

## **Beauty, Love and Death in the Poetry of**

### **Keats and Al- Shabi**

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#### **Introduction:**

During the first thirty years of the 19th century, certain elements and conceptions presented a new literary discourse not only in England but in nearly all Europe. It is the romantic Movement with its famous features.

A generation of romantic poets tries to stress on particular points in their writings. Some are: celebration of love of nature, which reflects a kind of relationship between the internal and the external world, imagination which is active in romantic poetry, besides feeling.<sup>(1)</sup> In discussing the importance of the subject, J. R. Watson says that the genuine pleasure at seeing, hearing, and feeling the freshness of the natural world returns not only for its beauty but for expressing truths and conceptions of the poets' minds.<sup>(2)</sup> It is really a new turn in the history of literature.

It is necessary first to mention that the effective inspiration comes, as it is known from the French philosopher Rousseau and the German writer Goethe who exalt sentiment. Whereas two English poets, Wordsworth and Coleridge exerted two important essays concerning the concept of feeling and the idea of imagination. The first one wrote his Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1800), and the second one (Coleridge) wrote "Biographia Literaria" (1817).<sup>(3)</sup>

In this concern, the influence of the romantic poetry extends impressively to various countries including, later on, Arabic literature.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Egyptian famous poet-dramatist A. Z. Abu-Shadi (1909-1934) responded early to this literary movement. Being the editor of a well-known magazine called **Apollo**, he started to receive enthusiastically a new generation of Arab poets who began to publish their developed poems in his magazine. They were rather looking into themselves seeking for the strange sensations.<sup>(4)</sup>

Among the new poets of this new literary movement is Abu Al-Qasim Al-Shabi, the Tunisian poet who started to publish his early poems in **Apollo** after the First World War. With much interest in nature and feeling, his poems are significantly based on these elaborate romantic features.<sup>(5)</sup> What is to be shown here is the influence of such romantic poetry on Al-Shabi's writing, and what is the parallel aspects between Keats and Al-Shabi in views of beauty love and death? Before we start, let us present a short biography of each one:

John Keats was the last born poet of the romantics and the first to die. He studied to be a doctor, but a devotion to poetry occupied him. He left school when he was fourteen years old to be a poet. His painful experience deepened his feeling of melancholy. Besides poetry, he has been affected by painting and by other works of art.<sup>(6)</sup>

Abu Al-Qasim Al-Shabi was born in Tunisia (1909 – 1934). His religious thinking encouraged him to read Islamic philosophy and language. He read various classical books besides other romantic ones and translated western literary productions. Jubran's spiritual ideas and his poetry affected him too much. After four years of hard suffering, he died leaving many original poems.

In a letter to Benjamin Bailey 1817, Keats points out that he believes in "the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of imagination."<sup>(7)</sup> For that reason, he develops consciously his concept of poetry and its touches of beauty. The effective poem, as he sees, should make the reader 'breathless' especially when "it comes out naturally as the leaves in a tree."<sup>(8)</sup> In Arabic poetry, Al-Shabi seems to be one of the youngest generations whose poems like Keats, are based on sensibility and hold various features of the romantic school. In this realm the two poets share the two previous points of the relation between imagination and passion. For that reason, they equally meet in considering love and beauty the most secure place for them. The intense enjoyment of beauty is clearly touched in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale":

*My heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains  
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,  
.....  
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
In such an ecstasy!*

**(Ode to a Nightingale, p. 418, lines: 1-2 and 56-57)**

In rather a similar expression, Al-Shabi focuses on the value of love and beauty as in these lines: "صلوات في هيكل الحب"

(Prayers in love Sanctuary):<sup>(9)</sup>

أنت تحيين في فؤادي ما قد مات في أمسي السعيد الفقيد  
وتشيدون في خرائب روعي ما قد تلاشى في عهدي المحدود  
من طموح الجمال إلى الفن ، إلى ذلك الفضاء البعيد

Or when he appreciates passion:

عش بالشعور وللشعور فإنما  
دنياك كون عواطف وشعور  
شيدت على العطف العميق وإنها  
لتجف لو شيدت على التفكير

Indeed, Al-Shabi like Keats, is an artist in standing frequently within the poem and in thinking deeply about poetry and the role of the poet. Moreover, the beauty for them represents joy and happiness. Keats says in his 'Endymion':

*A thing of beauty is a joy for ever  
Its loveliness increases, it will  
never pass into nothingness, .....*

