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On Fame: The Art of Being Forgotten

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Abstract

John Keats's "*On Fame*" explores the elusive nature of fame and its psychological impact on the creative soul. Written in two sonnet-like sections, the poem reflects Keats's personal disillusionment with public opinion and artistic recognition. Through rich metaphors, classical allusions, and philosophical inquiry, Keats critiques both the worship of fame and the inner torment it causes. This paper delves into the poem's literary craftsmanship, structural finesse, thematic complexity, spiritual resonance, and contextual roots in Romantic ideology and Keats's own life, culminating in a personal interpretation of its timeless relevance.

Preface

"*On Fame*" by John Keats is a poetic meditation on the seductive and illusory nature of fame. Written in two reflective stanzas, the poem reveals the poet's deep disillusionment with the public's perception of artistic worth and his growing desire for spiritual detachment. Keats, though often associated with the rich sensuality of Romantic poetry, demonstrates here a profound philosophical insight that transcends mere literary ambition.

In this work, Keats personifies Fame as a flirtatious, unpredictable woman who rewards indifference and scorns those who chase her too eagerly. With biting irony, vivid metaphors, and classical allusions, he critiques the vanity and despair of those obsessed with external validation. Yet beneath this satire lies a more profound message: that peace and creative fulfilment arise not through the pursuit of recognition, but through inner contentment and self-realization.

Remarkably, Keats's poetic vision resonates with the spiritual teachings of the **Upanishads**, the **Bhagavad Gita**, the **Vachanamrut**, and the **Bhagavatam**, where detachment (*vairagya*), humility, and equanimity are upheld as higher virtues. In an age still enthralled by the chase for popularity, "*On Fame*" stands as a timeless reminder of the quiet strength found in renouncing the need to be seen.

1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

Keats masterfully employs several literary techniques in "*On Fame*":

- **Personification:** Fame is personified as a "wayward girl," a "Gipsy," and a "Jilt," suggesting her fickle, deceptive, and unfaithful nature. This gives fame human characteristics, making her a capricious entity rather than a static concept.
- **Metaphor:** Fame is compared to a girl, a Naiad, and even to jealousy through Potiphar's wife. The poet suggests that fame seduces but never commits.
- **Imagery:** Vivid images like "the rose should pluck herself," "the undisturbed lake has crystal space," and "fever'd man" evoke the natural world to contrast inner turmoil with outer serenity.
- **Alliteration & Assonance:** Phrases such as "madmen that ye are!" and "vexes all the leaves of his life's book" contribute musicality and emphasis.
- **Symbolism:** The rose, plum, and lake symbolize purity, maturity, and tranquility respectively—values undermined by the obsessive pursuit of fame.
- **Irony:** There is irony in the idea that fame follows those who shun it—"Then, if she likes it, she will follow you."

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2. Structure and Form

- **Rhyme Scheme:** The poem follows a Shakespearean sonnet form with an ABAB CDCD EFEF GG rhyme scheme in the first part. The second part is more flexible but still employs rhyming couplets.
- **Meter and Rhythm:** Keats generally maintains iambic pentameter, though variations in stress add emotional intensity.
- **Stanza and Line Breaks:** The poem is divided into two sections, suggesting a thematic shift—from Fame as a flirtatious woman to the deeper existential consequences of seeking it.
- **Enjambment:** Many lines continue without pause, emphasizing the relentless thoughts that accompany the desire for fame.

3. Theme and Subject Matter

The central theme is **fame and its psychological/spiritual cost**. Keats critiques those who chase fame obsessively while suggesting that true worth lies in detachment and inner peace.

Secondary themes include:

- The fragility of human pride
- The futility of external validation
- The tension between desire and renunciation

4. Tone and Mood

- **Tone:** The tone is cautionary, reflective, and subtly satirical. Keats criticizes both fame and those obsessed with it, including himself.
- **Mood:** The poem evokes a mood of disillusionment and introspection, ending with a wistful note of philosophical resignation.

5. Philosophical and Spiritual Interpretation

John Keats's poem "On Fame" closely aligns with the teachings of the **Upanishads, Vedanta, Bhagavad Gita, Vachanamrut, and Shrimad Bhagavatam**, particularly in its emphasis on **non-attachment, inner contentment, and the illusory nature of worldly recognition**. Below is a detailed scriptural analysis demonstrating these parallels:

1. Upanishadic Wisdom

The Upanishads emphasize *detachment from external praise and identity*, focusing instead on self-realization.

