
A Comparative Reading of John Keats's *Isabella and Lamia*

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Abstract

Keats's *Isabella and Lamia* are narrative poems. They describe passionate love stories. In the former, two brothers with mercenary motive murder Lorenzo, the lover of their sister. *Isabella*, the sister, hides the cut-off head of the lover in a basil-pot. She loves the head. The cruel brothers steal the basil-pot with the head. *Isabella* pines and dies. The brothers are banished from Florence. In the latter, *Lamia*, a serpent-woman, seduces Lycius, a youth of Corinth. Apollonius, a sage or Lycius's instructor, detects her identity and denounces her in their marriage feast. She vanishes. On the spur of moment, Lycius dies. This research article makes a comparative reading of *Isabella and Lamia* in terms of their sources, motifs, themes and characters. It has been structured into three parts- Introduction, Thematic patterns and Conclusion. John Keats's respective poems and various books with critics' opinions about Keats and his *Isabella and Lamia* have been consulted in course of preparing this research. The article concludes that Keats creates pleasure and horror in both poems mentioned above in order to balance two worlds- the real and the ideal.

Keywords: love, mercenary motive, deception, cold philosophy, reality.

Introduction

John Keats's *Isabella* or *The Pot of Basil* (written in 1818 and published in 1820) and *Lamia* (written in 1819 and published in 1820) stipulate the reality of the harsh world in which differences, sufferings and grievances occur. Situations go ahead. Vicissitudes take place in life. The real world differs from the ideal world. Ultimately the two worlds remain in balance, letting the pain-pleasure reality, a Romantic trend in literature, exist.

Keats's *Isabella* and *Lamia* both have the sources of the stories. Boccaccio's "Decameron I" is the source of *Isabella*. In this source, Lorenzo works in the shop of Lisabetta's brothers. The brothers come to know about Lisabetta's love with Lorenzo. Due to their prestige issue, they murder the lover. In *Isabella*, the issue is not prestige but greed. Billy T. Boyar contends, "The brothers kill Lorenzo not because of a desire to protect their sister's reputation, as they do in Boccaccio, but because of greed" (169). "Anatomy of Melancholy" by Burton is the source of *Lamia*. In this source, Lycius meets a phantasm. She carries him to her house and seduces him. The location is the suburbs of Corinth. Apollonius unveils the truth that she is a lamia or serpent. Shortly after her vanishing, the house also vanishes.

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Writers and works represent the contemporary age and people. Literature as a mirror reflects the society. In the time when *Isabella* and *Lamia* were written, the society had experienced various ups and downs in economic and political domains. Britain was in the process of industrialization. In such a situation, people's craze for monetary gain was in apex. The society was cruel and full of avarice and vaunted pride. The powerful could easily dominate the weak.

The Romantic poetry in general stipulates that something sweet and something bitter get amalgamated in order to expose reality. Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), a Romantic poet, in his poem *To a Skylark*, says, "Our sincerest laughter/ With some pain is fraught;/Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought" (243). This feeling is vividly portrayed in Keats's *Lamia* and *Isabella*. Isabella and Lorenzo secretly love each other. Their sweet love finally gets shattered. Isabella pines. The sweet and the sad more vividly get portrayed in *Lamia*. The sweet relationship between the lovers fades along with their end.

Thematic Patterns in *Isabella* and *Lamia*

Isabella and *Lamia* are narrative poems describing passionate love affairs and horrible tragedies. In the former the lover is first killed and later the beloved pines and dies, and in the latter the beloved vanishes and the lover immediately dies. Both poems possess the similar themes and circumstances. They can have some connections with the early nineteenth century Britain. In *Isabella*, the title character is very naïve. She is in love with Lorenzo. Her love affair with him is not guided by any conditions and benefits. Lorenzo is also meek and mild. He is innocent. But the greedy brothers represent the world of experience. Their greed and cruelty victimize the innocent lovers. The corrupt brothers represent the world of experience whereas the lovers represent that of innocence. The sufferers just tolerate. Experience engulfs innocence. It is relevant to remember Michael Lagory's opinion—"Keats's extensive contrasts of kinds of vision show that Isabella and Lorenzo are victims not only of the merchants' cruelty but also of their own naivety" (341). Concerning Lorenzo's naivety, the poem reads:

For power to speak; but still the ruddy tide
Stifled his voice, and puls'd resolve away-
Fever'd his high conceit of such a bride,
Yet brought him to the meekness of a child:
Alas! when passion is both meek and wild ! (VI)

Likewise, in *Lamia*, Lycius falls in love with Lamia. He is innocent in the sense Lamia seduces him. Anyway they become near and dear to each other. They love each other. Apollonius, a sophist, stands for the world of experience. He becomes the cause of the damage of the lovers. They get finished. The sophist's intention may not be to finish them but his vaunted pride shatters them. Roger Sharrock, as to *Isabella*, contends, "A pair of young lovers is set down in the middle of a cold and hostile adult world; the warm sincerity of their passion is contrasted with the unfeeling sterility of their elders who are engaged in the pursuit of power or family pride" (53).

