

A linguistic bypass of Keats' 'Ode to a nightingale' through lexicons

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Abstract

John Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale' is considered to be the one of the masterpieces of English like his other odes. It is one of the great odes written by Keats in May 1819. It is a superb poem which was written by the poet while he was staying with his friend Charles Armitage Brown at Hampstead. For the stylistic study of poetry basically there are six levels of linguistic stylistic analysis, i.e. graphological, phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic and discursal. The present study makes an attempt at the interpretive or analytical research and gives a linguistic interpretation and analysis of Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale' from a single aspect of stylistic study i.e. at the lexical level. At the lexical level of the linguistic framework, 'Ode to a Nightingale' is analysed to find out the noticeable lexical features, the construction of phrases, and ways the poet adopts for forming new words and expressions.

Keywords: john keats, 'ode to a nightingale', graphological, phonological, lexical

Introduction

John Keats displays the transitoriness of human life in this poem which is one of his most celebrated works. Perhaps the poet composed the poem after facing the family sickness and many deaths in his own family, and foreseeing his own death. Keats in the ode addresses the nightingale and tells it a grim tale of the worldly life and so wishes to escape the fever and fret of the world and join the blissful world of the nightingale, that is to say, the world of imagination. This ode is the finest expression of Keatsian theme of the attraction towards an escape from the universe of suffering and pain. The poet describes the world 'where but to think is to be full of sorrow/And leaden eyes despairs' and expresses his wish to go to the nightingale when he says 'Away! Away! For I will fly to thee/ Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards/But on the viewless wings of Poesy.

Keats also gives expression to his frustrations in love and his sickness. Undoubtedly he suffered an utter financial crisis and so, like Chatterton, he feels attracted towards the 'easeful death'. He gives a vent to his latent emotions when he says:

'... for many a time
 I have been in love with easeful death,
 Call'd him soft names in many mused rhyme
 To take into the air my quiet breath;
 Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
 To cease upon the midnight with no pain.

The poet wants to fade away into the ideal world represented by the nightingale which has no experience of agonies and death. The poet has sought to demonstrate that a sense of beauty and ideal has the power to console the ailing humanity and enable it to face the harsh realities of life and imagination can help one get rid of pangs of life. Keats takes up a simple and conventional subject of an address to a nightingale and turns it to be a meditation upon art, life and death. The poem is replete with rich and sensuous expressions. It ends with a farewell to the nightingale and the poet's doubt 'Was it a vision, or a waking dream? Fled is that music:- Do I wake or sleep?'

Objective

Keats's poetry offers a plethora of various stylistic features. Indeed the poetry of Keats has the features of markedness in language which needs to be studied linguistically. His poetry needs to be analysed with the help of the techniques and tools provided by linguistics. Hence the study is an attempt in the direction of analysing the linguistic features of Keats's poetry in order to add value to the teaching and researching language in literature.

The poetry of Keats has been interpreted and analysed by applying a variety of methods of literary criticism. The present study is an attempt to present a linguistic analysis of John Keats' Ode to a Nightingale' on lexical level. The poem has been analysed from textual and systemic perspectives by bringing in the use of stylistic analysis in combination with systemic linguistic.

Linguistic Bypass

General Impression

'Ode to a Nightingale' is a superb poem which is laced with universal law of truth and beauty. In the season of spring a nightingale had built a nest close to the house of his friend at Hampstead and the exquisitely beautiful song of the nightingale made Keats fall into a trance of ecstasy which the poet talks in terms of 'drowsy numbness' in the poem and resultantly Keats composed the literary creation.

'Ode to a Nightingale' is considered to be the most celebrated work of Keats as it has artistic power and sensuous phrasing. It is remarkable for presenting a plethora of exquisite words and expressions. By using the apostrophe for addressing the nightingale, Keats has metamorphosed the poem into a musing meditation upon art, life and death.