Key Concepts:

- **Aparigraha** (Non-possessiveness)
- **Māyā** (Illusion)
- **Ānanda** (Bliss arising from self-realization, not fame)

References:

- **Katha Upanishad 1.2.1–2:**ⁱ

*"Shreyas (the good) and Preyas (the pleasant) approach the man. The wise, having examined them, distinguishes them. The wise prefer Shreyas to Preyas; the ignorant, for the sake of worldly well-being, prefer Preyas."*ⁱⁱ

→ Keats contrasts shallow praise (Preyas) with tranquil self-contentment (Shreyas), cautioning artists against chasing fame.

- **Isha Upanishad, Verse 1:**ⁱⁱⁱ

"Everything in the universe belongs to the Lord. Therefore, take only what you need and be content with what is given."

→ Keats's suggestion that "a heart at ease" is more beloved by Fame parallels the Isha Upanishad's call for contentment and renunciation.

2. Vedanta Philosophy (Advaita)

Vedanta teaches the illusory nature of fame and ego, emphasizing the pursuit of Brahman (truth) over *nāma* (name) and *rupa* (form).

Key Teachings:

- **Neti Neti** ("Not this, not this"): The real self is beyond worldly attributes like fame.
- **Aham Brahmasmi** ("I am Brahman"): True identity lies beyond praise or blame.

Keats's mocking tone toward fame ("a very Gipsy is she...") exposes the hollowness of identification with social accolades, aligning with the **Vedantic renunciation of the ego and transient labels**.

3. Shrimad Bhagavad Gita

The Gita repeatedly emphasizes **Karma Yoga**—performing action without attachment to results.

Key Verses:

- **Bhagavad Gita 2.47:**^{iv}

"Karman्य evadhikaras te, ma phalesu kadacana..."
(*You have the right to perform your duty, but not to the fruits of your actions.*)

→ Keats echoes this: **"Make your best bow to her and bid adieu, Then, if she likes it, she will follow you."**

- **Gita 2.70:**^v

"He attains peace into whom all desires enter as waters enter the ocean, which, filled from all sides, remains unmoved."

→ The "heart at ease" symbolizes the **sthita-prajña** (steadfast sage) who is unmoved by fame.

- **Gita 3.30:**^{vi}

"Renounce all desires and act with a pure heart."
→ The artist is advised to **detach** from recognition and work **sincerely and serenely**—the ideal Keats promotes.

4. Vachanamrut (Teachings of Bhagwan Swaminarayan)

The *Vachanamrut* emphasizes humility, detachment, and the danger of ego.

Relevant Teachings:

- **Gadhada I-27:**

"One who is unaffected by honour and dishonour is truly noble."

→ Keats praises the "thoughtless boy" with a carefree heart, not the sycophantic bard chasing reputation.

- **Gadhada II-38:**

"Even if the whole world insults you, do not abandon your dharma."

→ Fame is irrelevant in spiritual striving. **Dharma** must guide one's purpose, not public recognition.

5. Shrimad Bhagavatam (Bhagavata Purana)

The Bhagavatam often portrays **fame as fleeting and deceptive**, urging devotion to the Supreme instead.

Examples:**• Prahlada's Teachings (Canto 7):**

"The path of material fame and prestige is dangerous. It leads to pride, which is the cause of one's fall."

→ This reflects the warning in Keats's image of the man who "spoils his salvation for a fierce miscreed."

• Canto 11.19.44:^{vii}

"One who neither rejoices nor laments, neither praises nor criticizes, who is free from possessiveness—is dear to Me."

→ Keats advocates this non-dual stance: ignore fame, and it may follow.

6. Other Scriptural Parallels**Taittiriya Upanishad 2.7.1**

"He who knows bliss of Brahman fears nothing, craves nothing."

→ The "man who cannot look / Upon his mortal days with temperate blood" fails to attain this state.

Bible (Matthew 6:1)

"Do not do your deeds before men, to be seen by them."

→ Echoes Keats's disdain for "those who woo [Fame] with too slavish knees."

Conclusion

Keats's "On Fame" reflects profound spiritual truths embedded in **Indian philosophical traditions**. Whether through the **non-attachment** of the Bhagavad Gita, the **renunciatory ideals** of the Upanishads, or the **devotional humility** of the Bhagavatam and Vachanamrut, Keats's poem aligns with the path of **liberation from ego and illusion**. His message is timeless: **renounce the fruits, act with love, and let the universe bestow recognition—or not—as it will.**

6. Historical and Cultural Context

• Romantic Movement: The poem was written during the early 19th century, when Romantic poets challenged Enlightenment rationalism, emphasizing emotion, nature, and the inner self.

• Keats's Life: Personally afflicted by criticism and illness, Keats struggled with the lack of recognition. This poem reflects his inner conflict—wanting fame but scorning its superficiality.

