

中文摘要

约翰·济慈（1795 — 1821）是一位伟大的浪漫主义诗人，他留给了读者巨大的诗歌财富。从济慈生活的时代一直到当今，尽管评论家们对他和他的诗作评论不一，然而他作品中的美学思想与他的人文主义精神给读者留下了深刻的印象。本文立足济慈的诗歌理论和写作实践，探究美学与人文主义如何在他的作品中得以完美结合。

济慈的美学和人文主义思想闪耀在他的诗歌理论中，这些理论包括著名的“消极能动性”、真与美的关系以及想象的力量。希腊神话和莎士比亚对济慈影响颇深。在他的许多作品中读者都可以看到希腊神话的痕迹，在济慈的诗歌创作中，莎士比亚也起到了巨大的作用，莎士比亚既是人文主义者又是艺术家，不仅塑造了济慈的人格，也帮助济慈形成了对诗歌的直觉。

济慈美学思想和人文主义的完美结合体现在他的书信和诗歌中。读他的书信，读者至今仍能感受到诗人心底的爱。他对普通大众的深切同情，对朋友和家人的真切的爱，还有他的崇高品质足以证明他是一个真正的人文主义者。他对自然、对美的热爱也足以证实他是一个真正的艺术家和美的追求者。

济慈成功地把人文主义思想和诗歌技巧结合起来，其诗歌中反映出的艺术魅力和人文精神使他成为至今最受欢迎的诗人之一。他的代表诗作“夜莺颂”充分体现了他的美学与人文主义的思想。他对“颂”体的形式进行了创新，而且在诗中多次使用感官意象，这些都增加了诗歌的美感。艺术魅力之外，诗人的人文主义思想也闪耀在他诗歌创作的全过程中。

关键词：美学，人文主义，“消极能动性”，美，真，想象，意象

Abstract

John Keats (1795 — 1821) is a great Romantic poet who has left the readers considerable poetical heritage. Although the critics from Keats's day up to the present vary a great deal in viewing Keats the man and Keats the poet, his aesthetic ideas as well as his humanist spirit in his works have impressed the readers deeply. This thesis is to present Keats's poetical theories and writing practices and to explore how Keats combines aesthetics with humanism perfectly in his writing.

Keats's aesthetic and humanistic ideas spark in his poetical theories which include the famous "negative capability", the relationship between truth and beauty and the power of imagination. Greek mythology and Shakespeare influence Keats a lot. In many of his poems the readers can see the traces of Greek mythology. Shakespeare's influence is also tremendous in Keats's poetical creation. The humanist Shakespeare and the artist Shakespeare help to mold Keats's personality and poetical intuition.

Aesthetics and humanism combine perfectly in Keats's letters and his poems. Reading his letters, the readers can still feel the great love in the poet's heart. His constant compassion for the ordinary people, his sincere love for his friends and his family, and his high morality prove him to be a real humanist. His love for nature and for beauty proves him to be a genuine artist, a pursuer of beauty.

John Keats combines humanism with poetical skills successfully in his poetry. The artistic charm and humanist spirit as revealed in his poetry enable Keats to be one of the most popular poets up to today. In his representative poem "Ode to a Nightingale" his aesthetics and humanism are fully exhibited. His innovation in the "ode" form and his effective employment of sensuous imagery provide more beauty for the poem. Aesthetic appeal aside, the poet's humanist spirit also shines in the whole process of his poetical creation.

Key Words: aesthetics, humanism, negative capability, beauty, truth, imagination, imagery

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Introduction

In the Romantic period of English literature, there appeared lots of talented poets, among whom William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, George Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats were the most famous. John Keats was a key figure who served as a link between past and future in the history of English Romantic poetry. As observed by Wang Zuoliang, Wordsworth and Coleridge both were the founders of Romanticism, and Byron spread Romanticism and its influence worldwide while Shelly through Romanticism observed the whole human world. But none of them could match Keats in absorbing their forefathers' quintessence and influence from Spencer, Shakespeare to Milton. Ready to create new form and style, Keats followed his own poetic development and influenced generations of poets, from nineteenth-century British poets Alfred Tennyson, Algernon Charles Swinburne, to modern American poet Wallace Stevens. In China, poets such as Xu Zhimo and Wen Yiduo worshiped him very much.¹

Although Keats is more interested in artistic beauty in contrast with ugly social reality of his time, yet his sympathies are always on the side of the oppressed and the exploited masses. And his enthusiasm in nature and in art is in a sense a mild form of protest against the bitter and cruel reality. What is more, as an artist who dedicates himself to poetry, he believes fervently that the duty of a poet is to love his fellow-men and to regard the miseries of the world as his own. It is quite clear that his love of beauty in nature and in art does not make him an escapist, but a humanist.