The two narrative poems full of violence and oppression touch the readers' hearts to express sympathy for the victims who suffer and end. Pity is also suffering. Those who express sympathy

also suffer. Readers suffer from the suffering of the victims. In *Isabella* and *Lamia*, the suffering characters have no hatred and hostility against the torturers. They do not have any sense of revenge upon the torturers. Isabella pines but does not think of any revenge. Likewise, Lycius seems to have no sense of retaliation or he has no time to think in that way. His beloved vanishes and on the spur of moment he breathes his last. Thus in *Isabella*, the lover and the beloved suffer and get victimized. It is also true that the torturers, the sinful brothers, also get banished. To some extent, Keats has shown poetic justice. But in *Lamia*, Keats does not punish the sophist. It is also ponderable that earlier or later, Lycius can be victimized by the serpent-woman. The tragedy can be inevitable. It happens earlier and Apollonius becomes the cause in advance. Anything good or bad might happen if only the philosopher remains silent. He speaks the truth. The ruin of the lovers occurs.

In the contemporary society in Britain, the strong and rich tortured the weak and the needy. The struggle-for-existence tendency seems to have prevailed in the romantic literature despite the fact that the period adores nature. In *Isabella* and *Lamia* also, the rich and powerful torture the weak. The rich and greedy brothers murder Lorenzo and torture Isabella. Lamia traps Lycius. Keats witnessed this phenomenon in his troubled world. He opposes man's cruelty and oppression over man. In order to inaugurate the undesirable situations of the society, he has shown the victimization of the meek and mild. In this context, it is better to remember Hoxie N. Fairchild who argues:

To a twentieth-century reader the struggle-for-existence idea is a truism. So far as I know, however, this appearance of it in English romantic poetry is unique. Certainly the idea blasphemes the whole romantic conception of nature. It is also remarkable that the man responsible for this exceptional utterance should be John Keats. (99)

Romantic poets express their disgust against misery. Keats also assaults misery via his word-power. He perhaps wants to expose his own misery which he experienced in life. The time and the situation betray him. His tuberculosis betrays him. His beloved Fanny rejects him to marry her due to his poverty and poor health. He loses his kin due to tuberculosis. These all sad events make him weak and miserable. The lovers' tragedy in *Isabella* and *Lamia* may be Keats's own misery. Keats wants a peaceful world. He disgusts the morally wasteland of his time. Through his works like *Isabella* and *Lamia*, he wants to show the world of greed, cruelty and inhumanity. His sympathy for the meek and innocent touches the heart of every reader. Many contend that *Lamia* has an autobiographical touch. Lycius is Keats. Lamia is his beloved Fanny and Apollonius is his friend Charles Brown.

Isabella and *Lamia* both deal with deception. In the former, the covetous brothers deceive their own sister and her lover. In the latter, the seductive beloved deceives the lover, and the lover's instructor can also be said to have betrayed the lover and the beloved. Isabella respects and trusts her brothers. She suffers. Lycius respects and trusts his old teacher Apollonius. But he is betrayed. Obviously Lycius is victimized from Lamia and Apollonius. Lamia's serpentine reality is veiled to Lycius. The blindness motif is important in the poem. Lycius sees things but metaphorically he can't detect Lamia's conspiracy against him. Her company with him is sweet but it is betraying him. The sight motif is more dominant in the poem. Lamia knows about her identity and role. William Harrold remarks- "Better to understand the poem, scholars have investigated the Lamia

motif, which appears in the folklore and literature of countries from England to China and India” (579).

In *Isabella*, the greedy brothers want to marry their sister to a rich man. This is their mercenary motive. The poem reads-“When ‘twas their plan to coax her by degrees/ To some high noble and his olive-trees” (XXI). The brothers are capitalists or masters. Lorenzo stands for a worker or a servant. Michael Lagory argues- “The brothers’ “vision covetous and sly” is the opposite of Keats’s ideal of the sympathetic imagination. Their happiness requires the suffering of others. They exploit laborers all over the world; the phrase “red-lin’d accounts” hints that their ledgers are written in blood” (323). In *Lamia*, Apollonius seems to cause the disaster. His cold philosophy overcomes enchantment. Supernaturalism plays a pivotal role in progress of the story in the poem. There is a tussle between philosophy and mysticism. Innocence is trapped between the enchantment and cold philosophy.

