

Study Material for Degree I (Hons.), English, Paper-II

Dr. Suman Sinha

Department of English

R. N. College, Hajipur

POEM: EVE OF ST. AGNES

POET: JOHN KEATS

Eve of St. Agnes is a beautiful romantic poem with a medieval setting. The poem is written by John Keats. Keats was deeply fascinated by the medieval life. Revival of interest in medievalism was one of the important features of romantic poem. Poets like Keats, Coleridge and Scott were inspired by the medieval life. In the poems *Eve of St. Agnes* and *La Belle Dame Sans Mercy* Keats uses the element of medievalism. Keats's dwelt upon the passionate tale of love and romance of the medieval age. The political and religious life of middle ages did not appeal his interest. He is more fascinated by the medieval charms, medieval chivalry, medieval superstitions, old myth and legends, and medieval art and architecture.

The poem *Eve of St. Agnes* is based on the medieval superstition. It was believed that on the eve of St. Agnes, if a maiden goes supperless to her bed she would be blessed by the sight of her future husband in her dream. John Keats based his poem on the tale of a passionate lover, Porphyro who like a medieval hero enters the castle of his enemy, unnoticed or stealthily, to have a glimpse of his beloved, Madeline. He risks his life to see his beloved, Madeline. The lovers belonged to the hostile families like Romeo and Juliet of the Shakespearean play. Hence, the thrill was not in the adventure but in the passionate love. The poet gives a number of descriptions that contribute in creating the medieval atmosphere of the poem. The beadsman telling his rosary and praying for the sinners, the medieval castle with its exquisite carvings and colourful windows, the plume and tiara and the heraldries depicting the chivalrous life of knight and lords give a perfect touch of medieval life to the poem.

Eve of St. Agnes, a long narrative poem with 42 Spenserian stanzas opens with a perfect description of the cold weather that marks the occasion of the Eve of St. Agnes. St. Agnes is the martyred virgin saint of middle centuries. The occasion falls on 20th January. The weather is extremely cold. The shivering owl inspite of the thick feather coat, the rabbit limping on the frozen grass and the silent sheep in their fold perfectly portray the bitter cold weather. The old Beadsman settles to say his prayers in the old chapel, situated near the medieval castle, for the salvation of others and also for himself. His fingers become numb due to the extremely cold weather. As the old man says his prayers his 'frosted breath' continuously rises up like the smoke coming out of the pure incense burning in censer. It seems his prayers are reaching to heaven as described in these lines:

*Like pious incense from a censer old,
Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without death,*

After saying his prayers, he moves towards the chapel slowly. As he moves along he sees the statues of Knights and Ladies and feels as if they are also experiencing the extreme cold.

The celebration has started in the castle. The old man hears the golden tongue of music and feels tempted. He immediately realises that the time for his worldly pleasure has already ended because now he has become old and his death is also approaching him. There is no more revelry for him. It was a day of hard penance for him. Hence, he moved to say his prayers. The beadsman saying prayers for the salvation of the sinners is a medieval belief.

*The joys of all his life were said and sung:
His was harsh penance on St. Agnes's Eve:
Another way he went and soon among
Rough ashes sat he for his soul' reprieve,
And all night kept awake, for sinners' sake to grieve.*

The celebration of the day begins in the big hall of the castle which is fully decorated by the carvings of angels under the cornice. Keats descriptions of the angels seem to give life to them. They appear as:

*....carved angels, ever eager-eyed,
Star'd where upon their heads the cornice rests,*

In the beginning of the ceremony soft music is heard. The young men and women are lavishly dressed in their attire and are rushing towards the castle. The '*plume and tiara*' decorate them richly giving a touch of elegant art and craft of medieval age. As the revelry and merry making went in full swing, a young lady, Madeline sat quietly, perhaps, occupied in the thoughts of rituals of that auspicious day. She was drawn to the legend of St. Agnes told to her by the 'old dames'. They had told her about the rituals and ceremonies to be observed strictly for the desired dream. The ritual is described as follows:

*As, supperless to bed they must retire,
And couch supine their beauties, lily white;
Nor look behind, nor sideways, but require
Of Heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire.*

