



## THE PRINCIPLE OF BEAUTY: THE GOTHIC IN JOHN KEATS'S ISABELLA; OR, THE POT OF BASIL\*

GÜZELLİĞİN İLKESİ: JOHN KEATS'IN ISABELLA; YA DA, FESLEĞEN SAKSISI'NDA GOTİK

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### Makale Bilgisi

Gönderildiği tarih: 20 Şubat 2019  
Kabul edildiği tarih: 16 Nisan 2019  
Yayınlanma tarihi: 25 Haziran 2019

### Article Info

Date submitted: 20 February 2019  
Date accepted: 16 April 2019  
Date published: 25 June 2019

### Anahtar sözcükler

John Keats; Gotik; Güzellik; Hayal Gücü; Romantik Şiir

### Keywords

John Keats; Gothic; Beauty; Imagination; Romantic Poetry

DOI: 10.33171/dtcfjournal.2019.59.1.10

### Abstract

The Romantic period of the nineteenth-century English literature brought along a total break from the literary principles of the eighteenth century. It revealed a sense of freedom from the imposed forms of expression and established categories of understanding and boundaries that restricted freedom of creativity in literature. Contrary to the classicism of the eighteenth-century literature, Romantic poetry is marked by a general tendency towards medievalism which gave rise to the use of supernatural elements and gothic imagination in poetry. In John Keats's poetry, imagination, the essential element in the formation of art and the supreme way to attain beauty and truth, links man to an alternative world that hosts what is more than meets the eye. As a poet who states that he "loved the principle of beauty in all things" Keats invents imaginary realms and alternative perspectives to reality (The Letters 186, 467). In his *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil* (1818) he retells a medieval romance by employing gothic details as a part of his exploration of beauty. He makes use of gothic elements with gruesome details that can be considered less pleasant or threatening but his description of beauty embraces the irrational, the imaginary, and awe-inspiring details alongside the joy and happiness. The gothic atmosphere of the poem draws on the horror of a corpse's head taken care of like a flower in a basil pot. The poem deals with the horrifying events as a young girl's expression of love and interpretation of truth. This study focuses particularly on the ways Keats handles gothic elements as reflections of imagination to attain beauty which he equates with truth. By foregrounding the gothic elements in *Isabella* this paper aims to explore how these projections of imagination contribute to Keats's preoccupation with themes concerning beauty and truth.

### Öz

On dokuzuncu yüzyıl İngiliz edebiyatında Romantik dönem kendinden önceki dönemin edebi ilkelerinden tamamen farklı bir edebiyat anlayışı ile öne çıkmıştır. Bu dönem, yaratıcılığı kısıtlayan kurallardan ve yaygın anlayıştan uzaklaşma ve bir özgürleşme hissi ortaya koymuştur. On sekizinci yüzyıl şiirindeki klasisizm odağının aksine, Romantik şiir orta çağ temalarına yönelmiş ve doğüstü elementler ile gotik hayal gücüne yer vermiştir. John Keats'in şiirlerinde hayal gücü, güzellik ve doğruya ulaşmanın ve alternatif bir dünya kurmanın en önemli yoludur. "Güzelliğin ilkesini her şeyde sevdiğini" ifade eden şair hayali diyarlar yaratarak gerçeğe alternatif bakış açıları geliştirir (The Letters 186, 467). Keats *Isabella; ya da, Fesleğen Saksısı* (1818) isimli şiirinde orta çağa ait bir hikayeyi gotik unsurlar kullanarak kendi güzellik anlayışına göre uyarlamıştır. Ürkütücü detaylar içeren gotik unsurlar çirkin ve tehditkar görünebilir fakat Keats'in güzellik anlayışı akıldışı, hayali ve huşu uyandıran duygularla sevinç ve mutluluğu birlikte kabul eder. Şiirin gotik atmosferi bir cesedin başının fesleğen saksısına yerleştirilip gözyaşlarıyla sulanması gibi dehşet verici bir olaya dayanmaktadır. Bu korkunç olay şiirde bir genç kızın sevgisinin yansıması ve gerçeğin farklı bir yorumu olarak ele alınmıştır. Bu bağlamda bu çalışmanın odağı özellikle Keats'in gerçek ile bir tuttuğu güzelliğe ulaşmak için kullandığı gotik unsurları hayal gücünün ürünü olarak nasıl ele aldığı olacaktır. *Isabella*'da gotik unsurların kullanımı üzerinde durularak bu çalışmada hayal gücünün yansımalarının Keats'in güzellik ve gerçek kavramlarına yaklaşımına katkısı incelenecektir.

