

Illusion and Reality: Keats's *Lamia*

Dr. Ajey Kumar

H.O.D. English, N.N. College, Singhara, Vaishali, (Bihar) India

Abstract

Keats seems to be involved in a kind of conflicts when he writes *Lamia*. In *Lamia* and also in *La Belle* Keats achieves a kind of perfection much sought till now the entire *Lamia* episode concerns itself with a conflict of is and seems. This is not altogether a new experience for an artist like Keats only. It is as truer of Shakespeare as in case of a Keats. The appearance and reality have been the preoccupation of many artists down the ages.

Keywords: Conflict, Illusion, Reality, Perfection, Keats

Keats seems to be involved in a kind of conflicts when he writes *Lamia*. Conflicts are much too obvious in experience and innocence. This is not recapturing the spirit of conflict of Blakanian poetry. It is rather indulgence in bringing these two dialects of opposites face to face with each other. All these have resulted into a kind of ambiguity which is far or less mysterious than real.

Coming to the characters of the poem one is first attracted to Lycius. He, of course, resembles the night at arms of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. We are drawn towards a kind of sympathy the poet has with Lycius. As in *La Belle*, the attitude to *Lamia* seems to shift through the entire course of the poem. If one perceives with care one finds that there is a kind of irresolution in the mind of the artist himself at this stage of his career.

In *Lamia* and also in *La Belle* Keats achieves a kind of perfection much sought till now the entire *Lamia* episode concerns itself with a conflict of is and seems. This is not altogether a new experience for an artist like Keats only. It is as truer of Shakespeare as in case of a Keats. The

appearance and reality have been the preoccupation of many artists down the ages. Iago comes on the stage and declares he is not what he is. The basic principle of the artist is to bridge this gap. The very beginning of *Lamia* is in marked contrast with *Ode to Grecian Urn* or *Ode to Nightingale*. In these odes and also in early Keats we have an interest of the artist to bring human life and mythological experiences of the ancient world close together. In doing so the artist undergoes severe mental tension in process of the artistic creation. No doubt, the impetus brings him close to the reality of life. Nonetheless the poetry created and the self is elevated.

In *Lamia* the lover of vision is finally an innocent victim of his own quest for happiness. The quest remains a quest till it is given final thrust of realization of the truths of life. The narrative is very simple. It is a story of a pretty love affair between *Lamia* and Lycius. The setting is entirely pastoral and characters are allowed to move freely in this romantic universe of poetic sensation. There are elements in this little dear and darling world that suggest a

kind of ideal union between and idea and reality. This is again not a novel experience with Keats. It is an effort to recapture all that have been presented earlier through different pairs of lovers. It is a recurrent theme in the poetry of Keats that the opposites come in close contact with each other and they try to rub shoulders in order that they may find the real value in life. But there is difference here that the world presented in the poem is entirely non-human. With it, to some extent, is also relegated the issue that was central concern in so much of Keats's early poetry. The concern was basically with the hope of waking from a dream to find it's actual. In *Lamia* the line of demarcation between the two vanishes. A new artist is born. The cycle is completed and the goal is achieved:

It was no dream' or say a dream it was,
Real are the dreams of Gods, and
smoothly pass,
Their pleasures in a long immortal
dream.

The visionary and the actual seems to collide and create an atmosphere fit for writing poetry. The poetic eye catches the beauty of the nymph. She is of a dazzling hue and vermilion spotted. The long ranging colour picture has been given a romantic safe. A reader cannot but be gay at this kind of romantic indulgence of on the part of the artist:

She was a Gordian shape of dazzling
hue,
Vermilion-spotted, golden, green and
blue;
Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard,
Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson
barr'd;

And full of silver moons that, as she
breathed,
Dissolved or brighter shone or
interwreathed,
Their lusters with the gloomier tapstries
–
So rainbow-sided, touched with
miseries,
She seem'd, at once, some penanced
lady elf,
Some demon's mistress, or the demon's
self.

But the fact is that this is not a real world. The dream and fantasy from the basic core of experience of the artist. He is submerged in his own thought processes. E.R. Wasserman also feels "That the human world does not in any way participate in it", by implication it means that the affair between the Greek God Hermes and nymph suggests the impossibility of any fulfillment in the human world of mortality.

Significantly enough the world of imagination is punctured and the romantic charms gives way to final analysis of existence, The sage Apollonius is the voice of cold reason. He can see into reality and through it too. *Lamia* vanishes. Her true identity is established. The artist is preoccupied in the swing of the balance. He hears the voice of conscience and sacrifices all that he has at his command. Paradoxically enough she is "A virgin purest lipped yet in the lore of love deep learn'd to the read heart's core". The cyness of *Lamia* develops into queerness of the naked truth. This is the final point where Keats wants to arrive at. This is the voice of truth.

There is no use of being led away by emotional rejection of presence of sage

Apollonius as has been done by many a critic till today. The interpretations of the poem in these terms necessarily lead to a kind of assumption that the poem is about the abstractions. Lamia is after all, a serpent, however, so loving she appears to be, she is in a mood of prey. The design is thwarted. Apollonius, then represents a clear view of reality. In fact, the symbolism of eye is capturing. The vision of Lycius if filled and intoxicated by Lamia:

And soon his eyes had drunk her beauty
up,
Leaving no drop in the bewildering cup,
And still the cup was full.

Indeed Keats is posing an unhappy dilemma but it is not at all the core of the poem. Apollonius might have sharp eyes, quick eyes, severe eyes no doubt. But there is a sense of understanding peeping through the lines of the poem. Apollonius on the whole is the voice of cold philosophy at whose bidding all charms fly away and the pain of truth returns.

The second part of the poem begins with a doubtful proposition. It is in keeping with the attitude of reality in life. Having realized the truth of this enigmatic life, Lycius recoils into the reality of human situation. He begins to translate the

thought of his philosopher guide into an idea. This finally becomes the idea about life. The final vision, essentially philosophic in tone and imaginative in temperament dawn upon the artist. There is a resolve on the part of the artist to ward off the off the artist. There is a resolve on the part of the artist to ward off the oscillating vision. The soul recoils to find a judgment on life that it is worth living till it has its roots in the soil of human experience. This makes his poetry rooted to the earth. The poetry of earth is never dead and the poet is no longer willing to quarrel either with a rose or with a snake, rose being illusion, snake being reality.

Keats is seen attempting soberly at the technical improvements. It is therefore, a well imagined and a well planned poem. It has been written in a much tighter form of couplet The narrative technique adopted by the poet is “much clearer and less sprawling.” It is remarkable in this context to visualize Dryden’s influence on the poetry of Keats. The sentimental atmosphere, we encounter in early Keats has been negated deliberately and a bye pass has been created through a break – up in his poetic sensibility. On the whole it appears to an effort of all well organized verse narrative.

Works Cited:

- Hough, Graham. *The Romantic Poets*, Bombay: B.I. Publication Pvt. Ltd., 1953, p. 167.
Griggs, H.E. (ed.) “Lamila” in *the Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Keats*, Part I, New York: The Modern Library, p.335.
Wasserman, E.R. *The Finer Tone: Keats’s Major Poems*, Baltimore, 1953, p. 74.
Spencer, John Hill. *Keats: The Narrative Poems*, London: Macmillan Press, 1983.
Bush, Douglas. *John Keats*, London: The MacMillan Company, 1956.