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## **Social Outlook in Keats' World: A Study of Humanism in Keats' Selected Letters**

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### **Abstract:**

The present paper is an attempt to focus the humanitarian zeal of John Keats towards society. Being a poet, he used his letters as instrument to contribute to society for the betterment of the common human beings. Not only he shows his fondness towards humanity but also his internal inclination towards classical literature and classical disciplines are well manifested in his letters which are delivered to his teacher, friends and brothers and others also. The letters of Keats are not only mere presentation of message but also are the manifestation his critical and comprehensive projection.

**Keywords:** Humanitarian, Betterment, Classical literature, Manifestation, Comprehensive projection.

Now-a-day, the word "Humanism" is a recent development in the intellectual history of literature in English. The world, gradually, has developed itself and attained its highest range of maturity, Humanism, a profound philosophy, has dominated the entire literary horizon. It is the highest expression of human values. Broadly speaking, humanism is an attitude that tends to elevate the human elements, as opposed to the supernatural and divine elements-as opposed to the grosser and animal elements. In a more specific sense, humanism suggests a devotion to the studies-the life, thought, language and the literature of ancient Greece and Rome-supposed to promote human culture most effectively.

The term "Humanism" derives from 15<sup>th</sup> century 'Italian Humanista' or the teacher of the 'Studiahumanitatis' or humanities. It is a concept or a notion that is as old as classical Greece and as new as the twentieth century. It is a philosophical outlook that is centred on the autonomy of human being as a dignified and rational being, embodying the source of truth and right. Humanism's main core of appeal is human reason rather than the external authority and its goal is the greatest good in the finite existence of human being. It may be linked or related with religion, science or any political system. Its spirit is secular, liberal and tolerant.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment, humanist Rationalism, Individualism, and Secularism were given a new dimension by the association with political and scientific outlook. The main aim of scientific humanism is to supplant religion and to make scientific knowledge and instrument of freeing man. Science and technology must be humanized and socialized and man must be educated to respond positively to rapid and radical change.

Humanism in its all expression, considering education as man's one and important enterprise, means education in humanities no less than in science and technology. Thus, only the tradition of human knowledge can give direction to scientific development and prepare people for a change.

The historical epoch of the English Romantic Movement-of which John Keats was an outstanding and typical representative-is a period of great and revolutionary changes in the social evolution on English people. Keats lived in an era of tumultuous change, an era that changed the entire western society. The economic crisis had intensified social antagonism which led to the French Revolution in 1789. This year with French Revolution is associated with the beginning of the Romantic Movement in Britain. The working classes of France were oppressed by the monarchy. They revolted against the monarchy. As a result, the democracy and socialism began to spread out throughout Europe. The Europe Revolution had a great impact on Europe. The first generation Romantic poets were the supporters of this very revolt against monarchy who were very much despotic and merciless.

In Keats' Lifetime, revolt also began to seem distinct possibilities closer to home. England was the centre position of Industrial Revolution, that suggested inherently the period of social, economical and agronomic change dated from 1750-1830. There was a movement away from agriculture to factory. The people might be summed up as a qualitative transformation of Britain from an essentially agricultural country into an industrial and commercial world. The gradual change from feudal agricultural economy to capitalist method of production and distribution had begun several hundreds of years before Keats' time and was not completed until long after his death. As a result, the conditions of the people were appalling who worked in factories and mills. At the same time, the invention and introduction of new technologies threatened the working class and this threat provoked violent reaction. Factories and mills were severely attacked and machines were destroyed during the Luddite disturbance of 1811-17 which stirred memories for the frightening express of the French Revolution.