\* This paper is a part of the author's MA thesis titled "The Use of Myth, The Supernatural and The Gothic in John Keats's Poetry" (2013).

The prominence given to imagination in poetry during the Romantic period of the nineteenth-century English literature characterizes the perception of life and the way it is communicated, as expressed in Hazlitt's words:

Poetry [...] is an imitation of Nature, but the imagination and the passions are a part of man's nature. We shape things according to our wishes and fancies, without poetry; but poetry is the most emphatical language that can be found for those creations of the mind. [...] It signifies the excess of the imagination beyond the actual or ordinary impression of any object or feeling. [...] It is strictly the language of imagination; and the imagination is that faculty which represents objects, not as they are in themselves, but as they are moulded by other thoughts and feelings, into an infinite variety of shapes and combinations of power. (Hazlitt 389).

Belief in the power of imagination was a part of the challenge to the dominant ideals of the previous era, the Age of Reason and Neoclassicism in literature, which supported reliance on logic, intellectual achievement and rationalism. The Romantic period brought along a total break from the literary principles of the eighteenth century. Romanticism revealed a sense of freedom from the imposed forms of expression and established categories of understanding, notions, and boundaries that restricted freedom of creativity in literature. Contrary to the classicism of the eighteenth-century poetry, Romantic poetry is marked by a general tendency towards medievalism which gave rise to the use of supernatural elements and gothic imagination in poetry. Along with the revival of interest in medieval life and literature, a revival of the older forms like ballads, sonnets, blank verse, and Spenserian stanzas mark the poetry of the period. In his *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil* (1818) John Keats retells a medieval romance by employing gothic details as a part of his exploration of beauty. As a poet who states he “*loved the principle of beauty in all things*”, he invents imaginary realms and alternative perspectives to reality (*The Letters...* 186, 467). The gothic atmosphere of the poem draws on the horror of a corpse's head taken care of like a flower in a basil pot. The poem deals with the horrifying events as a young girl's expression of love and interpretation of truth. This study focuses particularly on the ways Keats handles gothic elements as reflections of imagination to attain beauty which he equates with truth. By foregrounding the gothic elements in *Isabella* this paper aims to explore how these projections of imagination contribute to Keats's preoccupation with themes concerning beauty and truth.

Before venturing into an analysis of Keats's *Isabella* it might be illuminating to elaborate on the descriptions of the gothic and its meaning to the Romantics. Although the term gothic evades any fixed definitions, it mainly designates the mysterious, the unknown, and the threatening and has negative connotations such as horrid, uncivilized, and gruesome. In contrast with rationalism that ignores feelings and creations of imagination in Neoclassical poetry, with the medieval revival in the Romantic period fantastic creatures such as fairies, elves, witches, ghosts came back into literature. Thus the term gothic came to indicate anything that was related to the Middle Ages, the feudal social order, barbarous past, darkness, the supernatural, and sense of mystery. Also, the longing for the past brought about a tendency for melancholy, nostalgia and the gothic as themes. Relating to this, Stevens claims that "*the fascination for ruins and relics permeated all the gothic arts, from architecture to literature, and frequently verged on the nostalgic in its idealization of the past as opposed to a complicated and unacceptable present*" (47). In other words, gothic revival became the symbol of the opposition to the order. During the Neoclassical era, what did not seem rational tended to be suppressed and disappeared in literature. As a reaction to this, Romanticism favoured the irrational, the vague, and the mysterious which the gothic represents. As Punter also states, "[w]here the classical was well-ordered, the Gothic was chaotic; [...] where the classics offered a set of cultural models to be followed, Gothic represented excess and exaggeration, the product of the wild and the uncivilized" (5). It connotes the wild and the unexpectedness, therefore, the term gothic became an antonym for classical (Brennan 1). Its suggestion of the barbaric and destructive side of life can be seen as a deliberate attempt to revive older traditions. Thus, the gothic emerged as a corrective to the rationalism fostered by the previous era that ignored one aspect of reality that is irrational and dark.