(Endymion, p. 399, Lines 15-16)

Obviously, beauty and joy seem to be much intensified and intermingled in various lines of Al-Shabi's poems. In this example happiness celebrates the coming of beauty and it reflects the link of goodness with light. Let us observe the following pattern:

وخبا لهيب الكون في قلبي الذي  
قد عاش مثل الشعلة الحمراء  
فانا السعيد بأنني متحول  
من عالم الآثام والبغضاء  
لأذوب في فجر الجمال السرمدى  
أرتوي من منهل الأضواء

Another analogy to be seen in their poetry is their significant

understanding of a quality in art for “what imagination seizes as beauty must be truth.”<sup>(10)</sup>. In his sonnet "Ode to a Grecian Urn", Keats's statement 'beauty is truth' and 'truth beauty' seems not logical because it refers certainly to "a truth of art" and creation. Al-Shabi parallely joins 'the voice of truth' with freedom which it is necessary to man as in his following lines:

رتل الرعد نشيدا      رددته الكائنات  
مثل صوت الحق أن      صاح بأعماق الحياة

In an obvious manner, one can say that the source of their poetical voices contradicts disappointment and melancholy, the two poets, Keats and Al-Shabi, try equally to overcome pain and evil because they confidently link the sense of beauty with more ambition and freedom. In a little different aspect, Al-Shabi modifies sociologically this idea of beauty and love in seeking for sublimity and liberty of which the miserable people of his nation are in need:

أسكني يا جراح      وأسكتي يا شجون  
مات عهد النواح      وزمان الجنون  
وأطل الصباح      من وراء القرون

Furthermore, Al-Shabi remains like Keats as a painter in dealing with nature. Various terms such as: heart, genius, melt in my soul, and 'universe' are easily distinguished through their metaphorical speech. Al-Shabi, according to the Arabic critic Mandur, has personified pain and challenge.<sup>(11)</sup>

However both poets are convinced that beauty and love can give truth and freedom. Keats associates the song of the nightingale with his feeling of freedom:

*Here where men sit and hear each other groan,*

*where palsy shares a few, sad, last gray hairs,  
where youth grows pale and spectre-thin, and dies*

**(Ode to a Nightingale, p.414, Lines 24-26)**

Similarly Al-Shabi says:

إلى النور فالنور عذب جميل      إلى النور فالنور ظل الاله

In connection with the above-mentioned point, another striking similarity appears in dealing with the idea of death and its relation with beauty. In clear terms, Keats shows us various suggestive images concerning the link between death and beauty in one intermingled unit for reaching immortality:

*She dwells with Beauty-Beauty that must die;  
And joy, whose hand is over at his lips,  
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,  
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:*

**(On Melancholy, p. 417, lines 21-24)**

In many of his Odes, Keats entertains the desire to escape into easeful death from weariness, fever and fret. Death, in 'Ode to a Nightingale', becomes a requiem.<sup>(12)</sup> It is rather an escape from the trouble and suffering of mortal life. Actually it is a death without pain at the moment of listening to the Nightingale's song:

*Thou wast not born for death, immortal! Bird:  
No hungry generations tread thee down*

**(Ode to a Nightingale, p. 418. lines 60-61)**

In a rather similar treatment, the Arab poet Al-Shabi deals with the subject of death in various aspects. Death first can be considered a new experience in life that opens a new way of eternal beauty. In fact it represents an

identified platonic ideal love for both poets.<sup>(13)</sup> Al-Shabi says:

وقلت هو الكون مهد الجمال

ولكن لكل جمال خريف

Or as in this line:

هو سحر الحياة يا قلبي الباكي

فهي نجرب الموت هيّا

Keats also says:

*Darkling I listen and for many a time  
I have been half in love with easeful Death*

(Ode to a Nightingale, p.418, lines, 50-51)

The two poets, second, appeal to death in order to realize that spiritual moment of getting beauty and conquering, at the same time, pain:

*To cease upon the midnight with no pain*

The famous critic F.R. Leavis mentions that Keats is strictly half in love with death.<sup>(14)</sup> Al-Shabi is similarly involved with it especially when he describes it as "the half of our life" that does not cry:

هو الموت طيف الحياة الجميل      ونصف الحياة الذي لا ينوح  
هنالك خلف الفضاء البعيد      يعيش المنون القوي الصبوح

