

Troubled Sea of the Mind:

A Study of the Horror in the Select Poems of John Keats

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Abstract

Horror is an “intense fear” that puts an individual’s emotions under threat creating “terror”, “disgust”, or “shock”. But horror as a genre captures the mind of the readers and audience with a sense of enjoyment. It is a releasing experience. It is “the physical and emotional release that follows scary situations”. And it is very close to “uncanny”, “terrible in nature that, according to Freud, “arouses dread and creeping horror”. The genealogy of horror as a literary genre can be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome. It was only in the late 18th and early 19th century when horror bloomed as the most successful literary genre. This paper on horror primarily tries to focus on select poems of Keats and presentation of horror in different sections of his poetic journey. A close reading of his poems not only offers the extraordinary capacity of thinking “on his pulses”, a highly loaded sensual Nature but also of a lurking trauma, creeping anxiety for death. In Keats, the beauty of nature has to be cherished with an uncertainty of existence. Certainly, Keats was influenced by Gothicism.

Keywords: Horror, Gothic, genre, death.

Some show the horror in explicit, close-up detail, a few show very, very little or merely hint at a horrible sight before cutting away. Many tell a story from the

point of view of the victims, others from that of the monsters. . .

(Cherry 13)

There are numerous types of horror in literature. The horror elements are included from a variety of times and places. The varieties of its type contribute more to the lack of its specific definition than to demonstrate and define horror as a particular genre of literature. In literature, the aim of the horror is to horrify the readers and create sensations. Seeing horror from this perspective requires giving attention to the strategies by which the horror is produced. Narration is one of the processes. Other strategies are to confront the readers with images of murder, death, violence, eeriness, walking corpses, unknown beasts, man-made monster, demon possession etc. The horror positions the readers in such a way that they experience fears and sensational uncanniness. Horror takes a shape in mind generally from thoughts of death, physical sufferings, psychological anxieties, loss, failures, inabilities etc. Fear arises out of feelings of guilt, loss of faith, unstable emotional state of mind, doubts, hesitation, irrational and incomprehensible issues, and disturbing events.

Horror or fear is an essential part of the Gothic. To quote Howard Philips Lovecraft: “THE OLDEST and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown. These facts few psychologists will dispute, and their admitted truth must establish for all time the genuineness and dignity of the weirdly horrible tale as a literary form” (4). The horror as a genre of literature has confused readers in their efforts at defining its specificities. To quote Joan Hawkins “. . . horror is not the only genre or category that is hard to pin down, nor is it the only genre or category that continually flirts with the possibility of existing simultaneously as high and low art” (43). In origin, Gothic is a race-term. It comes from the Goths, one of the Germanic tribes who invaded Britain as well as Rome and put an end to Roman domination. For the Renaissance scholars, it means whatever is pre-Roman. It also means non-classical architecture dating from the twelfth to the sixteenth century. The term

'Gothic' initially connotes visions of a medieval world and a style of architecture that originated in France and flourished from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. The Gothic shows reaction against the sedate neoclassicism of earlier eighteenth-century culture through a setting, consisting of castles, monasteries, ruined houses, an interplay of irrational and fanciful forces and violations of moral and social order. In literature, the Gothic novel is intimately connected with the mainstream of English fiction. The most important characteristics of the Gothic novel are the presence of a medieval castle, secret corridors, puzzling underground passages, supernatural surroundings, subtle suggestions of fear, dark forests, wild and desolate landscape, ruined abbeys, feudal halls, tombs or graveyards. It is also marked by characters who are good or evil. The other features are a villain, or a monster or a devil, heroes and heroines, passionate love affair Gothic novel also deals with fantastic tales and a dark or prohibited element. So it is evident that the word 'Gothic' comes to mean what is medieval, supernatural, mysterious, and wild. It is also synonymous with 'barbaric' or 'crude'. In the Introduction to *Supernatural Horror in Literature* by H. P Lovecraft, we note the following lines: "The True weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rules. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain..." (5).

The beginning of the horror is connected with the works of those major writers who are credited with setting the Gothic tradition. They are Horace Walpole (1717-97), Clara Reeve (1729-1807), William Beckford (1759-1844), Mrs. Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823), Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775-1818), and Charles Robert Maturin (1782-1824). Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) establishes the genre of the gothic novel in England. The most successful creator of Gothic stories is Mrs Ann Radcliffe. Her finest work is *The Mysteries of*

