

Dialectics between Consciousnesses and Illusion in Keats's Poem The Eve of St. Agnes¹

Pushpa Raj Jaishi

Abstract

The research paper attempts to explore the dialectics between consciousness and illusion in John Keats's poem The Eve of St. Agnes. The contradiction between the conscious state and dream in the poem shows the incongruity and ambiguity that gives a fine vein of Romantic irony in the poem. It is a stance of isolated skepticism carried by an author towards his or her work, typically manifesting in literary self-consciousness and self reflection. The symmetrical paradox between two different realms of human life in the poem exposes the inherent contradictions provoked the interplay between reality and dream. To reveal the relationship and hostility between the ideal and the real empathically focusing into the contradictory existence of ultimate human reality is a key to Romantic irony. Madeline's spirit to celebrate her chastity on the eve of St. Agnes enables her to celebrate consciousness as the bliss of ritual. The paper revolves around the unearthing of the inherent contradiction in the poem in reference to the theoretical illumination of Romantic irony using the critical perspectives of Schlegel, Colebrook and Mellor.

Keywords: Consciousness, Contradiction, Dialectic, Illusion, Romantic irony

The word irony has its origin in the Greek term eironia which first appear in the dialogue of Plato (as cited in Colebrook, 1999, p. 428-347), with reference to Socrates. According to Colebrook (1999), "the word Eironeia was first used to refer to artful double meaning in the Socratic dialogue of Plato, where the word is used ...to refer to Socrates' capacity to conceal what he really means" (p.1). Initially the word meant sneakily concealing the actual meaning of what one means to say. The rhetoric tool was

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Pushpa Raj Jashi, Lecturer and Assistant Campus Chief, Ghodaghodi Multiple Campus, Kailali, Nepal

Email: pushpajjaishi100@gmail.com

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formulated to pretend to be ignorant and expose one's opponent by challenging him on his received knowledge and wisdom. Aristotle mentioned about irony in his *Ethics* and *Rhetoric*. For him irony was neither virtuous nor malicious. Socrates and Platonic use of the word supported the initial concept which entailed later reflection on the concept of irony. However Socratic irony evolved in such way that it implies as ability to be divergent from what is said in general. There was a time when disproportionate and undue eulogies statements were regarded as ironic.

The paper studies the dialectics of consciousness and illusion focusing on the events circumscribed around the events revolving around the major characters: Madeline and Porphyro. The poem is structured by presenting the two antithetical ideas in parallel form which functions as the constant manipulation of Keats' adherence to the philosophy of dialectics resulting in the incongruency between real world and the visionary world which are the key features of romantic irony. Colebrook (1999) writes:

Romantic irony defined through a constellation of concepts, including, in addition to buffoonery, humour, wit and satire. Irony is related to buffoonery not just because subjective mastery is undermined; buffoonery falls, enjoys the humour of the fall, laughs from on high at the falling buffoon, and remains implicated in the fall. (p. 49)

Romantic irony pricks the bubble of romantic poetry, simplifies and finds the realities which are blurred by Romantic poet. Different critics have given their views among them Anne K. Mellor (1980) writes:

Keats's best poems are delineations of that struggle, rather than achieved resolutions (p.78). This poem utilizes a variety of incongruous conventions: courtly romance, fairy tale, gothic drama, folk legend (p. 90). In deliberate contrast to the springtime abundance of traditional pastoral romances, Keats opens his poem in the "bitter chill" of January and closes it with "cold"; whatever happens within the fairy-tale world of the castle, the lovers must eventually face the "winter"... (p. 90).