The meaning of the gothic is defined by various symbols, figures, and elements which exceed the limits of the rational and suggest something beyond the mundane reality. The need to break from the previous tenets of literature mirrors the dislike towards the new order initiated by the Industrial Revolution and mechanised social relations. Brennan considers the gothic as representative of "*psychological values, attitudes, and symbols that compensate for the one-sided values and beliefs of the dominant neoclassical culture*" (Brennan 1). Likewise, Aske states that the Romantic writers turned to the gothic, because "*it offered an escape from the potential tyranny of Rationalism*" (20). The Romantics turned to nature and tended to value individual perspective in the perception of meaning and hence the irrational was cherished as

a part of subjectivism. They believed, poets would perceive the truth as a whole which included both the ugly visible reality and what was hidden beyond it. In this respect, for the Romantics, the ideal world, which was bound to the individual, was a realm of infinity, but the contemporary world, which they lived in, was a realm of appearances, ugliness, and wretchedness. For them, *“the poetic imagination transcends mere intellect; it is reason in its highest and purest form, the intuitive faculty by which man apprehends unity and reality”* (Bush 130). It was a natural reaction to a decadent classicism, artifices of civilisation, and artificial constructs of humankind. Therefore, they found the solution in dealing with the rediscovery of older literary themes and created a new kind of poetry which emphasized intuition over reason.

The gothic appealed to the Romantics with its potential to express the inner thoughts and darker sides of personality. As Watson argues, the gothic *“is concerned with the unusual or strange behavior of individuals, with alienation, heart-searching, and frustrated hope”* (English 81). Similarly, in their study *The Gothic*, David Putner and Glennis Byron confirm that gothic elements *“reveal something about the possibilities and depths of human misrecognition, something about the degree to which life is pursued in the light of a certain degree of untruth, of misunderstanding”* (295). The gothic lends itself to the expression of the extraordinary quality of the unfamiliar realms or supernatural happenings, invoking awe and dread; it may appear in symbols of spiritual facts which reveal the unknown or tragic dimensions of life. In a way, these elements, with a mysterious tone, make the reader confront different realities. Besides, the use of the gothic was important to the Romantics because of its evocation of strong feelings like horror and amazement. The mysterious characters with supernatural powers and castles, ruins, ghosts, and miraculous events contributed to the arousal of emotions and mystery in literary works. The tendency towards the use of gothic elements was reinforced by the reawakening of a body of older literature like romances and ballads which provided the poets with numerous themes and new sources of inspiration. In parallel with this tendency, in poetry, the function of the use of the gothic was to raise awareness of such values as mystery, superstition, instinct. The gothic made its first appearance in the novel genre in the works of Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, William Beckford, and Matthew Gregory Lewis in the late eighteenth century. The gothic influence then showed itself in Romantic poetry. However, Putner and Byron point out that the Graveyard School of poetry, which deals with themes such as death and melancholy and sets in graveyards, is the precursor to

the gothic tradition since it *"prefigures the Gothic Novel"* (10). In literary works the morbid symbolism, imagery of decay, horror, pain lend themselves to the expression of strong emotions. These elements include the wild and disorderly aspects of nature that stand for the unknown in human life. In other words, imagination offers the chance to surpass the limited reality.