In *Lamia*, a serpent becomes a woman. As a woman, Lamia possesses the traits of a loving woman. It is not her real form and nature. That she finishes Lycius is true. Due to her seduction, he gets trapped and finally when the truth gets unveiled, he dies. A serpent’s desire, role, seduction and tragedy are described in *Lamia*. With the serpent’s tragedy, the lover also gets finished. In *Isabella* also, the cunning brothers possess the nature of a serpent. They are humans in form but actually by nature they are in guise of serpents. They have a mercenary motive. They are betrayers. They are venomous. Their desire, role and tragedy are described in the poem. Their tragedy is their fear and banishment from Florence. Billy T. Boyar argues:

While hunting, Shakespeare’s Adonis is gored in the groin by the boar, a disaster which (according to Venus) ushers evil into the world (lines 1135-1164). Isabella’s brothers clearly represent the negative principle of cruelty, destruction and death, and because of that, they are Keats’s equivalent to Shakespeare’s boar...Shakespeare frequently compares the boar to a serpent. Likewise, Keats compares the murderous brothers to serpents.(163)

In *Lamia*, when we see the progress of love between the lovers, we have a doubt that at a point there may be tragedy in the sense the love is seductive as Lamia is a serpent-woman. However, in *Isabella*, the Lorenzo-Isabella love is very devotional, spiritual and genuine. The treacherous brothers murder the lover and bury him. The lover’s ghost tells *Isabella* about the place where the corpse is buried. Isabella cuts the head off the corpse and hides it in a basil-pot. This action seems horrible and heart-rending. She loves the head. The basil-pot with the head is stolen. The poem reads- “O cruelty, / Tosteal my Basil-pot away from me” (LXII). She pines and dies.

After the stealing of the basil pot, Isabella mourns over it and she dies. After her demise, the gloomy song “O cruelty...” becomes viral and immortal in the country.

Cruelty and pity are the real stuff of the world. They make *Isabella* and *Lamia* beautiful. The cruel brothers commit a crime. They make their sister pine and die. Likewise, Lycius falls on the seduction of Lamia. He gets love and fun from her. Unknown about the truth, he is happy but his teacher opens the reality, then he dies shortly after Lamia’s vanishing. The teacher’s denouncement of Lamia is also cruelty. His philosophy is cold, that shatters the enchantment. We have pity upon the victims in both poems. We have lots of sympathy for Lorenzo. When we observe the pathetic conditions of Isabella, we feel suffocated and keep her in our heart. Our eyes

water and hearts melt for her. Despite the hostile reality about Lamia, we also feel sorry for her sudden absence. Lycius's death strikes us and our heads and hearts are full of sadness.

The motive of the sly brothers is greed. Their crime is serious. They steal the basil-pot. Before stealing the basil-pot, they remain in their location but after that they are bound to leave their home. So the basil-pot is a symbolic art which is very powerful with fair judgment. Kurt Heinzleman states- "What the brothers find in the pot compels them to flee the city, 'to banishment'. Their rule by economic exploitation is replaced by a new social order founded upon sympathy, as all of Florence weep for Isabella's grief. This social order is sustained by art" (167).

Lamia has a tussle between philosophy and spell. Apollonius, a sage, represents philosophy but Lamia represents enchantment or spell. Between this conflict, innocence is victimized. Lycius stands for innocence. The cold philosophy, i.e. merciless reason, finishes the power and existence of the spell. Lamia as a serpent in the beginning is in misery in process of the transformation into a woman. After the successful transformation, by virtue of God Hermes, she seeks Lycius, finds him and seduces him. Finally cold philosophy finishes her, thus we have both hatred and fondness towards her. Harold Bloom says- "Lamia is to be both feared and pitied, shunned and loved. Her deceptiveness imparts the most intense of sexual fulfillments, and completes even as it threatens to destroy" (388).

Lamia and Lycius fall in love with each other. Lamia creates a wonderful palace through her spell. The Lycius-Lamia relationship goes ahead. When Apollonius appears in the scene, the relationship between Lycius and Lamia seems to have some traits of crisis. Lycius invites his kin and friends, despite Lamias' reluctance, in their marriage feast. The poem reads- "(Lycius was gone to summon all his kin.)/And knowing surely she could never win/His foolish heart from its mad pompousness, /She set herself, high-thoughted, how to dress/The misery in fit magnificence" (II, 112-9). Apollonius, uninvited on Lamia's advice, attends the feast. The great tragedy can be attributed to his presence. We can also contend that Lycius did not follow Lamia's advice not to invite his friends. Had he obeyed her, Lycius's death could have delayed or not occurred or been better. Harold Bloom argues, "If death awaited Lycius in Lamia's folds, it would have been a death better worth the dying, and better worth the poet's imaginings" (390).