The Lexical level

At the lexical level of stylistics, the interpreter has to deal with the lexemes and the morphemes used in the literary text. The lexical level refers to the level of words selected and by used the authors in their creations. It is imperative for the interpreter to know whether the author uses monosyllabic or multisyllabic

words and whether they are expressive of the specific sense intended by the author. It is also helpful to know the origin of the words and registereal varieties for specific stylistic effects and for formation of stylistic patterns of texts. It is also essential to evaluate if the author has used idiomatic expression or archaic words and expressions and whether all the words have been curled from the standard language and some regional dialects. One can find the feature of lexical deviation like neologism which 'is one of the more obvious ways in which a poet may exceed the normal resources of language'

At this level of stylistic analysis, one has to find out if there is some deviation of foregrounding in the spelling of the word or the structure of the word and their morphological features. One may consider the lexico-grammatical features of literary texts to find out the functions of lexical items used by the authors in their writing.

Information Structure and Thematic structure

In accordance with the systems of lexico grammar, every clause which is quantum of message has an information structure and thematic structure and show textual function. In systemic functional linguistics these two parallel and interrelated systems of analysis are used to analyse the clause to indicate how the message has been organized. According to Halliday and Matthiessen, "... the information unit is a structure that is made up of two functions, the New and the given. In the idealized form each information unit consists of a given element accompanied by a new element"

In the flow of discourse the interlocutors initiate with the shared or mutual knowledge known as given information and then furnish the information that is the focus of the message and considered as New. The second system of textual analysis is thematic structure which also operates at the clause level to put in the words of Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) [2], "The Theme is the element which serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that which locates and orients the clause within its contexts. The remainder of the message, the part in which the Theme is developed, is called in Prague school terminology the Rheme"

'Ode to a Nightingale' has a theme of an escape from the worldly pains and agonies into the ecstatic world of imagination where rapture reins supreme. It also echoes the theme of the supremacy of art over mortality and death. It delineates the transitoriness of worldly things as well as human life and the permanence of the works of art. It resolves the tension between art and life, between the world of reality and the world of imagination. With help of art, the readers may get an aesthetic consolation in the midst of sufferings and agonies of the world. At the heart of the poem there lies the paradox that the world of imagination offers a release from the painful world of actuality. The poem is viewed as the supreme example in all Keats' poetry dealing with the impulse to imaginative escape. The actual world is painted by the poet to be full of sorrow, sickness, age and finally death. Hence, the poet makes an attempt to the delightful world of the nightingale, which is world of imagination and art.

Looking through the Lexicons

Keats is expressive of his linguistic creativity. When one goes through the poem, one finds the lexical items descriptive of the transitoriness of human life because of pains and death, and the permanence of the imaginative and artistic world. Keats

explicitly foregrounds his own mortality and so he tries to seek shelter in the world of nightingale which represents art or poetry. Indeed the poem vacillates between the condition of the release from mortal world of reality and that of a recall to the permanent world of imagination. The poem 'assimilates symbolically both the peak of human ecstasy and the pit of human despair (Blades 109).

'Ode to a Nightingale' comprises in its 80 lines a total of 598 words including the words mentioned in the title of the poem. It is vivid that very often Keats uses major category of words along with minor category of words. There is a marvellous mixture of the two categories of words in the poem and this adds to the beauty of the poem.

Keats uses words from mythological as well as Biblical references. The words like 'Ruth', 'Lethwards', 'Dryad', 'Bacchus' and so on are remarkable in their mythological and biblical associations. In place of the forms of contemporary pronoun 'you' Keats has aptly used the forms of 'thou' in the poem along with the verb forms corresponding to the forms of 'thou' in order to give the text of poem a perennial feature poeticity so that the poem may appear to be beautiful and poetic. More archaic forms of words and expressions have been used to serve the same purpose by the poet.

In the first stanza of the poem, the long noun phrases comprising modifiers are 'a drowsy numbness' 'some dull opiate', 'thy happy lot', 'light-winged Dryad of trees' and some melodious plot'. The unusual compounds occurring in the stanza are 'Lethwards' and 'light-winged' and the poet has used hyphenation while combining the elements. The stanza is rich in the expressions of pain and pleasure.

The second stanza comprises two very long noun phrases running in different lines of the poem 'a draught of vintage! That hath bee/Cool'd a long age in the deep dearth/tasting of Flora' and 'a beaker full of the warm South/Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene/With beaded bubbles winking at the brim'. Some other noun phrases in the stanza are 'the country green', 'Provençal song', 'sunburnt mirth', 'purple stained mouth' 'the forest dim'. The long noun phrases have premodifiers and post modifiers but the short noun phrases have pre-modifiers in them to modify the headword. The stanza has a solid compound 'sunburnt', and hyphenated compounds like 'deep-delved' and 'purple-stained'. There is a reference to the mythical Hippocrene. The stanza describes the poet's utmost desire to be intoxicated and fly from the real world to the imaginary world of the nightingale.

