his most probable literary inspiration. A detailed comparison of the two poems shows quite clearly numerous and conspicuous analogies and parallels in the theme, images, verbal expressions, ideas, characters and metrical form which cannot be dismissed as mere chance coincidences. Though the author cannot produce any objective proof of Keats' actual reading of Peacock's poem, the resemblance between the two works leaves no doubt in his own mind that »*La Belle Dame*« was influenced by »*Rhododaphne*«.

The fourth and last chapter deals with the relation of Keats and Spenser. The author has selected this subject for detailed discussion because Spenser's influence on Keats was the first and the most permanent of all (with the possible exception of Shakespeare). It was Spenser who inspired Keats to write his earliest known poem, and Spenser's influence is still strong and clear in Keats's last poem, »The Cap and Bells«.

The chapter consists of four sections, the first discussing and interpreting Keats's first poem »Imitation of Spenser«, the second, the two fragmentary romances »Specimen of an Induction to a Poem« and »Calidore, the third, Spenser's influence on Keats's later poems. This section also discusses Spenser's and Keats's conceptions of poetry and its social function. The last section is devoted to a discussion of Keats's Hellenism which is a characteristic feature of a great part of his poetry and has manifested itself especially in his preference for themes and images drawn from classical Greek mythology. Spenser, who like most English Renaissance poets and writers, was also a great admirer of classical myths and literature, undoubtedly fostered and strengthened Keats's interest in the subject and most probably influenced the idealistic philosophy as well as the imagery and composition of Keats's mythological allegory »Endymion«.

The foregoing critical examination of Keats's relation to Spenser makes it clear (as would the examination of his relation to any other author, English or foreign, classical or modern) that from the very beginning of his literary career this great romantic poet was never a slavish imitator. Like some of his most favourite authors, Spenser, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton etc., Keats drew inspiration and strength from the best works of the past and present, but he generally took only what he found true and beautiful refusing anything that he regarded as false or bad. And what he used he transformed according to his own knowledge, experience and ideals so as to make it suit his own purpose.

In his life and poetry Keats ardently pursued the ideal of truth and beauty. The author of this work hopes that the results of his inquiry into the sources of Keats's inspiration explain why, in his best poems, he has achieved that unity of truth and beauty which he regarded as the hall-mark of perfect art.

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