Madeline's faith is attached to this old customs. She decides to perform the ritual perfectly to get her dream fulfilled. The passion of the love-lorn lady also depicts the typical medieval portrayal. Her silence was a contrast to the loud and enthusiastic celebration. Perhaps, her silence was expressing her intense desire and eagerness. Even though she participated in the dance she was more involved towards performance of the ritual. Meanwhile, Porphyro enters the castle secretly because it is already mentioned about Keats's motive of expressing the strong emotions of love and not the thrills of adventure. The young lover, '*with heart on fire for Madeline*', enters the castle of the enemies who would find no mercy in his massacre. However, amidst the team of men who were '*barbarian hordes*', '*Hyena foemen*', '*and hot-blooded lords*' it was Angela, Madeline's nurse, an old and weak woman, who helped him in the castle. She even managed to arrange a safe place for him. She was aware of the fact that even on that sacred day of Eve of St. Agnes the '*blood thirsty race*' will not spare Porphyro. Porphyro's passion grew so intense that he persisted to have a vision of his beloved. Angela resisted his demand as it would spoil the ritual of Madeline. But later, Angela succumbed to his intense passion and also his promise of letting her perform the rituals. She hid him in a closet near Madeline's chamber from where he could have the sight

of his beloved. Porphyro was equally excited to win Madeline as his bride. This was a rare moment of lovers meeting. Keats talks about Merlin, who was treacherously killed:

*Never on such a night have lovers met,
Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt.*

Angela brought all the delicacies for the feast and stored it. Angela also desires the lover to meet or else her soul would never rise from the grave. Angela leaves the place and as she moves hurriedly she limps. Porphyro waits for his beloved impatiently. As Angela was feeling her way Madeline appears with a candle in her hand. She helps Angela to find her way. Keats compares Madeline to a ring dove who is afraid and hurries to get to her bed chamber where she will undress and lie on her bed looking upwards to see her dream. Keats gives a beautiful description of Madeline's chamber that looked elegant due to the medieval touch in the designs and colours. The windows were high with triple arch all decorated with beautiful carvings of flowers and fruits. The colourful window panes added to the beauty. The room was decorated with shields that spoke of the achievements of the knight in the war. The moonlight that enters through the colourful glass gives a unique hue. As the light falls on Madeline she appears like a wingless angel. The poet describes her beauty;

*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.*

Porphyro faints after seeing the pure and graceful beauty. Immediately, Porphyro regains sense. Madeline undresses herself after her evening prayers and prepares herself for the rituals. Madeline is unaware of Porphyro's presence in her room. She feels as if the Saint is present in her room but dares to look back as it would foil the ritual. Madeline appears like a mermaid in her half naked body. The description of Madeline's beauty is perfectly done. She is like a mermaid half hidden in sea weed.

Madeline falls asleep. As she sleeps, she appears to forget all pains and sufferings. The poet also refers to her beauty and purity. She is like a flower who has closed all her petal to become a bud again.

Keats is a sensuous poet. The description of colours, taste and smell is a mark of romantic trait in the poem. All this adds to the beauty of the poem which was the main feature of Keats's romantic cult. The description of the beautiful decoration of delicacies, taste, the smell of perfume renders to the enchanting atmosphere of the room.

Porphyro's impatience grew to see Madeline as she slept an '*azure-lidded sleep*'. It seemed that she was under some spell. The lover picks up the flute and plays a soft tune. Madeline wakes up but still finds herself enchanted by the dream. As she wakes up she finds Porphyro kneeling near her bedside. She felt distressed to find the real Porphyro weak in comparison to Porphyro of her dreams. He was pale and weak. However, Porphyro soon gained sense on hearing Madeline's passionate words. He promises her to take her as his wife. He comforts Madeline that he will never leave her. Porphyro speaks passionately to his beloved. He requests Madeline to accompany him because very soon the morning time will come and it will be difficult for them to leave the place. Hence, he says:

"Arise –Arise! the morn is at hand;-

.....

*“Drown’d all in Rhenish and the sleepy mead:
“Awake! arise ! my love, fearless be,
For o’er the southern moors I have a home for thee.”*

Hence, the two lovers escape from the castle in the midnight and move to the world of their dreams. They move unnoticed in the castle as everyone is asleep after the celebration. As the poet describes:

*And they are gone: aye, ages long ago
These lovers fled away into the storm.*

The beadsman died saying prayers for others, and old Angela died palsy stricken in that cold chilly night. The dreams of witches and demons seen by the baron and his guests leave a shuddering effect. Hence, the long narrative poem was perfectly woven with mediaeval accessories and romantic passion.

Keats has presented a beautiful poem that was rich in imageries and symbols. The medieval setting to the poem enhances the romantic mood of the poem. The use of Spenserian stanza fits to the mood of the poem. Edmund Spenser used this form in the poem ‘Faerie Queen’. The Spenserian stanza has nine lines, the first eight lines are in iambic pentameters and the ninth line is an Alexandrine and the rhyming scheme is *ababbcbcc*. Alexandrine has six iambic feet. The meter is adequately used to describe the fancy and music of the poem.
