

The Concept of the Sublime in John Keats's Poetry: A Romantic Perspective

Nivedita Nirvikar

Research Scholar

Department of English

Kalinga University, Raipur, Chhattisgarh-492101

ABSTRACT

The concept of the sublime in John Keats's poetry represents a distinctive evolution within Romanticism, diverging from the egotistical sublime of predecessors like William Wordsworth toward a more sensuous, ego-displaced engagement with beauty, mortality, and transcendence. This paper explores how Keats reformulates the sublime through his Great Odes and other works, drawing on influences from Edmund Burke's terror-based aesthetics, Immanuel Kant's moral elevation, and Friedrich Schiller's notion of mixed feelings of woe and joy. Central to Keats's approach is the "poetical character" that embraces negative capability—remaining in uncertainties without irritable reaching for resolution—allowing the sublime to emerge from the interplay of sensory delight and melancholic awareness of transience. Key poems such as "*Ode to a Nightingale*," "*Ode on a Grecian Urn*," "*Ode to Psyche*," and "*Ode on Melancholy*" illustrate this, where the sublime arises not from overwhelming nature but from intimate, imaginative immersion in art, myth, and the human condition. The analysis introduces the "Sensevil Sublime," a Keatsean innovation that repositions sublimity in the corporeal and putrefied senses, subverting traditional hierarchies through de-personification of the ego and moral superiority via bodily resurrection. By comparing Keats with Romantic theories and contemporaries, this study argues that his sublime offers a pathway to eternal truths amid mortality, emphasizing humility, gusto, and creative displacement over self-projection. Ultimately, Keats's poetry transforms the sublime into a pathetic, accessible force that bridges the sensible and supersensible, enriching Romantic perspectives on human freedom and imagination. This comprehensive examination draws on scholarly interpretations to highlight Keats's contributions to aesthetic philosophy, concluding with implications for understanding Romanticism's enduring legacy.

Keywords : Negative Capability, Great Odes, Sensevil Sublime, Mortality, Beauty and Melancholy etc.

Introduction :

The sublime, as a cornerstone of Romantic aesthetics, encapsulates the human encounter with overwhelming grandeur that evokes awe, terror, and elevation. Originating from Longinus's ancient treatise on rhetorical elevation and revitalized in the 18th century by Edmund Burke's emphasis on terror and obscurity, as well as Immanuel Kant's linkage to moral freedom, the sublime in Romantic poetry often manifests as a confrontation with nature's vastness or the mind's infinite potential. For first-generation Romantics like William Wordsworth, this took the form of an "egotistical sublime," where personal introspection and self-projection onto nature yield profound insights, as seen in "*Tintern Abbey*." John Keats, a second-generation Romantic poet (1795–1821), however, reformulates this concept, shifting away from ego-centered dominance toward a more humble, sensuous immersion that displaces the self in favor of mythic and artistic realms.¹

Keats's poetry, marked by vivid imagery and philosophical depth, engages the sublime not as a conquest but as a dissolution into beauty's transience, aligning with Schiller's idea of the sublime as a mixed feeling of pain and pleasure that affirms moral independence. Influenced by his medical background and personal struggles with illness and loss, Keats develops a "poetical character" that is "everything and nothing," capable of inhabiting diverse identities through "negative capability." This paper examines the sublime in Keats's works from a Romantic perspective, focusing on his Great Odes, and introduces the "Sensevil Sublime" as a unique Keatsean paradigm that integrates corporeal deficiency with aesthetic terror and moral elevation. The thesis posits that Keats's sublime,

through its emphasis on sensory fusion and ego displacement, offers a more inclusive and pathetic pathway to transcendence, critiquing and expanding upon Romantic predecessors while underscoring the interplay of mortality and immortality.²

Theoretical Framework: The Romantic Sublime and Keats's Divergence :