Keats's legacy mainly consists in his poetry and his letters. His poetry now enjoys high evaluation among both the critics and the readers. But it is necessary to point out that his letters provide a magnificent gloss on his poetry; they also help to explain why he has been so fortunate in his modern biographers, who since 1958 have been able to consult them in Hyder Rollins' superb annotated edition. These letters, in

¹ Wang Zuoliang, *History of Poetry in English Romanticism*, People's Literature Publishing House, 1991, p.292.

fact, form an indispensable part of his creative life. If there is immaturity and flexibility in his volatile expression, there is also unusual self-knowledge. And what is more, his most famous poetical theories are revealed, implicitly or explicitly, in these letters. Nowadays both his letters and his poetry are given high assessment and help to shed light on the analysis of his perfect combination of aesthetics and humanism.

Literature for Keats is more than a dreamy refuge for a lonely orphan: it is a domain for energetic exploration, “realms of gold,”² as he puts it, tempting not only as a realm of idealistic romance but also of a beauty that enlarges human sympathies through imagination. Literature for him is a career to be struggled with, fought for, and earned, for the sake of what the poet’s struggle could offer humankind in insight and beauty. This impression recurs often in reminiscences of Keats, which features his industry, pugnacity as well as generosity and compassion. With all these, he fought his way into literary circles.

In 1820, in a letter to Fanny Brawne, the woman whom he had fallen desperately in love, John Keats expressed his regret that he had not created any immortal works. “If I should die, I have left no immortal work behind me — nothing to make my friends proud of my memory.”³ Of course, this is not true to his readers ever since his death. Nowadays people evaluate his work more objectively and fully acknowledge his unshakable position in English Romantic literature. His poems are marked by the mastery of artistic form, depth of feelings, vivid imagery, perfect artistic finish, and touching melody.

In spite of his obvious modesty as a poet, Keats is a conscientious and strict artist with deep poetic commitment. Keats’s poetry is the perfect combination of aesthetics and humanism. His pursuit of beauty and eternity is spontaneous and intense. As a poet, he is strict with himself in poetical writing. On February 3, 1818, Keats wrote to John Hamilton Reynolds, “We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us...Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one’s soul, and does not

² The first line of Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” is “Much have I travell’d in the realms of gold”.

³ G. S. Fraser, *John Keats: Odes*, London: The Macmillian Press Ltd, 1971, p.51.

startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject....”⁴ Keats believes that poetry should strike readers by its content. Form and content are inseparable. The underlying aesthetic ideas, when combined with his practices, can serve as a most apt point for our critical reading and appreciation of Keats’s poetry.

Besides Keats’s cult of beauty in nature and in art, humanism is another key point one can feel while reading his works. Humanism is a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion. Affirming the dignity of human individuals, it supports the maximization of individual liberty and opportunity consonant with social responsibility. It advocates the extension of participatory democracy and the expansion of the open society, standing for human rights and social justice. Keats is a humanist both in his life and in his works. As Chen Jia has pointed out:

“Although Keats did not attack openly the political and the social evils of the day as did Byron and Shelley, yet his connections with the group of radicals in Leigh Hunt’s circle, his uncompromising attitude toward reactionary criticism, his sympathy for the poor and the miserable, and his belief in the lofty mission of the poet to work for the welfare of the people have earned for him a place among the great romantic poets of his time.”⁵

As a poet with strong sense of social responsibility as well as artistic achievements, Keats is the constant focus for critics. However, the critics from Keats’s day up to our time vary a lot in viewing Keats both as a man and as a poet.

During his lifetime Keats was not widely known as a great poet. Instead, he was severely attacked by his contemporary critics. For one thing, the influence of neo-classical theory remained strong until nineteenth century England. The classicists modeled themselves on Greek and Latin authors, and tried to control literary creation by some fixed laws and rules drawn from Greek and Latin works. So the neo-classical poetry was formal, with its emphasis on observing exact rules. It was artificial and

⁴ M. H. Abrams, ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (6th edition), vol. 2, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1986, p.868.