Robin Hood is a great and characteristic example of Keats' militant humanism. It illustrates the poet's constant interest in contemporary public events as well as his ability to draw from them correct conclusions which enabled him to find a correct relation and social reality in his own creation. In the legendary character of Robin Hood, he discovered and stressed the very features – struggle against oppression, love of men and defence of life of man – which are more closely tied up with the actual social situation and can be used to the English people as well as the whole humanity in their struggle for a better present and future. The struggle of Robin Hood against feudal exploration and oppression or the struggle of Keats' contemporaries against absolutism and capitalist reaction, are not brought to victorious conclusion, it will be necessary for us to incite the oppressed people to fight for liberation and to help them in their struggle with all our might. Keats is much more conscious of these situations around him. He proclaimed his own identity with the people against enemies. He has mentioned the great name of Robin Hood who fought against the great odds for the freedom in a letter to Reynolds (3<sup>rd</sup> February, 1818)

“I do not mean to deny Wordsworth’s grandeur and Hunt’s merit, but I mean to say we need not be teased with grandeur and merit-when we can have them uncontaminated and unobtrusive. Let us have the old poets and Robin Hood your letter and its sonnets gave me more pleasure than will the 4<sup>th</sup> book of Childe Harold and the whole of any body’s life and opinions. In return for your dish of filbert, I have gathered a few catkins; I hope they will look pretty.” (Vol – 1, P.225)

To J.H.R. In answer to his Robin Hood sonnets:

‘No those days are gone away and c’ – I hope you will like them they are at least written in the spirit outlawry – Here are the Mermaid lines. ‘Souls of poets dead and gone.’ (Vol – 1, P.225)

Keats is very much ambitious of doing something good for the world. He always tries to do something good for the society and world. He cannot find anybody who has devoted himself for the sake of good of this world. His depression and inherent endeavour have been found in a letter to Taylor (24<sup>th</sup> April, 1818)-

“I find that I cannot have no enjoyment in the world but continual Drinking of knowledge- I find there is no worthy pursuit but the idea of doing some good for the world – some do with their society – some do with their wit – some with their benevolence – some with a sort of power of conferring pleasure and good humour on all they meet.” (Vol – 1, P.271)

He placed his ultimate in the glory of doing for a great human purpose, so that mankind shall reach a happy future. He criticizes the whole humanity in a letter to Reynolds (19 February, 1818)-

“Humanity instead of being a whole heath of furse and Briars with here and there remote oak or pine would become a grand democracy of Forest Trees.” (Vol -1, P.223)

Keats began as a liberal. His friends were liberals. But Keats saw beyond British, liberalism and he was also critical of Godwinists, not concerning general questions of human progress but on concrete questions like he superiority of American civilization. In his letter to George Keats (14<sup>th</sup> October, 1818), the write about liberals-

“Notwithstanding the part which the liberals take in the cause of Napoleon I cannot but think he has done more harm to the life of liberty than anyone else could have done”. (Vol-1, P.397)

He criticizes liberalism not in general but on the concrete question of Napoleon about whom incidentally he thinks in the same way as Shelley.

Keats unfortunately never wrote lines of so weighty and rousing patriotic or political character. His lines were not filled with his humbler plans and hopes of domestic happiness

of which he dreamed in his Epistle. He regarded them as dreams of his 'mad ambition'. He was conscious that his absorbing passion for poetry may be the very obstacle which hinders his becoming 'dearer to society'. This important idea is expressed in the same Epistle to George (August, 1816).

"Ah, my dear friend and brother

Gould I, at once, my mad ambition smother

For tasting joys like these, sure should I be

Happier and dearer to society." (Vol-1, P-105)

An interesting document of Keats, selfless love of people is found in his letter to George and his wife Georgiana Keats written in between February and April, 1819. The extract quoted below is dated March 19<sup>th</sup>.

"Very few men have ever arrived at a complete disinterestedness of mind: Few have been influenced by a pure desire of the benefit to others- in the greater part of the Benefactors to Humanity some meretricious motive has sullied their greatness- some melodramatic scenery has fascinated them – from the manner which I feel Haslam's misfortune." (Vol-2, P.79)

Keats is very much aware about one society in which he was living. He is conscious about the untoward activities happening in society around him. In the same letters, Keats' severe attack on society and manners of man in society has been highlighted.

