



THE EVE OF ST AGNES: A NARRATIVE POEM

Lyrical happens to be the principal medium of the romantic revival. It provided the poet the form in which the moment of individual experience could be best captured. But lyric could not fulfil the broader aims of the poets. So they turned to writing of narrative poems. All the romantic poets tried their hand over the writing of narrative works.

John Keats enjoys a distinguished place in this field. His major works include the famous odes, having a narrative element. 'The Eve of St Agnes' is a very good example of the narrative art of Keats.

In judging the narrative skill of Keats we have to see how far his rendering of the central experience in the form of the story is close to the latter. Now let us see 'The Eve of St Agnes' from this angle.

There are five clear movements of the story in this poem - the background, the entry of Porphyro, his meeting with Madeline, his persuasion of Madeline and their elopement.

The poem opens with a description of the bitterly cold night on St Agnes.



Even from human beings to animals - all are under the spell. The owl shivers, the hare limps and the sheep are silent. The beadsman's fingers are frozen. This chilly weather strikes a symbolic note. It helps us to view the opposition of nature to human activity and particularly to human love in a new light. It also brings into focus the vigour and dedication of the old priest who goes on performing his prayers utterly disregarding the inclement weather.

Against this disappointing picture of the weather is set the description of revellers who are entering the palace of Madeline to celebrate St. Agnes' Eve. Immediately follows a picture of young Madeline who, like other maidens has observed a fast and is dancing. Keats distinguishes her by underlying her state of mind -

"But she saw not: her heart was elsewhere;
She sighed for Agnes' dreams, the sweetest of the year
She danced along with vague, regardless eyes
Anxious her lips, her breathing quick and short;

quick and short."

Next is described the entry of Porphyro 'with heart on fire'. He enters there



secretly. If he is found out there is every chance that he might be murdered. Luck saves him in the form of an old woman, Angela. She gets surprised and is fearful about the life of Porphyro. She asks him to leave immediately. Porphyro is undaunted. At last Angela lets him enter the bedroom of Madeline. There he hides himself and waits for her.