The Romantic sublime often involves a human-centered engagement with nature, where encounters with vast landscapes or tempests evoke self-reflection and a sense of freedom from sensory limitations. Critiques highlight its anthropocentrism, prioritizing human elevation over nature's intrinsic value, potentially leading to solipsism. Burke's sublime arises from terror and obscurity, where the mind grapples with the infinite, producing delight through removed danger. Kant advances this by tying the sublime to reason's supremacy over imagination, fostering moral autonomy when nature's magnitude overwhelms the senses but elevates the mind. Schiller, in "On the Sublime," describes it as a mixed emotion of woe (from physical vulnerability) and joy (from moral independence), enabling transcendence.³

Keats diverges from Wordsworth's egotistical sublime, which "stands alone" as a self-asserting force, by advocating a "chameleon poet" who has "no Identity" and fills other bodies with gusto. In letters, Keats critiques Wordsworth's "palpable design" and praises his exploratory "dark Passages," aligning with negative capability—embracing uncertainties without resolution. This allows Keats to access sublime truths through myth and art, avoiding self-worship. Furthermore, Keats's "Sensevil Sublime" repositions sublimity in the "putrefied sense," blending sensory delight with decay, drawing from Hobbes's relational good/evil, Longinus's rhetorical amplification, Burke's terror, and Kant's moral elevation. Characteristics include ego de-personification, deference from the sensible, and moral superiority through corporeality, expanding Romantic boundaries but limited by infinite regression and sensual instability.⁴

The Sublime in Keats's Great Odes

Keats's Great Odes unfold as a progression toward the sublime, confronting mortality's paradoxes through imaginative unity. In "Ode to Psyche" (1819), Keats reveres Psyche as a symbol of the soul's dual mortality and immortality, building a mental shrine: "Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane / In some untrodden region of my mind." This enacts ego displacement, uniting intellect and heart in creative growth, echoing Schiller's sublime as spiritual awakening.⁵

"Ode on Indolence" rejects temptations of Love, Ambition, and Poesy as phantoms, affirming higher identity: "Vanish, ye Phantoms! from my idle spright, / Into the clouds, and never more return!" Here, the sublime emerges from renouncing mortal attachments for freedom.⁶

In "Ode on Melancholy," Keats urges embracing sorrow as integral to beauty: "Veil'd Melancholy has her Sovran shrine," transforming transience into divine connection through joys like "a morning rose." This mixed feeling aligns with Schiller's woe and joy.⁷

"Ode to a Nightingale" contrasts human pain with the bird's eternal song, achieving transcendence via "the viewless wings of Poesy." The speaker dissolves: "Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget," accessing mythic eternity, but returns questioning reality. This embodies negative capability and the Sensevil Sublime's terror-comprehension blend.⁸

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" visualizes eternal art: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter," equating "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." The urn's frozen scenes evoke sublime permanence amid flux.⁹

The Sensevil Sublime in Later Works

In sonnets like "This Living Hand" and "Why Did I Laugh Tonight?" the Sensevil Sublime manifests through corporeal terror and resurrection. In the former, the hand's warmth turns haunting: it chills "in the icy silence of the tomb," calming conscience via transfusion, expanding via putrefied sense but limited by deficiency. "Why Did I Laugh" turns glory to pain, with negations evoking Burkean obscurity and Kantian intensity: "Death is life's high meed."¹⁰

In "Hyperion," the sublime arises from titanic falls and Apollo's apotheosis, blending mythic grandeur with sensory pathos.

Conclusion

Keats's sublime, rooted in Romanticism yet innovative, transforms awe into a sensuous, ego-effacing encounter that bridges mortality and eternity. Through negative capability and the Sensevil Sublime, he critiques egotism, offering a pathetic pathway to moral and aesthetic transcendence. This perspective enriches Romanticism, emphasizing humility and imagination's power to infuse life with essential beauty. Future studies might explore its influence on modern poetry, underscoring Keats's enduring relevance in grappling with human limits.

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