As Keats demonstrates in his poetry, unlike the earthly realms defined and restricted by physical reality, the unknown is full of possibilities conjured up by imagination which is free from the rational rules and imposed boundaries surrounding them. In a letter, he complains that *"[t]he more we know the more inadequacy we find in the world to satisfy us"* (*The Letters...* 98, 259). He is not satisfied with what he sees and experiences in his life; therefore, he creates his own reality in his art by merging the mundane with the magic. In order to embellish visible reality with the products of imagination Keats makes use of gothic elements with gruesome details that can be considered less pleasant or threatening but his description of beauty embraces the irrational, the imaginary, and the awe-inspiring alongside the joy and happiness. With this common thread of Keatsian poetry, Keats's approach to reality and the imaginative has a paradoxical quality. One side of his poetry suggests a yearning for an imaginative journey towards an ideal world created by his poetic gift. On the other hand, he undertakes a mission as a poet: the mission to heal the sorrow and pain of the world through reconciliation between joy and sorrow. In order to bridge the gap between the actual world and the ideal one, he wants to create something permanent, which is art. In a letter to Bailey, he states that *"I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination. What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth - whether it existed before or not"* (*The Letters...* 31, 67). Imagination derives its power from the faculty of being identified with the essential nature of the objects. In fact, Keats believes that knowledge and reason can only be supportive to imagination in attaining truth. A poet must also acquire knowledge and wisdom without adhering to any system of thought that would ignore the mystery of life. The rational mind has limits because it excludes everything that it finds irrational. In other words, it applies rules to truth and denies all the things that do not fall into line with its rules. Therefore, as a poet, Keats lets the imagination deliver his mind from the boundaries of the visible reality to reach out to the mysterious existence that would lead to beauty and truth.

Keats captures the fleeting moments of life in his art by accepting the coexistence of joy and pain and celebrating its beauty. His glorifying the visionary experience as a source of beauty and immortality seems to be an attempt to prioritize the imaginary over the real. Yet in Keats's poetry what is imaginary is always in touch with human reality, which involves sorrow and loss as well as joy. He was aware of the turmoil which the society lived in as he reflected in his letters to Tom Keats: "*we live in a barbarous age*" (*The Letters...* 75, 173). Thus, it can be argued that, for him, a poet must not rest in poetical dreams but must share the sorrow of humanity as experienced in the real world. The things representing truth and beauty are not necessarily concrete because they are hidden in the essential nature of things. Hence, beauty or truth cannot be grasped by mere rationalisation. This quality of Keatsian poetry is expressed best in Keats's aesthetic theory of "negative capability" which refers to the competence to objectively examine what is observed or experienced and to bring out something universal (Bate 243). The theory stems from the idea that through a lack of personality and tolerance to ambiguity the poet must negate himself to attain the "*human agreement with reality*" (Bate 243). The poet who is "in uncertainties" has no worry to categorise his object (*The Letters...* 44, 96). Contradictory aspects of nature are received with no concern of personal identity. Therefore, he disapproves the kind of poetry "*that has a palpable design upon us*" (*The Letters* 44, 96). In other words, poetry should not be a means of self-assertion. According to the concept of negative capability, imaginative receptivity to the mysteries and obscurities is an inseparable aspect of life itself. In order to achieve this impartiality, one should annihilate his own prejudices, established beliefs, certainties, and preconceptions; mind should be open to all possibilities, including the irrational.

Keats believes that through imagination, truth is perceived in the form of beauty which lies in the unity of seemingly opposite aspects of life. In his poetry, the gothic is not there to threat or instil fear; rather it is a part of the world, an aspect of life that should not be ignored. For him, it is only by means of man's highest imaginative capacity that he can make the ideal united with the actual one. Thus, Keats creates a kind of world in which the qualities of human life are represented by the details of nature and his own poetic vision. In his poems, such as *Isabella*, *The Eve of Saint Agnes*, *Lamia*, *Endymion*, he explores love relationships or ill-fated love from various perspectives. In these works, he explores especially the mysterious aspect of love and makes use of supernatural elements such as spell-casting, transformation, ghosts, mythological characters, and gruesome events.

