

Lyric Narrative and Keats's Poetic Identity —“Ode to Psyche” and “Ode to a Nightingale”

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Abstract

Keats is a narrative poet: storytelling is a mode central to the practices and achievements of John Keats. In “Sleep and Poetry,” he refers to life as “The reading of an ever-changing tale” (line 91). This line suggests his sense of the centrality of narrative to human experiences. Yet the Keatsian narrative is a medium for Keats to explore the nature and development of his poetic identity. In this context, through the application of the theory of “lyric narrative”—a theory first applied by Keats scholar Judy Little and promoted by narratologist James Phelan: similarities and overlaps found between narrative and lyric poetry, this paper will read “Ode to Psyche” and “Ode to a Nightingale” in the light of this theory to discuss Keats’s narrative skills in these two lyrics.

These two poems are indispensable in examining Keats’s poetic identity because each poem presents a different side of Keats. This paper investigates two aspects of “Ode to Psyche”: the figuration of Psyche and Keats as a modern poet. While striving for his poetic identity, the figure of Psyche reflects Keats’s anxiety and ambition. Keats’s personal and expressive stance shown in celebrating Psyche makes him an unconventional poet. At the same time, he demonstrates his growing consciousness and confidence in his poetic voice as he transforms from a self-doubting poet to one who says, “I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired” (line 43). In “Ode to a Nightingale,” the poet-narrator exhibits a differing outlook. Here the narrator’s attitude is

initially ambivalent while meditating on the nightingale's song. He shifts his stance three times and, at the end of the poem, the narrating poet cannot clearly say whether he prefers the bird's realm to his mundane world or not. Keats's indeterminacy displays an ambivalent poetic identity.

Key Words: Keats, lyric narrative, poetic identity, "Ode to Psyche", "Ode to a Nightingale"