⁵ Chen Jia, *A History of English Literature*, Beijing: Commercial Press, 2000, p.120. The reactionary criticism here refers to the critics of “The Quarterly Review” and “The Edinburgh Review” mentioned by Chen Jia on page 131 in the same book.

polished. The chief poetic form of neo-classicism was the heroic couplet. By virtue of the neo-classical influence, contemporary readers of Keats had difficulty in accepting his poems which were full of creative vigor and sensuous imagery. For another thing, Keats's democratic views and his close association with Leigh Hunt offended the aristocratic and bourgeois literary circles. Because of their enmity to Hunt, those critics brutally leveled their criticism at Keats. Two anonymous articles appeared in 1818: a scurrilous attack on Keats as a member of the "Cockney School" which appeared in the heavily Tory *Blackwood's Magazine*, and a savage mauling of "Endymion" in the *Quarterly Review*.⁶ For a long time, Shelley, Byron and Keats's other friends believed that the inhumane literary attacks from critics were responsible for the early death of the poet. Although this might not be true, yet one point was proved by history: these anonymous letters not only destroyed Keats's fame but also limited later studies on him till the second half of the nineteenth century to a great extent. At that time, two opposing extremes were formed. One was critical and depreciative toward Keats while the other was appreciative and vindicative. The former was mainly from politicians and some literary men with political inclination. The latter was from some writers, literary critics and Keats's friends. Due to the above-mentioned two major reasons, Keats was denied fame in his brief and sad life.

More than twenty years after Keats's death, quite a number of literary critics and readers who appreciated him believed that his poems inclined toward "Art for art's sake", hankering for pleasant sensuousness and lacking in thought. This viewpoint indicates that their study had reached merely a superficial stage. *Life, Letters and Literary Remains of John Keats*, published in 1848, marked a turning point in the study of John Keats. The author disclosed Keats's letters and manuscripts to the public for the first time and precisely analyzed these first-hand materials, revealing the poet's inner world which had rarely been known to readers, and explaining his

⁶ According to <http://www.blupete.com/Literature/Biographies/Literary/Keats.htm>, in an edition of an Edinburgh paper, *Quarterly Review*, in 1818, there appeared a critique which "branded into ignominious permanence ... the name and fame of Keats."

mature and profound thought.⁷ The publication of the book guided literary study to a new sphere, i.e., Keats's artistic features and beliefs.

Generally speaking, the study of Keats came to be freed from political and class bias in the latter half of the nineteenth century. During the period, among those who gave comprehensive and profound reviews, Matthew Arnold was the first worth mentioning. In his "Essays in Criticism" published in 1880, he wrote: "Nothing is more remarkable in Keats than his clear-sightedness, his lucidity, and lucidity itself is akin to character and to high and severe work."⁸ In particular, Arnold extolled Keats's "yearning passion for the Beautiful" and pointed out that "It is an intellectual and spiritual passion." The conclusion of Arnold's opinion is that "he ranks with Shakespeare". In addition, the Pre-Raphaelite poets such as D.G. Rossetti and W. Morris, highly praised Keats's vivid description and beautiful imagery in his odes. These Pre-Raphaelites regarded him as a primary source of inspiration. Paul Elmer More in his essay expressed his viewpoint this way. "I am inclined to think that the essential kinship of Keats to 'The fervid choir that lifted up a noise of harmony,' as he called them, rests upon something even deeper than similarity of language and poetic method or than 'natural magic' [as Matthew Arnold termed it], that it goes down to that faculty of vision in his mind which, like theirs, beheld the marriage of the ideas of beauty and death."⁹

The study of Keats in the nineteenth century paved the way for the twentieth century. More attention was paid to his creative process, poetic style and his inner world. Consequently Keats's poetic beauty was frequently discovered from different perspectives. In addition, Keats's several poetical theories scattered in his letters, such as "negative capability", became well-known.

Nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century critics believed that Keats was far away from politics and from social reality. He just lived in his wonderland by way of imagination. New Criticism concentrated on the textual analysis of his poems and

⁷ See http://87.1911encyclopedia.org/K/KE/KEATS_JOHN.htm.