Lorenzo and Lycius meet with untimely deaths. The merciless brothers kill Lorenzo. He is in a trap of his girl's relatives who are like demons by nature. Lycius dies, not killed. He is in a trap of his own girl, a demon or serpent, and teacher. Both heroes are dominated and victimized. Isabella and Lamia love innocent boys. Isabella's love for her hero is true. Lamia's love is seductive. She is immortal. Her hero is mortal. Despite Lamia's serpentine identity, we are sorry for her in different modes of events and times. Sometimes we have some negative attitude towards her in the sense that for her satisfaction, a youth unknown to the reality about her at all, has to be seduced. When Lycius dies, we are sorry for him more than the girl, yet we still have some sympathy towards her. J. R. Jackson contends:

Lamia's attempts to dissuade him from rejoining society seem intended as much to preserve their love as to avoid detection; in so far as an ulterior motive is revealed, it is Lycius's unworthy wish to display her. When Apollonius detects her identity, her beauty fades, and as she vanishes 'with a frightful scream', we

are left in doubt as to whether or not the illusion she represents was really a malevolent. Lycius's death confirms our uncertainty. (82)

It is often argued that beauty is seductive and destructive. In *Isabella*, this opinion may not be fit but in *Lamia*, the Corinth youth gets trapped in the beauty of the serpent-woman, though he does not know about it. Lamia is a character possessing both virtues and vices, having more sympathy than hostility from the readers. William E. Harrold says- "The elements of cruelty and beauty are juxtaposed in the poem" (582). In *Isabella*, the lover is killed. The beloved still has some association with the cut-off head. It is stolen. The lover's death becomes the cause of the beloved's death. So is the case in *Lamia*. The beloved vanishes. Immediately, the lover dies. Thus death becomes a sacrifice in the poems. Allen Tate writes:

When Lamia vanishes, Lycius 'dies'; And this affirmation of life through
Death is the element that Keats 'adds on to things as perceived.' But
life-in-death is presented pictorially, in space, as an eternal moment, not as a
moment of dramatic action in time, proceeding from previous action and
looking towards its consequences. (157)

Dreams come true in these poems. In *Isabella*, Lorenzo's ghost in her dream tells about his murder and burial. The dream proves the reality. The bad brothers see nightmares which disturb them. They are bound to leave their home. Michael Lagory says- "Keats includes a passage in which nightmares reproach their consciences. Moreover, they escape apparently little the worse at the end of the original; Keats banishes them from Florence" (339). In *Lamia*, the serpent sees a dream. After its metamorphosis as a beautiful girl, the serpent-woman Lamia, following the dream, waits in the dream-location and finds Lycius, a youth of Corinth.

Conclusion

John Keats suffers. The time is unfair to him. The situations do not favour him. His beloved does not favour him, either. Maybe, his fate could be responsible for his misery. The world does not understand him. He may be Lorenzo or Lycius who gets victimized. He presents the lovers as meek and silent characters. Isabella and Lorenzo hide their love from the adults. They secretly meet each other. In tragedy as well, Isabella has no protest and voice against the corrupt brothers. She remains silent. Her silence, to some extent, banishes the brothers but finally she also dies. Lamia also wants to be silent and away from the sight of the adults. But finally she vanishes and Lycius dies.

Isabella is innocent, pure and sacrificing. Her love for Lorenzo is immortal. Readers always have sympathy for her. Lamia is clever and seductive. Her love is also strong and devotional to Lycius. The difference is that Isabella is a human and Lamia is a supernatural being. *Isabella* describes love between humans or mortals whereas *Lamia* depicts love between a human and an immortal. Both poems describe the contrast between two worlds- the real and the ideal. Horror is a prominent feature of Keats's poetry. *Isabella* and *Lamia* are also horror poems. The horror side represents pain, death, destruction, tragedy, conspiracy and so on. This side represents the real world. A good poem should consist of the traits of horror to launch the reality of the world. Louise Z. Smith writes- "Keats simultaneously draws back from the horror of Isabella's grisly

task and makes the theoretical point that horror in some form must enter any good poem to balance with beauty so as to give an accurate account of the real world" (307).

Keats's *Isabella* and *Lamia* are inspirational and didactic works. Humans desire for success and luxury. They might achieve what they intend to. But their lives do not go as per their wishes. Things go not always the same. There may be the presence of torture, hostility, conspiracy and unfavourable situations. Consequently people have to come across lots of bends and twists. Thus they enjoy and also suffer. They start feeling bored. They will have lots of grievances and frustrations. They explore the causes behind these ill feelings. When they come to know the difference between the real and the ideal worlds, they might console themselves and understand the reality about life and the world. The world is both painful and pleasurable. Life becomes beautiful when it knows how to balance the real and the ideal.

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