Keats (1884) captures this thrust or spirit when Madeline falls from the heavenly position of bliss to the sensual position of physicality:

He ceased- she panted quick- and suddenly
Her blue afraid eyes wide open shown:
Upon his knees he shank, pale and smooth- sculptured stone (lines, 297-299)

These lines explicate the aftermath of the physical consumption which embodies the rupture of the bliss of virginity at the cost of feast which significantly portrays the embellish state beyond the culmination of human emotions groomed by individual censorship. As Colebrook (1999) writes, "romantic irony must tackle this process of the fall of creative life into inert objectivity. . ." (p. 48). The elevated position of Madeline gets knocked to the down trodden state when she is entangled in the worldly affair of consummating which renders her predicament as necessarily born out of the 'fall'.

St. Agnes's eve is the evening before the day on which the memory of St. Agnes is celebrated and fast is kept. The eve of St. Agnes is the 20th January and the consecrated day in January 21st. The eve is called the vigil and the day is called feast. And so St. Agnes eve is January 20th. St Agnes was a young Roman girl who became a convert to Christianity, and who was persecuted and finally suffered death for her faith under Emperor Diocletian. She was subsequently canonized and declared a saint by the Christian church and a day was devoted to her memory.

The setting of the poem is a medieval castle; the time is cold January 20th, the eve of the feast of St. Agnes. Madeline is assured that if she keeps fast and performs some special rites, she will have a clear vision of her lover at midnight. That is why she is impatiently waiting for the midnight to fall and goes to bed without supper as a ritual.

Romantic irony is characterized by the spirit of romanticism: a conception of "universe founded in chaos and incomprehensibility rather than in a divinely ordained teleology" (Mellor, 1980, p. vii). This conception, however, is not nihilistic, as it may sound. Although the romantic has lost faith in the traditional morality and believes that everything is in vain, he still preserves a belief in a final reconciliation. He "feels" that there is a way out, thus a romantic ironist employs irony to constantly undermine given meanings, with the hope that this undoing will eventually result in a state of privilege and security he has been longing for (Lang 1996, p. 576).

Consciousness is the state or the quality of awareness, being aware of an external object or something within oneself. Consciousness include the concept of fundamentally coherent, conscious experience in relation to the outer environment unlike this illusion is a state of false consciousness and a state of being unaware of the phenomena occurring in the surrounding. The poem is built in the tension between these two domains as separate entities. Keats fascination with the philosophy that consciousness and illusion are incompatible to the extreme and one can only co-exist for a single fleeting movement. The dialectics of consciousness and illusion pervades in the poem from the very

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beginning. The poem begins with the unequivocal depiction of what Keats does not want in life. The first stanza of the poem establishes the sound of silence as suggested by the line: “And Silent was the flock in wooly fold” (Keats, 1884, p. 4). Keats through this invocation brings the notion of coldness and stillness in the poem.

The central paradox in the romance of Madeline and Porphyro in the special evening shows the contrast between dreams and reality as the main part of enthusiasm and skepticism simultaneously as quoted by Mellor (1980) in her article, *On Romantic Irony, Symbolism and Allegory*. She mentions, by transcendental, Schlegel refers to a poetry that hovers between the ideal and the real, between the chaos of becoming and the orders of being, that is seen in the stanza XXXIV of the poem as:

Her eyes were open, but she still beheld,
Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep:
There was a painful change, that night expell'd
The blisses of her dream so pure and deep
At which fair Madeline began to weep,
And moan forth witless words with many a sigh;
While still her gaze on Porphyro would keep;
Who knelt, with joined hand and piteous eye,

Fearing to move or speak, she looked so dreamingly. (Lines, 298-306)

Madeline thought she was in dream but when she saw Porphyro in front of her, she surprised, what happened in her dream was real love making. Both dream and reality happened together, For Madeline, it was dream and for Porphyro it was real. Life has balanced between creation and destruction, every character of the narrative poem speaks in their own way. Beadsman slept in cold ashes and Angela died palsy-twitched. Beadsman, Angela, Madeline, Porphyro and others expresses their chaos by facing storm in the hope of peace in the form of death. The poet creates events where characters play throughout the life hovering between real and ideal.

