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Author(s)	Haruki, Takako
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Keats through his use of metaphors
in
Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Lamia

Takako Haruki

I. Introduction

This essay aims to examine Keats's poetry with metaphors as a focal point and to detect Keats's world of poetry, its characteristics and nature through Keats's use of metaphors. There have indeed been several scholars and critics who paid their attention to the importance of imagery in Keats's poems. Their methods, however, are either too mechanistic or too impressionistic. Fogle, for instance, is too mechanistic in his choice and classification of the examples, without distinguishing between really effective expressions and ordinary uses of words.¹⁾ On the other hand, D'avanzo, Knight, and Pettet are characterized by their impressionistic approach.²⁾ They draw a rather hasty generalization on the basis of the abundance of examples which struck their eyes. Their findings are often evocative and suggestive but incomplete so that readers are left with an idea that there must be something left unsaid.

What is fundamentally wrong with these scholars is that they isolate the study of imagery from *context*. An image has any meaning at all in relation to the situation in which it occurs. An image comes to have any effect only when it is supported by the rhythm of the verse, and by the flow of emotion.

Admitting the extreme importance of *context* as regards metaphors, we use the word *context* meaning such elements as rhythm, rhyme, juncture and 'sound effects' of all kinds on the phonetic level, sentence and clause structure on the syntactic level, the choice of words, the status of items of vocabulary, position in the poems and relationship with other metaphors on the semantic level. All of these contribute to and are part of the metaphor as it actually occurs.³⁾

And again metaphors in poetry should be related to the meaning of the entire poem. The use of them should be effective and dynamic enough to

break the confinement within the linguistic world and to create a new world for a poet, a world of his own. When we examine metaphors, importance should, naturally, be attached to the point that metaphor's dynamic power is relevantly tied to the entire work of poetry. We call such metaphors successful metaphors and only through close examination of the use of successful metaphors, not of mere embellishing metaphors, we can see how a poet's imagination works.

Our observation of the use of metaphors in Keats's three narrative poems, *Isabella*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and *Lamia* brings us to categorize them into four groups according to their uses, each of which constitutes the following chapters.

II. Prefigurative metaphor

Prefigurative metaphor usually works in a suggestive way that readers are to acknowledge them subtly at the moment and, later on, to recognize them more deeply in retrospect or in seeing a poem as a whole. Such are the cases in *The Eve of St. Agnes* and in *Lamia*.

In *The Eve of St. Agnes* Keats arranges a careful setting from the very beginning. The metaphor in the second stanza not only strengthens the prevailing sense of chill, darkness and silence, but also adds the trapped, end-is-near feeling.

II.

His prayer he saith, this patient, holy man;
 Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees,
 And back returneth, meagre, barefoot, wan,
 Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees:
 The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze,
 Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails:

(*The Eve of St. Agnes*, 11.10-15)⁴⁾

The dominating sound effect is produced by the abundance of the diphthongs and long vowels in the heavy-stressed syllables. The slow, drowsy motion of the old man is effected by this abundance and by putting emphasis on the long vowel [i:] by rhyming. Although the

metaphor shares the slow effect, it has other facets which are entirely new. Its long vowel [ɔ:] is half-open compared to the [i:] which is close, [ə:] which is half-close.⁵⁾ Its length of five syllables stands out clearly, too, conjointly with its Latin origin.

The central point of the word's power is in its evocativeness. The souls of the dead of long ago still suffering the punishment of their sins, the beadsman's sense of the same approaching fate, the sense of the end of his harsh, lonely life: all of these are condensed in the choice of this adjective. As we see the poem as a whole, we should note, moreover, that this evocativeness of the introductory stanzas contributes to the dramatic effect which the whole poem possesses. The intensity of the metaphor is greatly contributing to make clear the contrast between the silence of the church and the revelry in the hall of Madeline's house in the first place, and next, the church scene and the Madeline's chamber scene, where the detached silence is dominant again but the youth, warmth, and richness conveyed by Madeline and Porphyro are remarkable.

In *The Eve of St. Agnes* one more example of this type can be seen. Porphyro covertly ventures in the castle and persuades the reluctant Angela to do what he asks. In his fancy he is eager to 'win a peerless bride' while Madeline is in her sleepy bed and dream still takes hold of her. We are to see later that the description of Madeline in a drowsy, magical state is actually realized.⁶⁾

XIX.