• Contemporary Reception: Critics like Blackwood's Magazine and The Quarterly Review ridiculed Keats, which likely inspired this poem's scornful depiction of fame.

7. Poet's Perspective and Emotional Mindset

• Emotional State: Keats likely wrote this with a mix of **resentment, philosophical resignation, and ironic self-awareness.**

• Autobiographical Elements: The reference to "love-sick Bards" and "madmen" could be self-directed, acknowledging his own yearning for fame.

• Inspiration: His failing health and critical rejection may have triggered a deeper search for spiritual consolation, leading to this meditative work.

8. Target Audience and Purpose

• Target Audience: Fellow poets, artists, and society at large. The poem speaks to all who seek fame, especially those in creative fields.

• Purpose: To expose the fickleness of fame, caution against blind ambition, and suggest a path of detached wisdom. Keats aims to free the artist from ego's bondage.

9. Personal Interpretation

Keats's "On Fame" is not merely a personal lament; it is a profound spiritual meditation on the illusions of glory. It teaches that true creativity and peace arise not from applause, but from **inner composure and humility**. Fame, when chased, flees. But when forgotten, she may come.

To the modern reader, this resonates deeply in a world obsessed with social media recognition and external success. Keats's poem, therefore, offers a timeless remedy: **Be content, act nobly, and let fame follow if it must.**

Conclusion

John Keats's "On Fame" concludes not with a bitter rejection of fame, but with a subtle spiritual invitation—to live and create from a place of **serenity**, not servitude. By mocking the fickleness of Fame and extolling the artist who bids her adieu, Keats invites us to adopt the posture of detachment taught by **Vedantic seers, Bhagwan Swaminarayan, and the Gita's yogis**. The poem becomes a mirror for the modern soul, reminding us that true greatness lies not in being known, but in being **authentic**. In blending poetic beauty with ethical and spiritual insight, Keats offers not only a critique of cultural obsession but also a guide to personal liberation. For those willing to heed its wisdom, "On Fame" is not just a poem—it is a path.

Foot note

- I. अन्यच्छ्रेयोऽन्यदुतैव प्रेयस्ते उभे नानार्थे पुरुषे सिनीतः ।
तयोः श्रेय आददानस्य साधुर्भवति हीयतेऽर्थाद्य उ प्रेयो वृणीते ॥ १ ॥
- II. श्रेयश्च प्रेयश्च मनुष्यमेतस्तौ संपरीत्य विविनक्ति धीरः ।
श्रेयो हि धीरोऽभिप्रेयसो वृणीते प्रेयो मन्दो योगक्षेमाद्वृणीते ॥ २ ॥
- III. ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत् ।
तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथा मा गृधः कस्य स्विद्धनम् ॥ १ ॥
- IV. कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥ 47 ॥
- V. आपूर्यमाणमचलप्रतिष्ठं
समुद्रमापः प्रविशन्ति यद्वत् ।
तद्वत्कामा यं प्रविशन्ति सर्वे
स शान्तिमाप्नोति न कामकामी ॥ 70 ॥
- VI. मयि सर्वाणि कर्माणि संन्यस्याध्यात्मचेतसा ।
निराशीर्निर्ममो भूत्वा युध्यस्व विगतज्वरः ॥ 30 ॥
- VII. भगो म ऐश्वरो भावो लाभो मद्भक्तिरुत्तमः ।
विद्यात्मनि भिदाबाधो जुगुप्सा ह्रीरकर्मसु ॥ ४० ॥
श्रीर्गुणा नैरपेक्षयाद्याः सुखं दुःखसुखात्ययः ।
दुःखं कामसुखापेक्षा पण्डितो बन्धमोक्षवित् ॥ ४१ ॥
मूर्खो देहाद्यहंबुद्धिः पन्था मन्निगमः स्मृतः ।
उत्पथश्चित्तविक्षेपः स्वर्गः सत्त्वगुणोदयः ॥ ४२ ॥
नरकस्तमउन्नाहो बन्धुर्गुरुरहं सखे ।
गृहं शरीरं मानुष्यं गुणाढ्यो ह्याढ्य उच्यते ॥ ४३ ॥
दरिद्रो यस्त्वसन्तुष्टः कृपणो योऽजितेन्द्रियः ।
गुणेष्वसक्तधीरीशो गुणसङ्गो विपर्ययः ॥ ४४ ॥
एत उद्धव ते प्रश्नाः सर्वे साधु निरूपिताः ।
किं वर्णितेन बहुना लक्षणं गुणदोषयोः ।
गुणदोषदृशिर्दोषो गुणस्तूभयवर्जितः ॥ ४५ ॥