Most of the time, just like imaginary occurrences, love is fragile and experienced in secret. The risk of death dominates the majority of these poems that include gothic elements. These poems feature helpless male characters who are directed towards death as a result of their passionate union with women. The illicit love has to come to an end if the outside world discovers it. Yet these lovers are breaking the conventions and rules at the expense of their lives.

Keats adapted his *Isabella* from a tale in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353) which tells of the tragic love story of Isabella, a maiden of Messina, and Lorenzo, a young man working for her merchant brothers. The eldest brother finds out their relationship and lets the others know to plot Lorenzo's murder. They slay and bury him but tell Isabella that Lorenzo went away on business. One day Lorenzo's ghost comes to Isabella's dream to tell what happened and describes the location of his corpse. Weeping bitterly Isabella rushes to find the body and severing the head from the trunk puts it in a basil pot and drenches it with her tears. After a while, the brothers realize her attachment to the pot and steal it to check what is hidden in the pot. Upon finding the head in it, they bury the head and run away; poor Isabella dies of despair. Keats interprets the story in accordance with his idea of beauty; what one might find unpleasant in the gothic elements becomes an act of compassion and tenderness in his poem. As Bernbaum states, "*the Italian master related this as a realistic tale of terror, and dwelt upon the action; Keats entirely changed its atmosphere by imaginatively elaborating the feelings and sentiments of Isabella and her lover*" (230). Unlike its source which revolves around the treachery of the brothers, Keats's version focuses on love. In the poem, especially the grief deeply felt by Isabella changes the focal point of the events. Keats adds a mysterious atmosphere to the story with the aim of illustrating another aspect of life that is far from what is considered rational.

The poem introduces romantic love with references to an idyllic landscape. Lorenzo is a naive figure who is a victim of the forces beyond his control. Although Isabella and Lorenzo's love is destined to failure and destruction, at first it is described without references to its imminent doom:

With every morn their love grew tenderer,  
With every eve deeper and tenderer still;  
He might not in house, field, or garden stir,  
But her full shape would all his seeing fill;

And his continual voice was pleasanter  
 To her, than noise of trees or hidden rill;  
 Her lute-string gave an echo of his name,  
 She spoilt her half-done broidery with the same. (9-16).

As opposed to their pure love that connotes a positive atmosphere, Isabella's brothers are described as greedy and cunning tradesmen. The brothers who are "*enriched from ancestral merchandise*" (106) consider themselves superior to Lorenzo, who is not wealthy enough for them. They want to wed their sister to "*some high noble*" (168). The rational values of the contemporary society to which Keats tries to create an alternative is reflected in the material and utilitarian endeavour of Isabella's brothers. The fact that the brothers are not given names puts them in a position to represent the society who are utilitarian and stick to tradesman ideals. Through their greedy pursuit of financial gain, the poem demonstrates the corruption that the Romantics are against. The brothers are introduced as rich exploiters:

[...] for them many a weary hand did swelt  
 In torched mines and noisy factories  
 And many once proud-quiver'd loins did melt  
 In blood from stinging whip;--with hollow eyes  
 Many all day in dazzling river stood,  
 To take the rich-ored driftings of the flood.  
 [.....]  
 [...] for them alone did seethe  
 A thousand men in troubles wide and dark:  
 Half-ignorant, they turn'd an easy wheel,  
 That set sharp racks at work, to pinch and peel. (107-112; 117-120).

They are so "proud" (125) that Lorenzo is not in the position to enhance their status; as he is a servant to them, he cannot marry their sister. Furthermore, Lorenzo's love "*is a 'crime' because it crosses class boundaries*" (Fermanis 148). In their economic pursuit they are so selfish that their sister's feelings are of no worth. Their ignoring Isabella's feelings and love also displays the assets of the actual



society and how Keats interprets the world they live in. Because of the pressures of such society, Isabella and Lorenzo's love cannot survive.