Which was, to lead him, in close secrecy,
 Even to Madeline's chamber, and there hide
 Him in a closet, of such privacy
 That he might see her beauty unespied,
 And win perhaps that night a peerless bride,
 While *legion'd fairies pac'd the coverlet*
 And *pale enchantment held her sleepy-eyed.*

(*The Eve of St. Agnes*, 11.163-69)

We can see once again that Keats's imagination works prefiguratively in the opening of the second part of *Lamia*.

The lady, ever watchful, penetrant,
 Saw this with pain, so arguing a want
 Of something more, more than her empery
 Of joys; and she began to moan and sigh
 Because he mused beyond her, knowing well
 That but *a moment's thought is passion's passing bell.*

(*Lamia*, Part II, 11.34-39)

This metaphor, making use of the concrete image, expresses very vividly and decisively the idea that a 'thought' and 'passion' cannot be alive together. The phrase has a deeper connotation than that. It is natural to take Lamia's thinking at its face value, but in retrospect, we can call it prophesy. Later in the story a philosopher, the thinker Apollonius, enters the wedding as an uninvited, unwelcomed visitor and banishes Lamia from the human world. Considering this denouement, the passing bell is at the same time for Lamia herself and the world represented by her. The inner lingering emotion is also suspended by the construction of the phrase, that is, the two adjectivals before the noun and by the prolonging Alexandrine.

In *Isabella*, however, the readers are let known the course of the killing while Isabella was left unknown to the death of her love. Prefigurativeness of the metaphor works for the heroine alone.

..... Oftentimes
 She ask'd her brothers, with an eye all pale
 Striving to be itself, what *dungeon* climes
 Could keep him off so long? . . .

(*Isabella*, 11.257-60)

The word is apparently used by Isabella in a metaphorical way. Separated from her love, she feels she exists in a dungeon. She uses the word also as she guesses him to have the same feeling as herself. Yet it is a bitter irony in the reader's eyes that the word is literally true. Her love Lorenzo is actually confined in the subterranean dungeon of a tomb.

What makes the word 'dungeon' distinguished is, in the first place, its phonetic features. We can say the second syllable is an echo of the first: the explosive [d], one of the articulatory strongest consonants, softening to the affricate [dʒ] and the tonic vowel [ʌ] reducing to a schwa [ə],

and both syllables end in the same consonant [n]. Cooperating with these is the rhythm: line 259 preceded by the regular-measured line 258 starts with the heavy-stressed 'Striving' and accelerates until the sudden pause after 'itself'.⁷⁾ The pause produces a suspense and a stopping of emotion to emphasize the 'dungeon'. We are made to notice, by this contextual emphasis, the effective use of the word's meaning.

III. Climactic metaphor

What we call here a climactic metaphor is those used for climactic moments with regard to a whole story or a part of a story. The first thing we notice about this kind of metaphor is that they all have a sensory quality, which appeals to the senses of the reader and conveys the intensity and the meaning of the scene in a most direct way.

X.

Parting they seem'd to tread upon the air,
 Twin roses by the zephyr blown apart
 Only to meet again more close, and share
The inward fragrance of each other's heart.

(Isabella, 11.73-76)

In this instance it is the olfactory sense that combines the 'Twin roses' and the lovers. As they are so beautifully interfused in this phrase that we are likely to feel that 'each other's heart' is Isabella and Lorenzo's heart, forgetting that the grammatical structure urges us to take 'Twin roses' as the subject. The metaphor has succeeded in conveying to us the young lovers' feeling towards each other, and their innocent joy together with sweetness, sensuously.

In *the Eve of St. Agnes* we can see that the olfactory and gustatory senses play an important rôle.

XXXVI.

Beyond a mortal man impulsion'd far
 At these voluptuous accents, he arose,
 Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star

Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose;
 Into her dream he melted, as the rose
 Blendeth its odour with the violet, —
Solution sweet: . . .

(*The Eve of St. Agnes*, 11.316-22)

The word choice is so apt that we must acknowledge the phrase to be far more than a mere euphemism. Notice the way Keats leads us expertly to the climactic metaphor through the group of words concerning physicality such as 'impassion'd', 'voluptuous', 'Ethereal',⁸⁾ 'flush'd' and 'throbbing' or through the use of kindred words such as 'melted' and 'blendeth'. The vivid preparative comparison to the odour of rose and violet makes it easy for us to comprehend the metaphor. This comparison of the odour of rose to his state conveys a subtler feeling than that of the mere 'purple riot' (*The Eve of St. Agnes*, 1,138) kind of metaphor. The metaphor has an implicative quality as well, making it possible for Porphyro in his intense spirituality to fuse into the dream of Madeline. Moreover, the continuance of regular iambic rhythm after the line ending with 'violet', the alliteration of the fricative [s] sound and the long vowels in both 'solution' and 'sweet' hypnotize us to enter the dreamy world of Madeline.