"I perceive how far I am from any humble standard of disinterestedness... For in the wild nature the Hawk would lose his Breakfast of Robins and The Robin his of worms the Lion must starve as well as the swallow – the Greater part of Men make their way with the same instinctiveness, the Same unwandering eyes from their purposes, the same animal eagerness as the Hawk – the Hawk wants a Mate, so does the Man – look at them both they set about it and procure one in the same manner." (Vol-2, P.79)

Through out of his letters, we can realize Keats' idea of the struggle for life in nature which he calls "the eternal fierce destruction". Keats is not disinterestedness with the cruel law of nature but the human ethical commandment of unselfishness. It is cleared that Keats believed with Rousseau in innate goodness and unselfishness of human nature. He believed in the innate human profession of a 'purifying electrifier' of the heroic selflessness which urges men to become completely disinterested, perfect, as were Socrates and Jesus. Keats always believed in the inherent goodness of human nature. His attitude to people is best summed up in his own words (in his letters). In a letter to Haydon (22 December, 1818) he wrote –

"I admire Human nature but I do not like men – I should like to compose things honourable to Man-but not fingerable over by Men. So, I am anxious to exist with

troubling the printer's devil on drawing upon men's and women's admiration."  
(Vol-1, P.415)

Keats has certainly revealed his political stance in his letters. He has repeatedly expressed his great abhorrence of tyranny, his sympathy with suffering and a commitment to a liberal view of history as a progressive enlightenment, a continual change for the better. He wanted to make a fair society in England where everything will be neatclean. Keats' views regarding society and social development and expressed in a lengthy discussion of historical progress and of contemporary social situation in England in his letter. He has expressed his specific views in French Revolution and its consequence on England in letter to George and Georgiana Keats on 18<sup>th</sup> September, 1819:-

"In every age there have in England for some two on theircenturiessubjects of great popular interest in the carpet: so that however great then uproar on can scarcely prophesy any material change in the government for as long time.....what has roused them to do it is their distresses – perhaps on this account the present distresses of this nation are a fortunate thing – though so horrid in their experience. You will see in mean that the French Revolution put a temporary stop to this third change, the change for the better." (Vol-2, P.192)

Keats' survey of English and European political evolution delineates correctly its upward progressive line from feudalism to capitalism; it rightly observes that the evolutionary progress is not smooth and straight forward and more over that its motive force is the class-struggle. In the above mentioned letter Keats has shown three great changes. According to him, the first change is a change for the better begins with the feudal wars between the houses of Lancaster and York. The second change is probably the consolidation absolutism under James and Charles-1. And the third and last change is a change for the better.

The Peterloo Massacre and other public events of the stormy year 1819 removed many doubts which Keats had about the outcome of the great struggle between the forces progress and the reaction. He wrote a letter to George and Georgiana Keats in America (written in October, 1818) where he analysis the situation in contemporary England, rope and America. The ideas expressed in his letter are very helpful to anyone who wants to understand Keats' several views.

"As for politics they are in my opinion only sleepy because they will soonbe too wide awake perhaps no- for the long and continued place of England itself has given us nations of personal safety which are likely to prevent the re-establishment of our national Honesty. There is of a truth Nothing manly or sterling in any part of the government...A country like the United States whose greatest men areFranklins and Washingtons to us will never do that – they are great Men doubtless but how are they to be compared to those of our countrymen,Milton and the two Sidneys – The one is a philosophical Quaker full of mean and thrifty maxims, the other sold the very charger who had taken him

through all his battles. Those Americans are great but they are not sublime men—the humanity of the United States can never reach the sublime.....” (Vol-1, P.396)

What strikes us in the above extract is Keats' uncompromising criticism and condemnation of English reactionary government and European despotic monarch who have created the Holy Alliance to keep their won peoples in subjection and spread their dominion over other parts of the world. Keats did not think much more of Napoleon because he hated all military dictator and conquerors. Keats' doubt of inevitable continuous progress of society – expressed in his criticism of his friend Dilke and of Dilke's master Godwin – results from his expectation of human salvation from “sublime” individuals, such as he did not find any – where around him. His idealistic conception of greatness could not find either in the leading politicians or the bourgeois liberal opposition or in the leading fighter for the independence of America.

