

Keats' Narrative Poetry: Interior Space and Description

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Abstract

As “the narrative poetry of Keats progresses, he develops an acute awareness of the spaces that his characters occupy and in which the action takes place, which gives particular symbolic significance to various interior spaces (such as castles and houses, living rooms, ballrooms, bedrooms, tombs, and so on) with windows and doors or with no openings. It is my intention in this post to provide an explanation for Keats' use of the descriptive approach, with a particular emphasis on his production of inner space. What techniques does he use to create these inner spaces? Which methods are used in order to attain which goals? What role do they play in the storylines that they appear in? In addition, are they mostly performed by narrators or are they primarily focalized via characters?

Keywords: Keats' Narrative Poetry.

Introduction

The poems *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil* (1818) and *The Eve of St. Agnes* (1818) are the subject of this reading of Keats (1820). In *Isabella*, I investigate the image of the tomb, as well as the spatial entities of the pot and the woodland, which, according to Keats' enlarged view of space, operate as internal places for the character *Isabella* (with the ability to contain living or dead people within them). In *St. Agnes*, I pay particular attention to the symbolic importance of *Madeline's* room, which serves as the setting for the scene of seduction, which serves as the story's climax.

Descriptive Stasis versus Plot Progression

And can I ever bid these delights goodbye? / Yes, I must pass them for a nobler existence, / Wherein I may discover the agonies, the battle / Of human souls (122–125). In *Sleep and Poetry* (1817), Keats says farewell to lovely poetry in order to write in an epic and more narrative manner. The narrative poetry of his final collection of poetry, *Lamia and Isabella and The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems* (1820), on the other hand, does not actually fit to these epic aims, if we look at what Keats went on to compose afterwards. Among his many accomplishments are his continued writing of lyric poetry (including, but

not limited to, the highly praised major odes) and the composition of his narrative poems, which are lyric-narrative hybrids.

Keats' lyric poetry, as well as his lyric narrative poetry, are replete with detailed descriptions of a wide variety of objects. A number of scholars have emphasised how Keatsian narrators often depict diverse people as though they were works of art (Kelley 170). The Fragment of Castle Builder, written by Keats, exemplifies his fascination with description. The speaker in the poem indulges in the imaginative creation of a particular chamber in a castle, which he or she does in a performance. In her essay, Theresa Kelley discusses how the title and repeated use of the modal verb 'should' (on pages 26 and 28, 59, 63, and 65) recognise this room as an ethereal poetic 'phantasy' (47), conjured out of thin air, as well as how [t]he features and appointments appear both substantial and yet patently invented (Kelley 175). The title suggests that Keats intended for the poem to be written in fragments on purpose. When it came to *The Eve of St. Mark*, Keats never got much farther than the expositional beginning. It is the narrator's intention to draw a contrast between Bertha's separation from the outer world and the inside of a room where she sits reading that he accomplishes. The narrator analyses and examines the interior space of the room as well as the mood, but the poem concludes before any narrative instability is introduced into the plot. The tales in *Fragment of Castlebuilder* and *The Eve of St. Mark* are shortened as a result of the focus put on space and description in both works.

While some of Keats' poems do feature a fully developed tale (such as *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *Isabella*, and *Lamia*), others (such as *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *Isabella*, and *Lamia*) lay a focus on description and the depiction of space. An examination of the interaction between the narrative drive and the various roles of description in regard to interior space in these poems is the subject of this article.

Lessing and Lukács are two of the most famous writers in Hungary.

It has been a long time since theories of description and their significance in art were developed, and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's book *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* is considered a seminal work in this field. He contends that painting and poetry are two separate types of media that use different methods to achieve their goals. Poetry (by which he often refers to epic or narrative poetry) reflects acts occurring in time, while painting shows figures and colours in space, according to him. Choosing the most intriguing and readily intelligible moment of an activity is essential when creating a painting since a painting shows a single instant of an action and must therefore be selected from among many possible moments (78). Poetry, on the other hand, shows a series of events, but it should, as a general rule, abstain from including detailed descriptions of the people, things, and settings in the poem.

At one point in the book, Lessing explains how the poet and the painter must be as two equitable and friendly neighbors [who] do not permit the one to take unbecoming liberties in the heart of the other's domain, yet on their extreme frontiers practice a mutual forbearance by which both sides make peaceful compensation for those slight aggressions which ... the one finds himself compelled to make on the other's privilege. (91)"

Even though Lessing delimits suitable roles for poetry and painting respectively, he also examines how each successfully employs what seems to be the privilege of the other's medium of art. He suggests that there are good and bad ways to do this. In order to examine how well they apply to Keats's descriptive method, I broach three of the ways poets—according to Lessing—can viably introduce spatial reference.