In *Lamia* one climactic metaphor occurs in the opening episode, the other at the scene of Lamia's transformation. Their effects are not less important than the two preceding metaphors.

But the God fostering her chilled hand,
 She felt the warmth, her eyelids open'd bland
 And, like new flowers at morning song of bees
 Bloom'd, and gave up her honey to the lees.
 Into the green-recessed woods they flew;
Nor grew they pale, as mortal lovers do.

(*Lamia*, Part I. 11.140-45)

Her eyes in torture fix'd, and anguish drear,
 Hot glaz'd, and wide, with lid-lashes all sear,
Flash'd phosphor and sharp sparks, without one cooling tear.
 The colours all inflam'd throughout her train,
 She writh'd about, convuls'd with *scarlet pain*:

A deep *volcanian yellow* took the place
 Of all her milder-mooned body's grace;
 And, as the lava ravishes the mead,
 Spoilt all her silver mail, and gloden brede;
 (Lamia, Part I. 11.150-58)

The former makes use of the visionary and tactile senses, which helps to bring out a vivid contrast between the everlasting love of immortal beings and the evanescence of the love of human beings. In the latter quotation Keats uses first a concrete metaphor⁹⁾ which directly stimulates our senses. Secondly, a synaesthetic metaphor combining the organic sense of 'pain' with the visual sense of 'scarlet' which gives us a strong compact sensation. The synaesthetic metaphor is used again in 'volcanic yellow' to mean sulphur. This metaphor evokes in us, furthermore, the kinesthetic, visual, olfactory senses. All of them are mingled as the serpent writhes in pain and cause the curious dynamism of verisimilitude.

It is by means of this description of painful transformation that Lamia as a serpent is given a curious existence, and that the fresh beauty of Lamia as a lady impresses us as unearthly, supernatural. The curious sensation of her existence is strongly transmitted by a train of metaphors.

IV. Summarizing metaphor

This chapter treats the third kind of metaphor, which, so to speak, sums up what the poet has pictured in descriptive passages up to that moment. This is typically seen in *Isabella*.

Isabella has two rich brothers. Their covetousness as merchants is given a full description and reproached in a rather exasperated tone by Keats in the space of four stanzas. One of them, stanza XV contains an effective metaphor which sums up stanza XIV and XV.

XV.

For them the Ceylon diver held his breath,
 And went all naked to the hungry shark;
 For them his ears gush'd blood; for them in death
 The seal on the cold ice with piteous bark
 Lay full of darts; for them alone did seethe
 A thousand men in troubles wide and dark:

Half-ignorant, they turn'd an easy wheel,
 That set sharp racks at work, to *pinch and peel*.
 (*Isabella*, 11.113-20)

The metaphor is concrete and appropriate. Its vividness comes from the attributes of the machine, 'rack'. 'pinch' and 'peel', which evoke in us the horror of an instrument of torture. The cruelty of the brothers is felt all the more in that they are 'half-ignorant' since it would suggest their unwilling recognition of the torture they give.

Various phonetic features perfectly reinforce the sense of cruelty. As well as the alliteration of [p] sounds which confirms this sense, line 120 has as many as nine stops [t], [p], [k] in succession and the rhyming of 'wheel' and 'peel' is grim enough. Throughout the stanza the iambic rhythm is very regular, which strengthens the mechanical, merciless connotation. It may be worth adding that every foot consists of two unstressed and stressed syllables, which is a rarer thing than is supposed, since English can be characterized as an isochronic language. (See note 7.)

The stronger the two brothers' egoistic, cruel character is impressed on our mind, the better we are convinced that they are capable of murdering Lorenzo and marrying Isabella to a noble with a rich estate.

V. Thematic metaphor

What makes *Lamia* different from other two narrative poems is that it contains several thematic metaphors which are expressive of the poet's idea. As we have seen earlier on, Keats expresses, vividly and decisively, the idea that a 'thought' and 'passion' cannot alive together by making use of the concrete image.

The notion of a 'thought' driving away 'passion' or dream is displayed further in the following example by marvellous concrete metaphors.

Philosophy will *clip an Angel's wings*,
Conquer all mysteries by *rule and line*,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine –
Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made
 The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade.
 (*Lamia*, Part II. 11.234-38)

Philosophy's destructive power is expressed by 'clip', 'conquer', its annihilating power by 'empty' and analyzing power by 'unweave'. All the verbs give an unpleasant, vacant impression, while mystery or beauty is represented by a series of nouns which arouse in us a lost, yearning feeling. Notice that the regular iambic rhythm is inverted in lines 233 and 234 to put the heavy-stressed syllable on the first in 'conquer' and 'empty'.