⁸ Fraser, p.51. All the following Arnold critical remarks concerning Keats are taken from this book.

⁹ Paul Elmer More, *Shelburne Essays*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1906, p.68.

believed there was a strong tendency to aestheticism in Keats's poetical works. The single, hard-won and almost universal acceptance of the earlier twentieth century Keats's studies can be summed up to form an integrated image of Keats as a poet, one with extraordinary inventive resources, imagination and linguistic features. But the critical studies of Keats in this period had its obvious limitations. Keats was considered only as a remarkable master of lyrical poetry, a consummate artist in poetical language, a singer and an advocate of the cult of beauty, a writer of "pure poetry", and a sort of "art for art's sake" dreamer who steeped himself in poetic fancy and fantasy. The political consciousness and the humanist spirits in his works were neglected.

In 1979, Jerome J. McGann published "Keats and Historical Method in Literary Criticism". In this essay he affirmed the political, historical and social influence on Keats's poetry and has blazed a way for neo-historical criticism, which probes Keats's poetry from political and social perspectives. The neo-historical critics who deny the aesthetic tendency in Keats's works seem to come to another extreme.

The critics from Keats's day up to the present have differed a lot in viewing Keats the man and Keats the poet. Some believed that Keats had a strong aesthetic tendency and they confirmed the artistic beauty in his works. Some realized his political consciousness and the humanist spirits in his works. But few could combine the two elements, i.e., aesthetics and humanism, together. The author of this thesis argues that Keats's works are the perfect combination of aesthetic ideas and humanistic sentiments. The artistic charm and humanist spirits in his poetry enable him to become one of the most popular English Romantic poets.

It is true that Keats is not an outspoken spokesman on behalf of liberty and revolution or a brave fighter against political reaction and social injustices as were Byron and Shelley. But his great sympathies are always on the side of the poor and the miserable, and his passion for nature and beauty is a kind of covert protest against the cruel and unjust society in which the struggles of a man from a poor family like him are too grim and hard. In Keats's eyes, the world of nature is beautiful and the realms of art and poetry are wonderful. He also realizes that the existing human

society contains inescapable and irremediable misery. It is the poet's intense hatred for the social injustices of his day that makes him love so much the beauty in nature and in art.

The active integral blending of aesthetic characteristics and political consciousness runs through Keats's poetry all the time. The two elements, though seemingly contradictory, are inter-dynamic and permeate into each other. Among them there is the poet's experience of life, the aspiration of freedom and democracy; there is pursuit of art even more.

The main aim of this research is to explore the combination of aesthetics and humanism as revealed in some of his representative poems as well as in his letters. The research has been done to provide better understanding and insights concerning Keats's works. The main critical perspective to be taken will be socio-historical as well as textual.

The whole thesis mainly consists of three parts. Part One will focus on Keats's poetical theories among which "negative capability", beauty and truth, and the power of imagination are the most noteworthy. These theories justify Keats as an artist and a humanist at the same time. Part Two brings forward the influence of Greek mythology and Shakespeare on Keats's poetical creation. The former is employed richly and skillfully by the poet, so that we cannot fail to see his yearning for eternal beauty in the ancient Greek civilization. Shakespeare as a great artist and a great humanist also influences Keats a lot in personality and in poetical creation. Part Three is devoted to the discussion of Keats's poems and letters. Critical analysis will be made into some of Keats's letters and poems to shed light on two major points. First, love is one of the main themes in the poet's life and in his works. Second, the poet's combination of aesthetics and humanism is further proved through the analysis of "Ode to a Nightingale".

Part One: Aesthetic and humanistic ideas in Keats's poetical theories

T. S. Eliot, one of the most influential poets and critics, compared Keats with Shelley and Wordsworth in one chapter of *The Use of Poetry* in 1933. Based on Keats's letters, he said Keats could "only be called the result of genius". In his opinion Wordsworth and Shelley made better achievements as far as literary theories are concerned. For "...Wordsworth and Shelley both theorize. Keats had no theory...." Wordsworth sets forth his principles of poetry in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. Shelley's essay, "A Defense of Poetry", demonstrates that Shelley is a great theorist of poetry.¹⁰ It is true that Keats really does not theorize systematically, but this does not mean that he has no theories of his own. On the contrary, he has formed a distinctive doctrine about poetry. Nowadays, apart from his outstanding poems and odes, his poetical theories shown both in his poems and in his letters have aroused the attention in the critical field, and many a critic has made comments on them.