The third stanza of the poem repeats the verb phrase 'fade away' of the second stanza for the sake of emphasis and cohesion. The noun phrases describing the agonies of the world are prevalent, such as, 'the weariness, the fever and the fret', 'a few, sad, last gray hairs', 'leaden-eyed despairs', 'her lustrous eyes', and 'new Love'. All these noun phrases delineate the real world to be full of unhappiness and sorrow of which the nightingale is unaware. The poet implicates that the world of art and poesy has so pains and so art and poetry are considered to be ideal. The stanza contains hyphenated compounds like 'specter-thin' and 'leaden-eyed'.

The fourth stanza of the Ode depicts the determination of Keats to be in the world of the nightingale where there is the light of the Queen Moon at tender night by taking a flight from the world of pain and death which is full of darkness. He wants to do so not by riding the chariot of Bacchus but by flying on 'the viewless wings of Poesy'. The noun phrases in the stanza are

'the viewless wings of Poesy' 'the dull brain', 'the Queen-moon', 'her throne', 'all her starry Fays', 'no light', and 'the breezes blown/Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways'. The noun phrases have modifiers which show comparison and contrast between the real world and the imaginary world.

In the fifth stanza, the poet describes his awareness of the real world. The noun phrases like 'soft incense', 'the bought', 'embalme darkness', 'the seasonable month', 'The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild', 'White hawthorn', 'the pastoral eglantine', 'fast fading violets cover's up in leaves', 'mid-May's eledes child', 'The coming musk-rose full of dewy wine', 'The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves' are descriptive of the objects in nature. The modifiers of the head words of the noun phrases are remarkable here for making the poet aware of the natural objects around him when he is trying to dissolve himself into the imaginary world of poesy. The solid compound like 'Wherewith', the hyphenated compounds like 'fruit-tree,' 'mid-May', and 'musk-rose', and the open compound like 'fat fading' are noteworthy in the stanza.

The opening word of the sixth stanza, 'Darkling' which implies the poet's condition of being in lack of light, is indeed remarkable. The stanza describes the condition of the life and world of the poet and reminds the readers of the deaths in the family of Keats. The paradoxical situation is that the poet is 'in love with easeful Death' and at the same time wishes the death to be always. In the noun phrase like 'easeful Death', 'soft names', 'many a mused rhyme', 'my quiet breath', 'the midnight with no pain', 'thy soul abroad', 'such an ecstasy', and 'thy high requiem' the modifiers create paradoxical situation.

The poet addresses the nightingale as 'immortal Bird', in the seventh stanza and tells that is 'not born for death'. Whatever song was heard by the emperors and the clowns in the olden days, the poet is listening to the same song of the immortal bird. The stanza has a reference to the Biblical figure, Ruth. The noun phrases present in the stanza are 'immortal Bird', 'No hungry generations', 'The voice I hear this passing night' 'ancient days', 'the self-same song that found a path/Through the sad heart of Ruth, When sick for home/She stood in tears amid the alien com', 'Charm'd magic casement, opening on the foam/Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn'. The last two noun phrases are indeed very long ones which comprise even clauses as their embedded parts.

The last stanza of the poem repeats the last word of the previous stanza, 'forlorn', the poet retreats back from the world of imagination to the world of harsh reality of life. The poet bids farewell to the nightingale as he becomes his own limitation as human being, the stanza is replete with the repetitions of the word 'adieu' and now the poet has made 'solution sweet' of noun phrases and verb phrases. Compounding as a process of word-formation is vivid in the use of 'sole self', 'hill-side', and 'valleyglades'. The poet gets aware of the time and the space of the real world and asks

'Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:- Do I wake or sleep?'

Conclusion

The linguistic bypass of 'Ode to a Nightingale' through lexicon depicts Keats' mastery over the use of words and sensuous phrases. It reveals the features of Keats' creative use of linguistic items in the poem. Actually, the linguistic features of

Keats' poetry delineate the development of Keats from an apostle of beauty and truth to a great aesthete. By virtue of the style of his poetry Keats is considered as 'the poet of poets'.

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