One slight aggression—as Lessing puts it in the quotation above—by the poet shows in his need for spatial reference. In this regard, Lessing refers to what he calls the rule concerning the harmony of descriptive adjectives and economy in description of physical objects (79), according to which poets have to select a single descriptive property. They must choose the one which awakens the most vivid image (79).

Lessing's account of Homer's preference for a single trait describes his style in general, and Lessing accounts for other passages in which Homer adds a third descriptive epithet (93). In Keats's narrative poetry, it makes sense to apply this rule of economy in relation to this

description of interior space. The descriptive traits can be seen to invest the object described with metaphoric and symbolic meaning, integrating the description into the overall thematic purpose of the work.

Lessing finds this way of transforming what is coexistent in his subject into what is consecutive to be an admirable artistic device, in that it makes the living picture of an action out of the tedious painting of an object (Lessing 95; Ryan has termed this tactic narrativized description—par. 19). Narrativizing a description and hence making the coexistent consecutive applies to Keats's method of constructing spatial reference. Lessing generally criticizes poets with a propensity for elaborating descriptions, especially if they are not narrativized. He argues that in order to arrive at a clear conception of an object in space, one must first look at its parts singly, then the combination of parts, and finally the totality (85).

“When poets write long descriptions of flowers, for instance, they lose the totality. Over the course of such a long description, a conception of the whole cannot be maintained. Conversely, this can be taken in at one glance in a painting, and therefore the poetic description remains infinitely inferior to what lines and colors can express on canvas (Lessing 87).”

In Georg Lukács's essay *Narrate or Describe?* (1936) he addresses the same issue as Lessing and arrives at some of the same conclusions. Lukács writes about realism and naturalism in the French and Russian 19th-century novel in the period that follows Keats. He contends that great novels (which he calls epic) depict the inner poetry of life, the poetry of men in struggle, the poetry of the turbulent, active interaction of men (Lukács 126). This focus on action leads him to impose limits on the range and use of description. Émile Zola serves as this negative exemplum. Commenting on the description of a horse race in *Nana*, Lukács writes that even though Zola displays great virtuosity in his use of description, it is a mere filler in the novel (110). Lukács criticizes the naturalistic novel for presenting descriptive details as being relevant in and of themselves, so that an accumulation of such details becomes part of the composition:

“When a writer attempts as an observer and describer to achieve a comprehensive description, he must either reject any principle of selection, undertake an inexhaustible labour of Sisyphus or simply emphasize the picturesque and superficial aspects best adapted to description.”

When there seems to be no principle of selection and the elements are presented with equal significance, the piece according to Lukács loses its inner significance. Finally, Lessing's distinction between poetry and painting gives rise to the question of whether signs can result in organized spatial arrangement. Frederick Burwick asks this question in his article *Lessing's Laocoon and the Rise of Visual Hermeneutics* (1999):

“How can signs in temporal sequence (nach einander) express spatial arrangement (neben einander)? The signs of poetry, Lessing answers, do not follow one another in a random sequence ... Metrical arrangement and grammatical structure impose a necessary spatial configuration. (224)”

In my interpretation of Keats's poetry, I show how the poet exploits this potential of textual space to design the story space and how this relates to the other spatial strategies he employs.

Keatsian Space

They evoke a form of pure affect (187) otherwise inexpressible, rather than shaping or reflecting the psychology of characters. Wordsworth's poetry in the first person serves as an example throughout Vallins's essay. Does the capacity of the spatial affects to shape or reflect the psychology of characters increase in heterodiegetic narrative poetry like Keats's? At least in Keats's narrative poetry, most of the time an authorial heterodiegetic voice unequivocally delivers spatial metaphors, rhymes, and descriptions overtly and occasionally intrusively (for instance, suddenly stopping the narration to make apologies to Boccaccio). This voice does not seem to be very interested in characters' thoughts. Indeed, besides the narrator's omniscience, dialogue provides our main access to what characters think.