For Keats, love is the expression of beauty and truth. The death of Lorenzo is the consequence of the cruelty of society and an inevitable part of life. Keats embellishes this unpleasant fact with gothic elements to interpret love from another point of view. Against this materialist world, Keats offers his own formulation of beauty which involves both joy and pain. Therefore the gothic functions as both an expression of pain, which involves horror, and love which survives in another dimension. The ghost of Lorenzo comes to Isabella in a dream informing her of his tragic fate and giving the instructions that will lead her to his body. The fact behind Lorenzo's death is revealed to her in a dream vision. However, this is not a pleasing dream because the tragedy inherent in human life is elaborated in unsettling symbols. Keats gives details of atrocity and violence within a gothic atmosphere. Lorenzo appears as a "*pale shadow*" (281) with "*cold doom / Upon his lips*" (277). His "*forest tomb*" (275) has "*marr'd his glossy hair,*" (276) and "*loamed*" (279). His words are described as "*strange sound*" of a "*ghostly under-song*" (286). Moreover "*its eyes, though wild, were still all dewy bright*" (289) implying that Lorenzo is no longer a human being. The poem conveys the brutality of loss and pain from a perspective that cannot be perceived through the capacity of reason alone. On the one hand, the atmosphere has unpleasant connotations in parallel with the actual life, on the other; it suggests another realm which is not of the real world. By the agency of the dream that presents an alternative world, truth is introduced to Isabella. Since truth means beauty in Keatsian principle, Isabella treasures the dream and what it brings forth.

Lorenzo's ghost is a reflection of his endless love for Isabella. Similarly, Isabella's embracing Lorenzo's pain mirrors her enduring love. To express the intensity of the experience Keats uses gruesome details that enhance horror. In the dream, Lorenzo begs Isabella to visit his grave with one purpose only: "*shed one tear upon my heather-bloom, / And it shall comfort me within the tomb*" (303-4). When Isabella and her nurse find and begin digging Lorenzo's grave, their action is described with grim imagery:

That old nurse stood beside her wondering,  
 Until her heart felt pity to the core  
 At sight of such a dismal labouring,

And so she kneeled, with her locks all hoar,  
 And put her lean hands to the horrid thing:  
 Three hours they labour'd at this travail sore;  
 At last they felt the kernel of the grave,  
 And Isabella did not stamp and rave. (377-384).

Although the gothic elements suggest a horrid atmosphere, they are a part of Isabella's love which is beautiful for her:

With duller steel than the Persean sword  
 They cut away no formless monster's head,  
 But one, whose gentleness did well accord  
 With death, as life. The ancient harps have said,  
 If Love impersonate was ever dead,  
 Pale Isabella kiss'd it, and low moan'd.  
 'Twas love; cold, - dead indeed, but not dethroned. (393-401).

After they carry Lorenzo's head home, Isabella wraps the head in a silken scarf; buries it in a pot and sets over the herb "*sweet basil*" to hide it (416). Her love for Lorenzo, the truth and beauty of her life, exceeds her fear in these lines:

And then the prize was all for Isabel:  
 She calm'd its wild hair with a golden comb,  
 And all around each eye's sepulchral cell  
 Pointed each fringed lash; the smeared loam  
 With tears, as chilly as a dripping well,  
 She drench'd away:--and still she comb'd, and kept  
 Sighing all day—and still she kiss'd, and wept. (402-408).

The thrilling details and the appalling image of a buried head in a pot are enhanced with the detailed account of Lorenzo's decaying body. The narration of a dead person with details of physical decay and the references to "*blood*" (333), "*skull*" and "*bones*" (356) can be grounded on Keats's medical education. With regard to this, Gaull points out that

apprenticed to an apothecary, [Keats] witnessed human suffering on a daily basis, assisting in a number of such minor but disagreeable procedures as bleeding, drawing teeth, setting bones, and attending to infections in the days before anaesthesia and antiseptics. His response to pain and despair intensified when he trained at Guy's Hospital, a charitable institution for incurable diseases, where he attended lectures, observed operations, assisted in the sick wards changing dressings, and dissected corpses that had been stolen from local graveyards by thieves who then sold them to the hospitals. (221).