In struggling of the people for liberty from oppression and exploitation, Keats attributed the great importance partly to education and knowledge in which a written must play a great role. Keats held in great esteem those men of letters, journalists and publishers who fought their books and articles on the side of progress and liberty. Indirectly he has played a great part as a fighter against the misdeeds of society through his letters and poems. A part from his letter, he gave expression to the idea of the importance of educating the people in a Spenserian stanza which he inserted into his copy of Spenser's Fairy Queen, very likely in 1818.

In his “Series of thought”, Keats asks and answers two main questions: the question of the progress of human society, and that of the formation of individual consciousness. He touches upon many other philosophical and psychological problems, connected more or less closely with the main inquiry. The problems are not determined solely by his personal interest and private experience. The starting point of his chains of thoughts was the notion that man is formed by circumstance and he says that “axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses.”

One of his major traits of Keats' speculation is his firm recognition of the real existence of the material world and its grand influence upon human consciousness and character. But, his idealistic view that intelligences are sparks of the divinity and that the creative principle is God prevents Keats to infer from his right notion of the dependence of consciousness on objective reality. In his attempt to solve the problem of the progress of man and society in the course of evolution Keats arrived implying the improvement of human nature and the material and cultural standard of mankind because he overrated natural obstacles that may hinder such progress. The root of his pessimistic view may be seen in Keats' limited knowledge of the real historical progress and of the advance science had made up to his time. It is certainly strange that living in a period of revolutionary scientific and technical advance in agriculture and industrial production, he failed to notice that though men cannot go or act against natural laws, they can learn to know them, make use of them in accordance with her laws.

Though Keats refused to call the world in which we live ‘a vale of tears’ and regarded this orthodox Christian conception as a silly superstition, he was not blind to the existence of pain, trouble, ugliness, injustice and other evil things in our lives. He was by no means satisfied with the objective social realities of his age and country. But on the country, we can see that he expressed his dissatisfaction and protest against these social evils. From his poems and letters, we may collect a large number of quotations to this effect. Thus he Speaks of “thehard world” of “the tempest cares of life”, of “the world” which is “full of troubles” of “feverous world”, where “there is nothing stable” and “uproar’s your only music.”

Keats randomly blames history as it was taught and studied in his age because it discarded and neglected the human elements, everyday life and interests of the people but enhanced conquerors and wars, rulers and ruling classes. According to Keats, true history is the record of human hearts and of love because it is love which is the constructive and life-giving principle extending toward happiness. Like Keats, a man who loves his fellow men and human nature and hearts, is deeply moved and encouraged to do something good by the records of loving human hearts, not by those of war, destruction and exploitation. That is Keats’ profound and boundless conviction. Keats was determined and resolved to fight throughout his life and literary career for this idea of human love, brotherhood, freedom and true friendship with his best weapons such as poetry and letters. He could not rest in inactivity and an idle life. Though he felt that his powers were too weak to rouse and persuade the others, yet, he tried to motivate the people towards their goodness and happiness by his everlasting and immortal works. He realized by his matured brain that the road to happiness is the road of mutual love and assistance. At last, we can conclude with Keats’ lines taken form *Endymion*, Book-II:-

“Fearfully,

Must such conviction come upon his head

Who, thus far, discontent, has dared to tread

Without one muse’s smile, or kind behest,

The path of love and poesy, But rest,

In chafing restlessness, is yet more drear

Than to be crushed, in striving to uprear

Love’s standard on the battlements of song.” (Garrod, P.96, LI.34-41)

Thus, Keats in his Letters has provided a humanitarian zeal in his scrutinization of his own poetry and the poetry of others with a critical perspective tending to the sense of classical apparatus as well as of his presentation and justification of his contemporary society hinged by political upheaval, social injustice and problems of human rights. Unlike the social reformers, Keats has contributed much in societal discourse in an indirect way by conveying his critical argument through poetry and letters to make the readers and critics acknowledged



about the reality. All his Letters bring forth his passionate and essential sensibilities towards his humanistic framework of his art and mind.

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