Although the rendition of interior space is mainly aperspectival, it serves multiple important purposes. First of all, the construction creates the symbolic space, thematically relevant to the plot. Secondly, it interacts with the narrative drive, deliberately inserting

frustrating pauses. It occasionally appears to be filler (as Lukács suggests about some naturalistic novels), but Keats always employs a principle of selection. In certain passages, the narrator even offers a poetic vision that is an end in its own right (similar to what the speaker does in Keats's odes). In a few rare instances, it is not entirely clear if the interior space is focalized through a narrator or characters. Hence, readers try to negotiate whether the rendition of space and the ascription of symbolic value are performed by the heterodiegetic narrator or focalized through a character (or oscillating indeterminably between the two). In what follows, I examine the questions raised here and those raised in the earlier theoretical section on Lessing and Lukács by considering two of Keats's narrative poems.

The Tomb as Epithet in *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil*

In Keats's version of the unfortunate story of Isabella from Boccaccio's *Decameron* *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil*, Isabella embarks on an affair with Lorenzo, a servant in the family's trade business. Her brothers discover their secret love and plot the murder of Lorenzo. After Lorenzo's death, he appears in front of Isabella in a dream vision and tells her what has happened to him and where he is buried. Isabella finds his grave in the forest and brings home his skull, which she hides in a pot of basil. She wets it with her tears, and her all-engulfing care for the pot of basil with Lorenzo's skull in it results in her slow decay. One of the central places for the action is the forest where the murder is committed and Lorenzo is initially buried. In addition, the central object in the poem is the pot of basil mentioned in the title. I apply Lessing's rule concerning the harmony of descriptive adjectives and economy of description of physical objects to the forest and the pot of basil, respectively. Keats uses a single descriptive epithet (or various synonyms or metonymies for the single epithet) for the forest throughout the poem: the tomb. When the brothers resolve to kill Lorenzo, they plan to do it in some forest dim and there bury him (22.175–76). On the pretext of going on a business trip, they ride with Lorenzo [i]nto a forest quiet for the

slaughter (27.216). After the murder, Isabella slowly loses her beauty and vitality. In stanza 35, she is visited by the deceased Lorenzo in a vision: It was a vision.—In the drowsy gloom,

“The dull of midnight, at her couch’s foot Lorenzo stood, and wept: the forest tomb Had marr’d his glossy hair which once could shoot Lustre into the sun, and put cold doom Upon his lips, and taken the soft lute From his lorn voice, and past his loamed ears Had made a miry channel for his tears.(35.273–80)”

In this stanza, Keats rhymes tomb with gloom and doom in a way that links the gloom in Isabella’s room with Lorenzo’s tomb that has covered his hair and face in mud and put cold doom on his lips. The forest tomb may designate Lorenzo’s tomb in the forest or indicate that the entire forest is one big tomb. The vision of Lorenzo goes on to recount how the murder happens:

“The while it [Lorenzo’s spirit] did unthread the horrid woof Of the late darken’d time,— the murderous spite Of pride and avarice,—the dark pine roof In the forest,—and the sodden turfed dell, Where, without any word, from stabs he fell.(37.292–96)”

The fragmented nature of the sentences indicates that we either get snippets of Lorenzo’s account, a summary of the account by the narrator, or an account of the events as perceived by Isabella. The forest is described as having a dark pine roof. This adds to the conception of the forest as an interior space and concurs with its resemblance to a tomb. The next stanza makes a shift in discourse to Lorenzo’s direct speech. He tells Isabella exactly what the place of his grave looks like (with whortle-berries, a large flint- stone, beeches, chestnuts and sheep passing by along the river) and implores her to find it: Go, shed one tear upon my heather- bloom, / And it shall comfort me within the tomb (38. 303–4). This rhyme of bloom with tomb suggests the bizarre nature of decomposition as something that enhances the conditions for future blooming, and it foreshadows the scene when his skull, kept moist by Isabella’s tears, will make the basil bloom beautifully in the pot later in the poem.

The morning after the vision, Isabella enters the woods to seek out Lorenzo’s grave: Resolv’d, she took with her an aged nurse, / And went into that dismal forest- hearse (43.343–44). As a metonymic substitution for tomb, the forest is now described as a hearse, a closed container of death, while continuing the oxymoronic nature of the bloom- tomb rhyme. In the sentences before these two lines, the ambiguity of perspective prevails

through indirect discourse as Isabella devises her plan. The repeated sentence structure How she might secret to the forest hie, How she might find the clay, How her short absence might be unsurmised, etc. (43.338–34) indicates Isabella’s subjective perception. This also makes it

uncertain whether it is the narrative voice or Isabella who regards the forest as dismal and as a hearse. Certainly, Isabella does not doubt the truthfulness of her vision. She thinks about Lorenzo and about what happened in the forest, and this arguably leads her (rather than the narrator) to perceive the forest as a hearse.

