

Primary Symbols in Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci"

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Abstract

This study examines the primary symbols in British poet Keats' poem, "La Belle Dame sans Merci", and the poem strikingly revolves around a Knight and his, the protagonist's love for a beautiful woman. However, the woman does not have mercy and pity for the knight. A great number of symbols are given to present the theme of love focusing on the knight's desire for the fairy-woman. These symbols are incorporated with mythology specifying their relation with the themes of death and life. The article also reflects Keats' use of primary symbols together with their close integrity with nature. The relation between love and nature has been illustrated throughout the paper. The knight's first acquaintance with nature is provided by the fairy-lady. The fairy-lady's offer of a transient bliss, a particular kind of imaginative experience to the knight proves that love has been source of life for the knight despite its brooding. Conclusion of the article helps reader grasp a close connection between nature and woman. Thus, the article stresses the stubborn fact that there is a close relation between the concepts of love, woman and nature.

Keywords: *Primary Symbols, Knight, Nature, Woman, Love, Faery-lady*

John Keats'in La Belle Dame Sans Merci Şiirinde Bulunan Başat Semboller

Öz

Bu çalışma, İngiliz şair Keats'in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" adlı şiirindeki başat sembollerini incelemekte olup ve şövalyenin peri kadar güzel bir kadına olan sevgisini ele almaktadır. Ancak, kadın şövalyeye karşı hiçbir şekilde merhamet ve acıma duygusu göstermemektedir. Makalede, şövalyenin, peri kadına olan arzusunu dile getiren aşk temasını anlatmak için çok sayıda sembol kullanıma yer verilmiştir. Bu semboller, ölüm ve yaşam temalarını konu alan mitolojik öğelerle birleştirilmiştir. Makale ayrıca Keats'in kullandığı başat sembollerin, doğayla olan bütünlüklerini göstermektedir. Makale, aşk ve doğa arasındaki benzer unsurları konu edinmiştir. Şövalyenin doğayla ilk tanışma durumu peri-kadın tarafından sağlanır. Peri-kadının, şövalyeye geçici bir mutluluk ve özel bir tür hayali deneyim sunma durumu, şövalye için sevginin, kendi içindeki zorluklarına rağmen yaşam kaynağı, kutsal olma durumunu ortaya koyuyor. Makalenin sonucu ise, okuyucunun doğa ile kadın arasındaki yakın bağlantıyı anlamasına yardımcı olur. Bu nedenle, makalenin sonunda aşk, kadın ve doğa arasında inkar edilemez ilişkinin varlığının su götürmez bir gerçek olduğu vurgulanır.

***Anahtar Kelimeler:** Başat Semboller, Şövalye, Kadın, Doğa, Aşk, Peri Kadın*

Primary Symbols

The British poet John Keats' poem "La Belle Dame sans Merci" (1819) abounds in symbols which strikingly revolve around the protagonist knight's love for a beautiful woman who does not have pity. The primary symbols which are in association with mythology strikingly illustrate love as a symbol of life and death, thus showing its fundamentality and integrity to nature.

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" is a romantic poem, therefore embodies the features of the Romantic period. In order to analyze the poem effectively, it is important to have background knowledge about the period. The Romantic period in Britain starts with the French Revolution in 1789 and ends with the Reform Act of 1832. The French Revolution was effective in the emergence of 'liberty, equality, and fraternity' (Carter, Lea 103).

The spirit of 'liberty, equality, and fraternity' has led to some changes in the individual's way of thinking and heart became more important than the head. In other words, heart controlled the head and hence importance given to intellect lost its influence, leaving its place to the individual feelings.

Differences emerging in thinking paved the way for writers to change the theme and the language in literature. Therefore, for Romantics, individual spirit, imagination, feelings, symbolism and nature became more of an issue.

As stated before, symbolism and myth were highly important for Romantics because they were nature's language and helpful to express the unspeakable. For this reason, Romantics attached a great importance to the use of symbols in their works of art. In her essay, "Language Strange," Weismann states 'nature speaks through the poet's senses, she can be a moral instructor' (96). Weismann suggests that nature addresses the poet's senses, emotions, imaginations and feelings and in that sense helps to express the inexpressible. In a way, nature becomes a part of the poet's sensory organs. In fact, nature's becoming a part of sense organs shows us that nature is a bridge between the poet and the poet's senses. Nature is the silent teacher of the universe, the implied meaning lying under the silence of nature can be understood with the help of symbols since they utter the unspeakable.

Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci" opens with the protagonist, knight-at-arms and fractions of nature. "Alone and palely loitering, / the sedge is wither'd from the lake, / and no birds sing" (Keats I. 3- 5). In these lines, the hidden message is given through nature's language which is symbols. When these two lines are read, we dive into a turbulent mood since the grass has died off around the lake and birds do not sing. Nature tries to explain something giving this desolate and turbulent autumn landscape that lacks liveliness and vitality. Nature's lifeless being symbolizes death in the poem. Nature becomes a place of lifelessness for the protagonist, 'knight- at- arms' and he chooses to wait all alone.

"I see a lily on thy brow/ with anguish moist and fever dew/ and on thy cheeks a fading rose" (Keats 3. IX -11). The Knight-at-arms is as pale as a lily flower and sweating, as if he suffers from an illness and also on his cheeks the blush of life quickly fades away.

Burwell also suggests that “the flower imagery here is twofold. The immediate effect is that the knight-at-arms is proven to be literally pale—hence the lily—and there is a color fast fading in his cheeks” (4). Twofold flower imagery given in these lines embodies two connotations. One of them is Lily and it is the symbol of the Greek goddess Hera, it connotes purity. Lilies are also connected with death as well. Considering negative and positive meanings of this flower, the symbolic meaning of lily in these lines recalls the coldness of death with close relation to the knight’s love for the fairy lady. This symbolic relation of death may be presented through his unrequited love for his fairy love. He might be suffering from an unrequited love and for this reason his hope has faded.

When a person loses his or her hope to live, that person feels on the verge of death without any spark of life. Moreover, roses are the symbols of love but fading roses on the protagonist’s cheeks may again illustrate the loss of hope concerning the love since the Knights-at-arms might have been entrapped by a woman.

For those counted reasons, these lines suggest the symbolic relation between love and death through the integrity of nature using the symbolic meanings of rose and lily.

“So haggard and so woe-begone?” (Keats II. 4). He is so tired and may be immersed in sorrow. Something makes the protagonist feel sorrowful. Keats said in his letters “Sorrow is Wisdom” (qtd in Burwell 80). According to the Keats, wisdom comes after sorrow. The mood of sorrow in this poem emerges as a result of the knight-at-arms’ sad mood which is reflected through nature’s barren landscape.

He is sorrowful because the fairy-woman might have entrapped pale kings, and princes as well and pale warriors: “I saw pale kings and princess too, / pale warriors, death pale were they all” (Keats X.1-2). He might have been disappointed since the knight-at-arms was not the only man the fairy-woman flirts with. Through sorrow, he might be a wise man but with pain in the heart. At the end of the poem, we come across these lines: “And this is why I sojourn here, / alone and palely loitering, / though the sedge is wither’d from the lake, / and no birds sing” (Keats XII.1-4). Since he has

seen the pale kings and princes as well and pale warriors who have been enslaved by the fairy woman, the knight's only solution might have been just waiting and this process of waiting may have led him to be wiser.

At the same time, he might have lost his reason for living since he has seen other pale kings. For the knight, love should have been the reason for living, when he has lost that feeling, he has lost the energy for living. This situation is reflected through the landscape. Birds do not sing anymore and he just waits.

“I met a lady in the meads/full beautiful, a faery's child/her hair was long, her foot was light, and her eyes wild” (Keats IX.12-15). In these lines, we come across the relation between love and nature. On the one side, an image of a beautiful woman and on the other side the place of confrontation with this beautiful woman are given. Weismann states in her essay “Language Strange” that the first activity of the child-woman who serves as intermediary between the poet and nature, is introducing the knight to nature” (94).

The knight-at-arms encounters this woman in the meadow and this confrontation suggests a symbolic meaning. In other words, the woman image is correlated with nature; the beautiful woman in nature introduces nature to the knight. Moreover, ‘wild eyes’ symbolizes the beauty belonging to nature, untouched, innocent and as naïve as nature. Keats may try to adapt this beauty to nature loading with the same charge. “I made a garland for her head/ and bracelets too and fragrant zone;/ she look'd at me as she did love, / and made sweet moan “(Keats X.1-4). These lines are the symbol of love of the knight towards the faery-woman. The flower imagery suggests the relation between love and life. He makes a crown of flowers for her head, bracelets and a belt of flowers. There are flowers and the knight gives these vulnerable flowers to the fairy-woman. In this context, while flowers represent nature, offering them to her symbolizes the theme of love.