Indeed this description of death in their poetry means that both poets are clearly identify themselves with their poems. Consequently, these perceptions represent a bridge to assert of power, freedom besides beauty:

يا قلب لا تقنع بشوك اليأس من بين الزهور  
ف وراء أوجاع الحياة عذوبة الألم الجسور

Al-Shabi, third, as Keats appeals to nature and imagination to find a

sort of happiness and truth. It is really an attempt to realize that gentle dissolving into annihilation.<sup>(15)</sup> This mystical attitude reminds us of Al-Hallaj's idea of realizing divine love:

لنّاس حجّ ولي حجّ إلى سكّني      تهدي الأضاحي وأهدي مهجتي ودمي

Whereas Al-Shabi says:

لا أبالي وإن أريقّت دمائي      فدماء العشاق دوماً مباحه

Or as in these lines:

في الغاب، في الغاب الحبيب وإنه      حرم الطبيعة والجمال السامي  
طهرت في نار الجمال مشاعري      ولقيت في دنيا الخيال سلامي

In addition to some poetical features taken from Dante (especially in his Cantos), Shakespeare and Spenser, Keats holds a nostalgia for the Gothic past.<sup>(16)</sup> In a similar mode, Al-Shabi was influenced by some classical poets as Al-Maree besides one important contemporary one; Jubran Khalil Jubran (1883-1931), the Lebanese émigré poet.

According to Al-Tulese, the Arab critic, Al-Shabi has dealt with Jubran's subjects of love, freedom, and revolt which characterize most of his poems.<sup>(17)</sup>

We can conclude that the two poets Keats and Al-Shabi proved a remarkable ability in mingling the intellectual with the emotional, and the internal with the external world:

*Come then sorrow  
Sweetest sorrow !  
Like an own babe I nurse thee on  
my breast*

(Endymion, p. 404, lines 27-29)

The two poets, despite their short life, see beauty and love in death. Their parallel contributions reveal, even through the approach of death, that



deep sense of human life. Keats believes in the holiness of love and heart affection, as well as imagination. This romantic aspect is clearly reflected in Al-Shabi's poems. Moreover, both poets share a rather similar feature of joining imagination with passion. For this reason both poets see poetry as a secure place for them. Another similarity between both poets is they think deeply about poetry and its role. In addition to this, the two have the same attitude toward nature and natural elements. Even their attitude toward love is almost the same as both believe that love truth and freedom. A further similarity between the two is that their attitude concerning beauty and death is the same and expressed in some beautiful images. Inn fine , if Keats has been described as the martyr of poetry, Al-Shabi, one can say, is the martyr of both poetry and freedom:<sup>(18)</sup>

الوداع؟ الوداع ؟	يا جبال الهموم
يا ضباب الآسي	يا فجاج الجحيم
قد جرى زورقي	في الخضم العظيم
ونشرت القلاع	فالوداع الوداع ؟

Indeed Al-Shabi remains a young poet of a 'revolutionary spirit'<sup>(19)</sup>

## Notes

1. J. R. Watson, English Poetry of the Romantic Period 1789-1830 (London: Longman Group Limited, 1985) p.
2. Watson, p.52.
3. Watson, p.13.
4. خليفة محمد التليسي: الشابي وجبران في دراسات عن الشابي؛ إعداد أبو القاسم محمد كرو (بيروت: الدار العربية للكتاب، ١٩٨٤) ص ٣٣.
5. إيليا حاوي؛ أبو قاسم (دار الكتاب العربي؛ ١٩٧٢) ص ٥.
6. Watson, p.261
7. Keats, from the letters in “English Critical Texts” ed. By D. J. Enright and E. de Chickera (London: Oxford University Press, 1962) p.256
8. F. R. Leavis, “Keats in English Critical Texts” ed. by Enright and Chickera, p.315.
9. نظمي خليل؛ فن الشابي في دراسات عن الشابي، ص ١٨٨.
10. Keats, from the letters, p.256.
11. محمد مندور: الشابي 'روح نائرة' في دراسات عن الشابي ص. ١٥٧.
12. Watson, p.283.
13. خليفة التليسي: الاقتباسات الشعرية لأبي قاسم الشابي أخذت من كتاب دراسات الشابي. ص ٦٨، ٩٨، ٢٣٥.
14. Leavis, pp.317-318.
15. Leavis, p.326.
16. Watson, p.
17. خليفة التليسي، ص. ٣٣.
18. Leavis, p.312.