Udolpho (1794). Mathew Gregory Lewis is also the greatest in representing horror through his work *The Monk* (1797). William Beckford creates an elaborate Gothic fantasy through his novel *Vathek* (1786). Robert Maturin's novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) and Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) also excel in producing the emotion of horror. We note that the Gothic novelists are not interested in portraying contemporary and realistic life. They pay their attention to the presentation of past life. The Gothic novelists create a special atmosphere of horror and emotion of fear just as the poets of the 'graveyard school' do. The Gothic novelists show scenes of magic, wonder, murders, and bring in supernatural agencies to harm the poor mortals. The features of the Gothic novel seem to have influenced the Romantic poets. Coleridge is interested in the supernatural and exploration of the human psyche. Byron and Shelley are interested in expressing their respective ideas and concerns. Keats is concerned with the middle ages and the chivalric elements. Keats produces a sense of horror through his depiction of magic, witchcraft, tales of love and adventure. Some characters are pushed back into pathetic situation and become victim of spell-like power. A few poems and letters by John Keats bear witness to the fact that he has never been able to shake off his thoughts of transience and fear of death. He has extraordinary ability to convert anything, however horrible or ugly it may be, into a thing of beauty. He even can transform death into something so easy and pleasant. He can construct stories of enchantment and fear by means of his narration. To quote the following lines from *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*:

. . .the theme of suffering-horror is the ultimate evidence of such states of abjection within a narrative representation. If one wished to proceed farther still along the approaches to abjection, one would find neither narrative nor theme but a recasting of syntax and vocabulary – the violence of poetry, and silence [...] Everything is already contained in the journey: suffering, horror, death . . . sarcasm, abjection, fear. (Kristeva 141)

Keats writes *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* on April 21 or 28, 1819. The poem captures the medieval romantic spirit of love along with magical, mysterious, supernatural, and dream-like qualities. It shows chivalry and knight-errantry. It also produces an atmosphere of terror, agony and desolation. The poem begins with a picture of the knight-at-arms, who is “so haggard and so woe-begone.” He wanders about besides a lake all alone. To have a complete picture of him we quote the opening lines of the poem:

O WHAT can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
 Alone and palely loitering?
 The sedge has wither'd from the Lake,
 And no birds sing. (1-4)

He meets in the meadows a beautiful woman. She is long-haired, light-footed, and wild-eyed. She is a faery's child:

I met a Lady in the meads
 Full beautiful, a fairy's child;
 Her hair was long, her foot was light,
 And her eyes were wild. (13-16)

He loves the woman and she takes him to her faery cave and gives him faery food. She bewitches him by her magnificent eyes and magic beauty. The supernatural woman also lulls the knight-at-arms to sleep. In sleep, he sees a horrible dream and sees the knight, princes and warriors all of whom appear as pale as dead bodies. They warn him that he is in the clutches of the lady without mercy. In fear he awakes from his vision and finds himself in the withered natural world where the bird is over:

I saw their starved lips in the gloom
 With horrid warning graped wide,
 And I awoke and found me here

On the cold hill's side. (41-44)

So, it is clear that the poem is filled with a sense of horror and mystery with the medieval atmosphere of enchantment and wonder. Through the Keats shows suggestions of horror and the supernatural. And rouses a sense of awe about the merciless lady in the minds of the readers.

Keats composes *The Eve of Saint Agnes* on January 18 to February 2, 1819. Here Keats deals with a story of medieval life, with its castles, knights, feudal lords, feuds, festivities, superstitions, love and romantic adventure and succeeds in presenting a sense of fear. The poem begins in an old castle. It is St. Agnes' Eve. The weather is bitterly cold. The ancient beadsman with benumbed fingers sits in the chapel of a baron's castle and tells his rosary. Madeline's father arranges a feast in his castle and invites many guests, knight and ladies. There is much to eat and drink, much music, dancing and wooing. But Madeline, the fair maiden pays no heed to these things. She thinks of the legend of St. Agnes' Eve. She is told by aged dames that young virgins can see visions of their lovers at midnight upon St. Agnes' Eve if they perform certain ceremonies, go to bed and pray to God without looking behind or sideways. In the hope of seeing the vision of her lover, Madeline retires early from the dancing and revelry in the castle hall. She sleeps in her room. Her lover Porphyro belonging to a hostile family arrives at the castle gate and enters Madeline's chamber with the connivance of the old nurse Angela. Now, Angela is intensely terrified. Madeline, who is dreaming of her lover Porphyro, awakes, gets a little terrified and sees her lover. To quote the following lines from the Introduction to *Supernatural Horror in Literature* by H. P Lovecraft:

The phenomenon of dreaming likewise helped to build up the notion of an unreal or spiritual world; and in general, all the conditions of savage dawn—life so strongly conduced toward a feeling of the supernatural, that we need not wonder at the thoroughness with which man's very hereditary essence has become saturated with religion and superstition" (4).