Both Porphyro and Madeline experience various stages of reality and fantasy, waking and dreaming; they react differently to the jarring, and at times, “painful change” (Bate, 1963, p. 300) of moving from one state to another, especially when their separate realities collide: she weeps and moans “witless words with many a sigh” (p. 303); he kneels with “joined hands and piteous eye” (p. 305). Both young lovers intensely wish for their union to become reality; that it does so is “testimony to the power of human desire to realize itself, to transform awareness” (Vendler, 1983, p. 205). Keats uses his

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deeply embodied language in the poem to heighten and emphasize all life's contrasts: youth and age, heat and cold, life and death. His constant use of contrast as a poetic device is a clear indication that he knows there is always a cost to be borne; he knows that change and transformation required by life are painful and inevitable: from pupa to tiger moth, from girl to woman, and from youth to old age. He knows death comes to all living things. Yet, knowing and accepting all life's negatives, and despite his self-doubt, conflicts, and weakness, Keats is still able to create a moment of-a monument to-life-affirming beauty in 'The Eve of St. Agnes'.

The poem captures the division of reality led out by the creative generous of the poet. Keats has divided half of the poem about pleasure and happiness. The later half of the poem recalls troubles and darkness. Madeline awakens yet she continuous to see the vision of her dream, she believes herself to be sleeping. This is the tension between consciousness and illusion projected in the poem. This gist is reflected in the following lines of the poem:

"Ah Porphyro!" said she, "but even now
Thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear,
Made tuneable with every sweetest vow;
And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear". (Keats, 1884, lines 307-310)

The difference between consciousness and illusion is so drastic at this point that it causes Madeline astonishment and serious alarm. Madeline's confrontation with reality disrupts the sweetness of her fasting that evokes a serene notion of the dream to which Keats adheres in most of his writings. Keats undue emphasis on the pleasure of dream world or ideal world suggest the painstaking experience of coping with harsh reality embedded with the color of romantic irony "as a style of existence" (qtd. in Colebrook, 1999, p.50). It seems that Keats has better encapsulated the chaos of human life, the ironic existence and human predicament in his poem which deals with the romantic irony; focus on the events beyond human control and recognition. We are all part of this falling; we always dupes and effects of life with a power well beyond our control and recognition (as cited in Colebrook, p. 50).

All the senses are highlighted through consciousness at the same time and the most the striking example of Keats' appeal to the sense of sight is set up in his words of the stained glass window in Madeline's room. This window was "diamanded with panes of appealing device, countless of stains and splendid dyes". Madeline is transformed into

a "splendid angel", in Keats (1884), by the stained glass as the moonlight shines through it:

Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,
And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast,
As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together priest,
And on her silver cross soft amethyst,
And on her hair a glory, like a saint:
She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest,
Save wings, for heaven: — Porphyro grew faint:
She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint. (Lines, 217-225)

Keats put a unique style of lens in Madeline's room to glorify her and place her in the core center of his story.

In the light of the romantic irony, the poem echoes the association of consciousness and illusion which magnanimously replicate the reminder of the universal truth that life amalgamation of the contraries; consciousness and illusion. Friedrich Schlegel writes, "[i]rony is the clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos" (qtd. in Colebrook, p. 49).

According to Paul de Man (1996), irony is really complicated to define. In *Aesthetic Ideology* he examines irony from deconstructive point of view. The problem he identifies is that he sees irony to incorporate all tropes, but at the same time it is very tricky to define it as a trope. If we look at the meaning of the word 'trope' which mean 'to turn', it would be possible to define irony as a trope according to Northrop Frye who defines irony as "a pattern of words that turns away from direct statement or its own obvious meaning" (as cited in de Man, 1996, p. 164).