Apparently, his medical experience contributes to his poetic skill to describe death and pain vividly. His experience in hospitals is transformed into art based on feelings. Particularly, by integrating his knowledge with gothic imagination, Keats creates an alternative world. It is this vividness and ferocity that evoke feelings of horror, one of the fundamental qualities of gothic writing.

Isabella and Lorenzo's pure and vulnerable love is turned into an uncanny relationship which cannot be accepted by the actual world that is defined by the precepts of rationalism and visible reality but Keats creates an individual interpretation of love with gothic elements that transcend the boundaries of traditional interpretations of love. Through the gothic, Keats seeks what is beyond the visible. In the alternative realm Isabella creates for herself, what is irrational seems beautiful and pleasant. Since beauty means truth, this suffering she experiences is the mere truth of her life. The miseries of the actual world lead her to find the reality which also reveals the identities of the murderers. In this regard, the basil pot becomes the emblem of beauty, truth, and misery of Isabella's life. Therefore, when she loses the pot, she *"forgets natural processes and [...] withdrawing eventually from the sources of life itself [...] she invests all her consciousness and tears in watering the plant"* (White 144). Everything else loses significance for her:

And she forgot the stars, the moon, and sun,  
 And she forgot the blue above the trees,  
 And she forgot the dells where waters run,  
 And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze;  
 She had no knowledge when the day was done,  
 And the new morn she saw not: but in peace

Hung over her sweet Basil evermore,  
And moisten'd it with tears unto the core. (417-424).

What is beautiful for Isabella is ugly, grotesque and horrific for her brothers who are so much involved in materialistic values; they call the pot “*a very nothing*” (462). However, as Isabella’s experience reveals, beyond the boundaries of the earthly existence, things can be evaluated from different perspectives. As Brennan states, “[g]othic characters personify sides of the unconscious personality that have been neglected or repressed and need to be integrated to avoid catastrophic psychic destruction.” (Brennan 13). In the face of such grief what is rational is useless and in order to cope with her traumatic experience Isabella creates a reality for herself. She finds comfort in worshipping the pot and committing herself entirely to its beauty. In this sense, in the poem, gothic elements also portray psychological growth, acceptance, and healing. However, to the materialist eyes, her behaviour is incomprehensible. Isabella’s brothers find her behaviour puzzling and investigate the pot, only to discover the head of their victim staring at them: “*The thing was vile with green and livid spot, / And yet they knew it was Lorenzo’s face*” (475-476). Stealing the pot away, they flee from Florence into a life of banishment. When the brothers disappear with the basil pot, they destroy Isabella’s last meaningful possession and hence ruin her life; lamenting her loss she dies of grief.

The loss of the pot means the loss of beauty in Isabella’s life, therefore, without the pot, her life would be meaningless. Ulmer points out that Isabella reconstitutes the pot as an “*aesthetic*” object (131). Similarly, Watkins regards the pot as “*a relic that signifies truth*” (62). As he states, “*it is not a human relationship itself, but a symbol of a human relationship. In her absolute devotion to the pot, Isabella reveals her real, if unstated, belief that life itself holds nothing of meaning for her*” (62). After the disappearance of the pot, she cannot find purpose in life. In a way, Isabella replaces her love for Lorenzo with her obsession with the pot. Although all these gothic images like ghost, grave, and darkness seem to create a gloomy atmosphere, they are the components of beauty in Isabella’s world. Thus, the gothic elements in the poem are important in order to understand the world that she invents. The actual world cannot accept her grotesque dreams and imagination and finally her disappointment causes her death.

To conclude, in Keats’s poetry, imagination, the essential element in the formation of art and the supreme way to attain beauty and truth, links man to an alternative world that hosts what is more than meets the eye. The gothic introduces

a world that welcomes painful aspects of life and moments of happiness in order to reconcile the contradictory aspects inherent in human life. Gothic elements in *Isabella* may seem horrific but Keats uses these unearthly components to lay bare the manifold interpretations of reality. By turning a horrifying medieval tale into a Romantic poem that illustrates his understanding of beauty, Keats explores the unknown and mostly unacceptable aspects of reality which cannot be perceived by those who lack imaginative faculty.

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