At that time, the night is bitterly cold and a storm is raging outside. The inmates and the guards are in a drunken sleep. Under this circumstance, Porphyro and Madeline elope into the stormy night. So it is clear that the love of the lovers is totally beset by fears and darkness. The lovers cannot face the world out of a sense of fear. That is why they have to run away from home. That night the Baron and all his warrior-guests see fearful dreams of witches, demons and coffin-worms. The same night, old Angela and old Beadsman succumb to deaths in isolation. Obviously there is a note of supernatural horror found at the end of the poem:

These lovers fled away into the storm
 That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,
 And all his warrior-guests, with shade and form
 Of witch, and demon, and large coffin-worm,
 Were long be-nightmar'd. Angela the old
 Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform;
 The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,
 For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold. (371-78)

Keats begins to compose *Isabella; or The Pot of Basil* before March 4, 18 and finishes it by April 27. Through this poem, Keats Conveys a sense of horror and also heightens it in such a way that he transforms horror into beauty. The poem shows human love of Isabella, a Florentine maiden, and Lorenzo, an employee in the commercial house of her two brothers. When the two merchant brothers learn that Lorenzo and Isabella love each other, they lure Lorenzo into the forest where they kill him and bury his body. After murdering Lorenzo, the two brothers are filled with uneasiness, Fears and exhaustion:

...their crimes
 Came on them, like a smoke from hinnom's vale;
 And every night in dreams they groan'd aloud,

To see their sister in her snowy shroud. (261-264)

Both the brothers are stricken with horror. The frightening vision disturbs them. One night the ghost of her dead lover Lorenzo comes to her in a dream and reveals to her his tragic fate and the heinous crime of her two wicked brothers. The phantom lover also gives her instructions as to how she will reach his body. The depiction of the dream through which the vision of the murdered Lorenzo appears to Isabella at night is associated with a sense of terror. But we see that love prevails over horror:

His eyes, though wild, were still all dewy bright
 With love, and kept all phantom fear aloof
 From the poor girl by magic of their light,
 The while it did unthread the horrid woof
 Of the late darken'd time, – the murderous spite
 Of pride and avarice, – the dark pine proof
 In the forest, – and the sodden turfed dell,
 Where, without any word, from stabs he fell. (289-296)

As per the instructions, Isabella goes to the forest, finds the body of Lorenzo, brings home the severed head and places it in a flower pot and covers it with a plant of basil. The two brothers become curious to notice her great pre-occupation with the pot of basil. They steal the pot, examine it and discover the head of Lorenzo. In horror they leave Florence permanently:

Never to turn again, – Away they went,
 With blood upon their heads, to banishment (479-480)

Isabella is shocked and dies. Keats shows tragic pathos, the emotional intensity of feeling with a mixture of horror.

Another poem *Lamia* written in 1819 is the last of the romances in the 1820 Volume by John Keats. The figure of Lamia, an enchantress parallels Geraldine in Coleridge's

supernatural poem *Christabel*. Keats succeeds in producing such narration as creates feelings of wonder and sensations of fear. Lamia is a horrible witch with a serpent's head and a woman's mouth. Hermes comes to the forest of Cretan in search of his beautiful nymph. Lamia makes the nymph invisible to "the love-glances of unlovely eyes". It is interesting to note that Hermes transforms the fearful witch Lamia into a beautiful maiden. By the magic of his rod of twined serpents. In return, Lamia reveals to Hermes his beloved nymph whom he does not find. when Hermes approaches, his nymph,

she, like a moon in wane,
Faded before him, cower'd nor could restrain
Her fearful sobs, self-folding like a flower
That faints into itself at evening hour. (i, 136-139)

Hermes goes away with the nymph into the woods, and Lamia in the form of a beautiful woman betakes herself to a way to Corinth where the young and handsome Lucius lives. Lucius falls in love with Lamia. Bewitched by her beauty, Lucius takes her secretly to his house, avoiding especially teacher Apollonius on the way. They live happily in a palace built in Corinth by the magical powers of Lamia. But she is constantly beset with fears and uncertainty. Her cheek trembles in fear when Lucius wants to give a wedding feast and invite his friends. When Lucius does so, she awaits her doom in horror. She summons the supernatural spirits to make ready the banqueting hall for her earthly marriage the guests come to the feast and Apollonius also arrives there. He stares at Lamia and makes her uneasy. Lamia is a witch in disguise with magical charms but she is helpless before philosopher magician Apollonius. He ultimately sees through Lamia's disguise and fixes his eyes 'full of the alarmed beauty of the bride', calls her by her name and consequently Lamia, with a frightful scream, vanishes. Lucius succumbs to death experiencing this horrifying reality. The following lines of the poem are suggestive of all these fearful incidents:

He look'd and look'd again a level – No!
 “A serpent!” echoed he; no sooner said,
 Than with a frightful scream she vanished:
 And Lucius' arms were empty of delight,
 As were his limbs of life, from that same night.
 On the high couch he lay! His friends came round
 And, in its marriage robe, the heavy body wound. (ii, 304-11)

In this poem, Keats deals with love, life and death. The poem is suffused with a sense of fear and enchantment and pictorial richness.