Although the term "Romantic irony" was coined by Schlegel, he actually used it only four times, and all of these instances appear in his private notebooks, which were not published until 1957. Neither Ludwig Tieck nor A. W. Schlegel used the term "Romantic irony," although, like Friedrich Schlegel, they too made a clear distinction between rhetorical irony and Romantic irony. Novelist used the phrase in regard to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, but again that was in a private notebook not published until 1901. Although Hegel constantly criticized the philosophic concept behind Romantic irony, he did not use the term. Kierkegaard also did not use the term. The first use of the term "Romantic irony" in a scholarly work occurred in *Die romantische Schule in ihrem*

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Zusammenhang mit Göthe und Schiller by Hermann Hettner (1952), a historian of German literature (p. 5). All Romantic irony thus creates a perceptual distance from the artwork through paradox and by that means leads to transcendence. Romantic irony finally incorporates transcendence of the contradictions of the perceivable world. As a consequence of the paradoxes found in the work the understanding of the world changes. Transcendence is achieved when the paradoxes, while yet remaining unresolved, inspire a new understanding of the world, encompassing contradiction or paradox. The ultimate aim of Romantic irony, then, is to transcend rather than to resolve the contradictions and paradoxes of the finite world.

As Porphyro enters the hostile environs of the castle, Keats wraps up his sense of afraidness and his lovers emotion with the powerful use of metaphors of silence, secrecy, and attack: “let no buzz’d whisper tell: / All eyes be muffled, or a hundred swords / Will storm his heart, Love’s fev’rous citadel” (lines, 82-84). Porphyro’s connections with Angela and his connection focus on the undecided mixture of illusion and reality. Keats intentionally launches a fairy tale component when he portrays Angella carrying an “ivory-headed wand” (lines, 92); the fantasy image is reinforced by Angela’s knowing reaction to seeing Porphyro: “my lady fair the conjuror plays” (lines, 124) although he is seen charming appeal to Madeline. In such atmosphere, Porphyro is a very factual with his physical existence in the castle. This is astonishment to Angela witless when the young lover’s passionate resolve to see Madeline widen before her eyes:

Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose,

Flushing his brow, and in his pained heart

Made purple riot: then he doth propose

A stratagem that makes the beldame start. (Lines 136-39)

There is personified passion with its image of the rose, sense of blood around his body and symbol of love that causes illusion and surprise fastening his heart beat. The reference to his heart making “purple riot” is a reflection and reminder of Madeline’s “breathing quick and short” (lines, 65).

Romantic irony was first framed as a philosophical concept rather than as a purely rhetorical one by Friedrich Schlegel, who formulated his ideas during the last years of the eighteenth and the first years of the nineteenth centuries. Schlegel first constructed an original perception of irony, and he then gave it a place of primary importance in his aesthetic theory. He developed a hierarchy of ironies; the lower literary forms included the rhetorical, satirical, polemical, and parodistic irony, while higher philosophical irony

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is “genuine, complete, and divine in spirit.” This higher form is what Schlegel regarded as Romantic irony.

The poem utilizes extensive thematic paradox to examine the nature of relationship between consciousness and illusion. As the poem moves closer to the consumption of love and the union of the opposite, the poem overlaps the opposite domain. The blending of dream and reality in the poem establishes the ironic juxtaposition between illusion and consciousness as a part of poetic vision, rapture and downfall in the constant flux of romantic legacy.

The spiritual perfection of dream life is imperfectly mirrored in earthly reality. After following certain rituals, Madeline envisions in a dream of the true love, a vision of love that glitens the advent of spirituality. Porphyro's sudden arrival and the physical consumption of love shatter the dream of Madeline and acts as hindrance to the quest of spirituality. This foregrounds the incompatibility between the dream and reality.

This is a poem of paradox and one of the most potent contrasts is between consciousness and illusion. In the beginning of the poem more solid reality is presented as an ominous message about the nature of reality in general. Later Madeline is deep in a dream about Porphyro, when she awakes, finds the real man next to her. These contrasts suggest that the world of the dream-the world of imagination- is full of life, warmth and promise while reality is harsh, cold and dominated by mortality.

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