

St. Agnes - Elements of Medievalism or Hellenism - Keats - Romantic Revival

The most important characteristic of the Romantic Revival

is the revival of Medievalism. It has been a source of poetic imagination for the Romantics. The Romantic poets look for their themes in the Middle Ages. Scott and Coleridge show their interest in medieval pomp and pageantry. Keats is always inspired by medievalism. It serves as an inspiration in all of his poems. He often makes us roam in the medieval world of mystery and enchantment. Poverty, disease, death of his brother, disappointment in love affairs - all these make him feel dejected and distressed. He finds weariness, the fret and the fever in this world, where to think of anything is to invite new sorrow. Therefore, Keats wants to escape and goes to the world of middle ages to soothe his sorrow-stricken soul.

**Under Hellenism** Under Hellenic influence, Keats is inspired by the impression of remoteness in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'. His 'Endymion' is a legend of Grecian mythology. 'Isabella' is a story from Boccaccio and 'Lamia' is a story of Greek witchcraft. The 'Eve of St. Agnes' is based on a middle age's superstition that a maiden will dream of her future husband, if she performs certain ceremonies on the eve of St. Agnes. With a purpose to test the truth of this medieval belief, Medeline leaves the gay reveller and retires supperless to her bed. In the meantime, her lover Porphyro, comes across the moors and ventures into the hall at the risk of his life. Angela, an old woman, helps Porphyro. Medeline's dream is changed into reality and the lovers elope in the shade of storm.

The features of the Middle Ages are visible in every detail of the poem. There is an old beadsman, who carries us back to the days of Roman Catholics, when the barons were privileged class. They were permitted to commit sins provided they could pay or appoint a beadsman to pray for them. In the cold evening of St. Agnes

The beardless man is praying for the benefactors, the sinners.

"Rough notes sat for his soul's reprieve  
And all night kept awake for sinners' sake to grieve"

The cruelty and enmity of the middle ages are called when Keats describes the hall of 'society' it is full of the blood-thirsty enemies of Porphyro see the following lines:-

"For now their chambers hold barbarian hordes  
Hyena women, and hot blooded lords"

Prof Keats hints at the pomp and pageantry of the middle ages when he refers to the guests revelling in the banquetting hall -

"At length burst in the argent revelry  
With plume, tinsel, and all rich array."

In fact, St Agnes is a story of old romance. There is a hot blood between the members of the lovers' families. Medelina's family cannot spare Porphyro's life, if they find him there. Angela knows it and expresses her amazement at Porphyro's dangerous venture. -

"Thou must hold water in a witch's sieve  
And be liege lord of all the Elves and Fays  
To venture so"

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Even then the lover takes a bold and chivalrous step to have a glimpse of his beloved. In this way, this poem resembles Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet' while describing Medelina's casement. Keats acquaints us with the features of Gothic buildings -

"A casement high and triple-arch'd there was  
All garlanded with carven images  
Of fruits, flowers, and bunches of knot glass"

Thus, the romance and the artistic glory of the medieval ages have been transfixed in the 'eve of St. Agnes'. The medieval atmosphere pervades the entire poem and this atmosphere is created by a wealth of suggestive

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touches. There are old legends, superstition, reference to witches  
or ghosts, fairies, nightmares, the elfin in storms from the  
fairy land. The pictures of knights and warriors in the  
peculiar army, the miraculous elopement of the lovers are  
characteristically medieval.

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