Horror also pervades Keats's prophetic sonnet “*When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be*” or “*The terror of Death*” (1818). Keats is haunted with fears and anxieties to see that his own life is full of uncertainties, despair and difficulties. He knows that he has a bright and rich poetic career waiting to come before him. He also has powerful and fertile imaginations and feelings to establish himself as a poet. At the same time, he is filled with apprehension that he will perhaps not live long enough in this world. He fears that he will fail to reach his poetic aspirations and fame. He experiences the horror that seems to come from his biographical background. At this point, it is necessary to say that when the poet John Keats is eight years old, his father dies. It is also found that tuberculosis is a recurrent disease which affects and agonizes Keats's family fully. Keats's mother is attacked with tuberculosis and ultimately dies of it in 1810. His brother Tom fall is also affected with tuberculosis and Keats becomes worried over the pathetic condition of Tom is physical health. It is perhaps at this time that Keats undergoes a series of fears and tensions about his own poetic future. He is so terrified by shadows of death that it finds its expression his works. In this sonnet we find that Keats is capable of producing romantic feelings in his hearts. He has also the magical power to give

expression to them but he is terrified that his rich poetic powers and love remain unfulfilled because of transience of life in this world. For instance, we quote the lines:

when I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
 Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
 And think that I may never live to trace
 Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;
 And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
 That I shall never look upon thee more,
 Never have relish in the faery power
 Of unreflecting love; – then on the shore. (5-12)

A note of Keats's feelings of fear of an early death and the vanity of human life and aspirations is also noticed in the last two lines of this sonnet:

Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
 Till love and fame to nothingness do sink. (13-14)

So it may be now said that Keats's writings are marked by indirect reference to fear or presence of gothic elements.

The horror has its roots in the personal life of John Keats. Circumstances make him prey to fears. Horror haunts him with bitter experiences. He is afraid of his own death as well as that of others. When he is eight years old, his father Thomas Keats dies in a riding accident, on April 16, 1804. It is so pathetic as well as so horrible experience to Keats that his mother dies of tuberculosis in 1810. When Keats is fourteen years old, he is apprenticed to the family's doctor, Thomas Hammond. Keats enters Guy's Hospital as a student in October 1815. Keats qualifies for his apothecary licence on 25th of July in 1816. His six months of hospital training are also horrible. In the winter of 1817-1818 his brother Tom is also affected by tuberculosis and Keats has to nurse him. Keats's mind is much discontented and restless. Keats's brother

Tom dies in December 1818. It is a great shock to Keats. Besides, the review attacks in the autumn of 1818 also give birth to a sense of depression in the mind of John Keats. Keats himself is affected with tuberculosis. All these lead to the presence of horror in the writings of Keats.

If we look at Keats's poems and letters, we find that Keats faces various problems and challenges of existence. His thought is marked by horror, doubts, conflicts and pains. Keats is afflicted with a deepening concern with human sufferings. Keats is not a philosopher in the true sense of the term. He is a poet of 'sensation'. He is a poet of beauty in truth. He is aware of the realities and the pathetic condition of man. He is conscious of mortality and pains. He finds no hope of release. Man is an unfortunate creature subject to the same miseries, mischances, and ills as the wild beasts of the forests. The readers feel a sense of shock and understand the impact of the horror on John Keats as well as his visions, perceptions, thoughts and writings.

To conclude, Horror creates responses of fear, shock, disgust, uncanny effects and images. The reactions, it generates, are of different sorts such as the gothic, supernatural, occult, physical, social, psychological or emotional etc. To quote the following lines from the introduction to *The Biology of Horror: Gothic Literature and Film* by Jack Morgan: "However crude any given occurrence of horror literature might seem, . . . there is much to indicate that the horror mythos emerges from "the dark backward and abysm of time" and reflects particular aspects of our bio-existential situation; it emanates, that is, from agonies and exigencies of physical life" (19). Our paper shows that horror has had an impact on John Keats. To quote Howard Phillips Lovecraft: "THE shadow-haunted landscapes of Ossian, the chaotic visions of William Blake, the grotesque witch dances in Burns's *Tam O' Shanter*, the sinister demonism of Coleridge's *Christabel* and *Ancient Mariner*, the ghostly charm of James Hogg's *Kilmeny*, the more restrained approaches to cosmic horror in *Lamia* and many of Keats's other

poems, are typical British illustrations of the advent of the weird to formal literature” (10). John Keats is a life-long victim of horror which finds reflections in his works.

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