They are moreover metaphorically aligned with other spaces in the poem's world that may be either open or closed. I suppose the forest can be both, depending on whether one stresses its thick canopy of trees or the sky seen through the treetops; in the poem it is mainly described as closed. Finally, spaces can be much smaller (e.g. an eye socket or a pot) or much bigger (e.g. a forest) than tomb, sepulcher, or hearse. In this manner, Keats broadens how we typically perceive the concept of interior space.

However, Keats also employs longer descriptions. In *Isabella*, so much text and effort (six stanzas or 48 lines) is spent on describing Isabella and on the nurse's attempt to dig out the corpse that the overt heterodiegetic narrator feels the need to address this problem: Ah! wherefore all this wormy circumstance? / Why linger at the yawning tomb so long? (49.385–86).

Narrativized Description in *The Eve of St. Agnes*¹ Narrativized description as theorized by Lessing is central to *The Eve of St. Agnes*. All of *The Eve of St. Agnes* takes place within the castle of Madeline's family where a big party is held. They neglect soul for life alone. Madeline's nurse, Angela, can both be in the level chambers and ascend the staircase to Madeline's chamber, but she is described as being weak in body and in soul (*St. Agnes* 11.90); she has no intensity in either (Wasserman 130). In terms of the narrative, the most important room is Madeline's chamber—the scene of the narrative climax, the seduction of Madeline by Porphyro—and readers encounter many different types of descriptions of the room.

The interior of Madeline's chamber is first described statically in stanzas 24 and 25. When Madeline enters, Porphyro is hiding there. She has been performing the rituals associated with *St. Agnes' Eve*. In a trance, she enters and goes to sleep. At this point the narrator interrupts the action to describe the ornaments and colors on the window in the room:

“A casement high and triple-arch’d there was, All garlanded with carven imagries of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass, And diamonded with panes of quaint device, Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes, As are the tiger-moth’s deep-damask’d wings; And in the midst, ‘mong thousand heraldries, And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings, A shielded scutcheon blush’d with blood of queens and kings. (24.208–16)”

Why does Keats spend time and space on this extended description of the casement? Is it mere filler (in Lukács’s words), so that Keats simply accumulates details without any principle of selection? And if so, are we to understand it as being offered as relevant in and of itself? I think that this may be part of the answer. Keats is simply fascinated by casements (think only of the casement in *Ode to a Nightingale*), and here it seems that he indulges in describing it as an isolated lyric poem within the poem. Read this way, this passage pinpoints a discrepancy between Keats as lyric poet interested in these static descriptions as ends in themselves (in the poetry of things, to use Lukács words) and his interest in and obligation towards the plot. However, the passage can also be seen as a deliberate pause in the narrative. It occurs when Madeline is about to undress, while Porphyro is hiding and watching. It thus creates an effect of suspense, as I have argued elsewhere.

The casement may moreover be argued to function as a fascinatingly ornamented item that metonymically helps establish the atmosphere in her chamber. As such, it serves—though in a more static way—the same purpose as the later description of the atmosphere in the room, narrativized through Porphyro’s actions (st. 29–31).

Understood in this manner, the description of the casement can be seen to be integrated thematically into the action. A third reading of the passage might point out that the casement that lets the moonlight into the room also literally frames the interior space of the seduction scene. Irrespective of which interpretation we choose, it is hard to imagine the description of the casement being focalized through Porphyro’s eyes.

Porphyro plans to seduce Madeline, but before he wakes her up, he makes meticulous preparations, described in stanzas 29, 30, and 31. His preparations create an atmosphere in the room, conveyed to readers as it is being contemplated by Porphyro:

**“Then by the bed-side, where the faded moon Made a dim, silver twilight, soft he set a table, and, half anguished, threw thereon A cloth of woven crimson, gold, and jet:—
(29.253–56)”**

In this first step, Keats highlights the colors. The twilight room offers a mixture of silver, red, gold, and black colors. In stanza 30, he places on the table all sorts of foods, brought from exotic places like Fez, Samarcand, and Lebanon; among them are jellies, a heap of candied apple, syrup with cinnamon, manna, and dates. The colors of the food mix with the other colors in the room, but most importantly they add scent to the atmosphere in the room. In stanza 31 he finishes the preparations:

**“These delicates he heap’d with glowing hand
On golden dishes and in baskets bright
Of wreathed silver: sumptuous they stand
In the retired quiet of the night,
Filling the chilly room with perfume light.— (31.271–75)”**