In respect to this notion, we should not overlook one more effective metaphor. It occurs when Lycius goes out to summon all his kin while Lamia, though unwillingly, dresses the banquet-room magnificently to fit for the occasion.

About the halls, and to and from the doors,
 There was a noise of wings, till in short space
 The glowing banquet-room shone with wide-arched grace.
 A haunting music, sole perhaps and lone
Supportress of the faery-roof, made moan
 Throughout, as fearful the whole charm might fade.

(*Lamia*, Part II. 11.119-24)

The room is splendid enough, yet we are informed that it is supported solely by the music drifting on the air. It is as if the palace is magically charmed into existence, so that nothing substantial is needed for its support. The metaphor combines two things by apposition. One is music, which has an invisible, sensory connotation. The other is 'supportress' which has, outside this context, a solid substantial sense. The discrepancy of the two affords an uneasy, strange sensation to us. The sensation is partly due to the fact that the adjective 'lone' is strongly attached to 'supportress'. It is not only due to the sense but also due to the rhythmic balance between 'sole perhaps' and 'lone Supportress'. In addition, the alliteration of [s] sounds and the assonance of 'sole' and 'lone' give the phrase a strong group sense.

The uneasiness and uncertainty of the music is emphasized in this way, and the passage can be interpreted thus: a dream or a passion, especially without a solid foundation in reality, is easily dispelled and it is vulnerable to the gaze by Apollonius or 'philosophy'.

VI. Concluding remarks

Our chapters are divided according to the characteristics of the use of the successful metaphors in Keats's narrative poems. If they could be classified into four groups, it is not incidental. But it derives from the very fact that Keats's use of metaphors effectively combined with the essential skill in narrating poems, which are prefigurative, climactic, summarizing and thematic.

Although the examination we can confirm the general notion held by critics that Keats has an inclination to express abstract ideas by the aid of concrete metaphors or sensory metaphors. However, inspite of Fogle's remark that 'Keats's rather infrequent olfactory images are rounded, heavy, and pervasive' (1949, p.83), it may be right to suggest that Keats's approach to experiences is through olfactory or gustatory sensations.¹⁰⁾ This tells us that to detect a tendency of a poet's nature, importance should be put more on the intensity of the use and not on the frequency of simple images or metaphors.

We put an emphasis on the *context* with regard to interaction between the meaning of metaphor. *Context*, however, can be and should be put into consideration in a wider sense. Our future assignment so as to elucidate the characteristics of Keats is to observe his metaphors in the light of wider *contexts*; the whole of his poetical works, other Romantic poets' works, and the tradition of English poetry.

Notes

- 1) R.H. Fogle, *The Imagery of Keats and Shelley* (Chapel Hill, 1949)
- 2) M.L. D'Avanzo, *Keats's Metaphors for the Poetic Imagination* (Durham, 1967)
G.W. Knight, *The Starlit Dome* (1941; rpt. London, 1959)
E.C. Pettet, *On the Poetry of Keats* (Cambridge, 1957)
- 3) T. Hawkes, *Metaphor* (London, 1972), p. 69.
- 4) All the quotations hereafter are from H.W. Garrod, *The Poetical Works of John Keats* (Oxford, 1958) and italics of the quotations are all mine.
- 5) For the division of the vowels by four degrees of openness, see for example, S. Hattori, *Onseigaku* (Tokyo, 1951), p. 69.
- 6) For further contextual details, see my M.A. thesis, *Keats's World of Metaphor*, submitted in January, 1982.

- 7) Recall that English is by nature an isochronic language, that is, the time between the heavy-stressed syllables are equal regardless of the number of weak syllables, though an apparent isosyllabism often masks it.
- 8) 'When applied to human being it can express ecstasy, heavenly feelings of delight, as at the climax of *The Eve of St. Agnes*'. R.T. Davies, 'Some Ideas and Usages' in K. Muir (ed.) *John Keats: A Reassessment* (Liverpool, 1969), p. 136.
- 9) This denomination corresponds to 'concretive metaphor' in Ullmann's classification; S. Ullmann, *Language and Style* (Oxford, 1964), p. 83–7. See also G. Leech, *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (London, 1969).
- 10) Compare the dissolution of Keats in the 'Ode to a Nightingale'.