For Keats, love and nature are not independent poetic subjects. They are parallel, for we must experience both love and nature with full knowledge of the threat of time if we are to experience them truly; but love and

nature are not connected by spiritual bonds (Weismann 101). In other words, nature and love are interwoven with each other. Weissman states in her "Language Strange" that "The fairy- woman offers a particular kind of transient bliss, a particular kind of imaginative experience- the joyful experience of communication with nature so desired by the English Romanticism poets" (3). The fairy-woman for the knight-at-arms may be a source of happiness and joy even if it is ephemeral. The protagonist knight-at-arms' desire for the woman is met by nature since wild eyed woman exists in nature.

The existence of love also is the symbol of life in this poem. Before confronting the fairy-woman, nature looked barren, desolate and lifeless. However, after running up against her, the protagonist might be offered a particular kind of transient bliss. Therefore, this desolate and turbulent autumn landscape, lacking liveliness and vitality, may disappear all of a sudden and this time nature becomes a symbol of life for the protagonist knight- at- arms rather than lifelessness.

The relation between love and nature have been illustrated throughout the paper. Moreover, the close connection between nature and woman is an undeniable occurrence. Therefore, the existence of close relation between love, woman and nature is a stubborn fact. The knight's first acquaintance with nature is provided by the fairy-lady. This introduction is another means of confirming a close connection between nature and woman. When the knight has come across the faery-woman, she might have been the source of bliss for the knight. He illustrates his happiness through nature's symbols and makes garland for her head and bracelets too.

However, nature does not treat submissively on every occasion. Sometimes it destructs us: "For sidelong would she bend, and sing/ a faery's song" (Keats XI.4-5). In these lines the woman's singing a faery's song may refer to the Siren in mythology. Siren was a creature half bird and half woman in Greek mythology, who lured sailors into destruction by the sweetness of her songs (Encyclopedia Britannica). As stated before, the poem shows the relation between love and nature fed by mythology. When she sings faery's song, she may allure all the men and entrap them.

This sweet voice and her seductive song might be the end of the knight's life. If she entraps all men, then the protagonist may remain with the pain in his heart causing him to stay. "The introduction to nature ends in seduction and betrayal" (Weismann 95). Nature may destruct us as woman do in this poem leaving the knight with a loss of hope. Betrayal by love leads the knight to consider the nature as barren and so the protagonist loses his hope. Weissman states in her "Language Strange" that "For Keats, nature is only nature; but no poet has ever made it more beautiful than he does. We can love nature, even if it does not speak to us and does not love us." (100).

As stated before, the faery-woman is the symbol of nature. Nature does not love us, but it does not matter because nature unconditionally offers "beauty, joy and comfort" (Weisman, 100). Similarly, even if she does not love the knight, loving faery woman gives the knight hope for living. "And sure in language strange she said/ I love thee true" (Keats XII.3-4).

"She took me to her elfin grot,/and there she wept, and sigh'd full sore,/ and there I shut her wild eyes/ with kisses four " (VIII.1-4). The woman with no mercy took the man to her cave and he put her to sleep with four kisses. Elfin grot symbolizes the excessive feeling of love shown towards the woman. The knight is probably very in love because he could easily go in the cave without any hesitation. She may have taken him there to end his life, but again, it did not matter for the knight. These lines implicitly symbolize the relation between love and death with the knight's going into the grotto. The knight may have run the risk of dying in the face of love, a strong life motivation.

Throughout the article, Keats' poem "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is given with the theme of the protagonist knight's love for a beautiful woman who does not have pity. The Knight's love for the La Belle Dame illustrates love as a symbol of life and death. The fairy-woman's offer of a transient bliss, a particular kind of imaginative experience to the knight, proves that love has been the source of life for the knight despite its brooding aspects. The poem also reveals the relation between love and nature through the knight as when he was disappointed, he lost joy to live. This desperate and hopeless mood was reflected through the desolate, and barren autumn landscape.

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