Textual Space at the Service of Narrative Space

In this section I wish to analyze how textual space can serve the description of narrative setting. I have demonstrated how metaphors and rhymes are important means of producing symbolically charged interior spaces. These techniques already relate to textual space because rhymes highlight certain words by placing them at the foregrounded final position of a line of verse. Furthermore, rhymes through their phonological association establish correspondences between words (e.g. between bloom and tomb). Textual space is functionalized in relation to narrative space in the stylistic use of enjambment, as for instance in these two lines: Through many a dusky gallery, they gain / The maiden’s chamber, silken, hush’d, and chaste (St. Agnes, 21.186–187). These two lines narrate how the old nurse, Angela, leads Porphyro to Madeline’s chamber through many dusky galleries. Once in Madeline’s chamber, he takes cover and waits for Madeline to enter. The creation of space in these lines is complex. First of all, the archaic meaning of the verb ‘to gain’ as in ‘to reach’ or ‘to arrive at’ can itself indicate spatiality without the need for supplementary nouns or adjectives. According to David Herman in *Story Logic* (2004), motion verbs typically function in such a manner: By encoding the directionality of

movement, motion verbs express projective locations of entities being perceived by narrators, as well as paths taken by entities as they move or are moved from place to place (282). Herman furthermore refers to a study of natural- language narratives that shows how motion verbs such as come, arrive, walk in are used to indicate spaces located nearest to the observer, whereas go, walked off/out, leave indicate characters leaving the space (182). Foregrounded due to its position, gain is also part of the C- rhymes in the Spenserian stanza, which rhymes ABABBCBCC. What the Nurse and Porphyro gain (Madeline’s chamber) is not revealed until the next line, so entering the room means moving down to the next line of verse (after having paused at gain). The gaining of Madeline’s room, moreover, takes on yet another symbolic layer of meaning. Regardless of one’s inclination to embrace or to discard Freudian psychoanalysis, it is difficult not read the description of Madeline’s chamber as a vaginal metaphor, an account of the Maiden’s chamber (which is a hypallage) being silken, hush’d,

and chaste (21.187). Twice in the same line do these word foreground the importance of virginity (a maiden in a chaste chamber), an aspect highly relevant to the plot, in that Porphyro succeeds in gaining access not only to the room but to Madeline's virginity. After all, we are at the point in the story where the deflowering of Madeline is imminent. The employment of enjambment invokes these overtones of defloration.

Conclusion

On the basis of interpretations of key passages in Keats's *Isabella* and *St. Agnes*, I have argued that reading space as charged with symbolic significance is essential to grasping Keats's approach to narrative poetry. Interior spaces play a particularly important role in this connection. Lessing's discussion of the specificities of the different media and of their potential collaborations in the *Laocöon* essay has provided a number of concepts for staging the discussion in relation to Keats's poetry. In particular, I have focused on these aspects in Lessing's essay: on his notion of the harmony and economy of epithets, on the concept of narrativized description, and on the spatial organization of language which poetry entails. I have equally drawn on other theorists (Lukács, McHale, Herman, and Ryan) to supplement Lessing's model.

There are several options for including extended descriptions in narratives. I have focused on description that thematizes and narrativizes space. In Keats's narrative poetry, one encounters a multifarious array of means and ends related to this. Occasionally extended description is static and appears to be an end in itself almost as if it is a climax of some progression, but it never tries to be exhaustive. There is always a principle of selection and often thematically integrated in the events. When the description is narrativized, it eliminates stasis and incorporates the description of something inconspicuously in the unfolding actions and movements of the story.

The other two devices for description analyzed in this article highlight a potential unique to narrative in verse as opposed to narrative in prose, namely textual space and economy of epithets. The former constitutes a difference in kind, whereas the latter implies a difference of degree (since the nature of the economy of epithets is not exclusive to—but possibly more frequent in—narrative in verse). What characterize economy of epithets are the brevity and the reappearances throughout a text. Keats's chosen epithets often contain a metaphoric dimension and entail an extended understanding of space. The recurrence of a spatial epithet helps to serve thematic purposes. There is a unique potential to employ the textual space productively when creating story space in a narrative poem that emerges because the metrical aspects and versification privilege and single out certain places on the page. Future studies might apply the same concepts from Lessing to interior space in eighteenth century poetry (for instance Alexander Pope) or in Victorian poetry (for instance in Robert Browning or Alfred Lord Tennyson); they might moreover apply the results to the concept of space in Keats specifically and Romantic poetry in general.

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