If we make a thorough study of his poems and letters to his friends (Bailey, Reynolds, Taylor, Woodhouse, to name a few) and his brothers, we would find his scattered comments on the poet and poetry among which the "negative capability", beauty and truth, and the power of imagination are the most famous. These ideas reflect the poet's worship of beauty and at the same time reveal his concern for human beings suffering in a harsh world.

A. "Negative capability"

In his letter "To George and Thomas Keats" (December, 1817), Keats talked about his famous poetical theory — "negative capability":

"I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously — I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason — Coleridge, for

¹⁰ Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*. Cambridge (USA): Harvard University Press, 1984, p.12.

instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. This pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.”¹¹

Keats appears to have found such a quality in the acting of Edmund Kean,¹² whose performances he was reviewing for the *Champion*, and his reflections on this distinctive trait of quickening and encompassing nonassertiveness enabled him to coin a term that is to become one of his most distinctive contributions to aesthetic discourse, namely, “negative capability”. It is a concept Keats identifies as that “quality” belonging to “a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously.” This “negative capability” is present, Keats explains, “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.” Perhaps Keats himself provided the best gloss on this term when he wrote, in a marginal jotting on a passage in *Paradise Lost*, of “the intense pleasure of not knowing[,] a sense of independence, of power, from the fancy’s creating a world of its own by the sense of probabilities.” With “negative capability”, Keats instinctively adopts creative passivity as receptivity toward knowable mystery.

It is generally accepted among Keats’s critics that by virtue of “negative capability”, Keats has transcended morality and utility, and arrived at the imaginative realm of true beauty. Firstly, “capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts” means that the poet should experience the outside world which arouses some uncertain feeling in the poet. This feeling is not the poet’s subjective guesswork, but a kind of intercommunication with the objective world. Secondly, “without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” shows that rational analysis and inference are not as important as feeling and experiencing in poetic creation, hence, the vital role of human faculty of imagination. Lastly, the sense of beauty should be the ultimate goal

¹¹ Abrams (1986), p.831. The content in the quotation marks of the next two paragraphs is from the same origin.

¹² Edmund Kean (1787-1833) was an actor who was engaged by the Drury Lane Theatre for three years in 1814, making a triumphant first appearance as Shylock. He also played the role of Iago.

for all poetry. “With a great poet the sense of beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.”

Three distinct movements are seen to exist in his poems: first, the external description of the subject; second, the entering into and becoming identical with the subject, creating through imagination an absolute empathy with the experiences either suggested or recorded; and third, the emergence and separation from the subject, with a commentary on or evaluation of the experience. The process involved in the second movement is what Keats believes to be “negative capability”, namely, the ability to lose consciousness of the poet’s identity in the creative process so that the creation and the creator become one. For example, in his famous “Ode to a Nightingale”, the poet in the first stanza tells of the powerful effects of the bird’s song upon him, mentally and psychologically, and shows his admiration for the bird. In the following stanzas he imagines himself to fly away with the nightingale, forgetting the earthly pain for the time being. In the process, the author, as indicated by means of poetic artistry, has entered into the world of extreme beauty and become one with the nightingale. His active moving in the fantasy world expresses his longing for beauty. His soul is with the nightingale, trying to find a better world that stands, in Keats’s mind, in opposition to the social reality he finds himself facing with. The poet’s entering a realm of Elysium also points to his disappointment and dissatisfaction with the real world “where men sit and hear each other groan”. The process of losing consciousness of his identity gives comfort to himself and to his readers, and to some extent, relieves their painful experience in the real world while appreciating the poem.

Keats’ best-known doctrine, “negative capability”, implies an engagement in the actual world through imaginative identification that is simultaneously a kind of transcendence. The artist loses the selfhood that demands a single perspective or “meaning,” identifies with the *experience* of his/her object, and lets that experience speak itself through him/her. Both the conscious soul and the world are transformed by a dynamic openness to each other. This transformation is art’s “truth,” its alliance with concrete human experience; its “beauty” is then its ability to abstract and universalize from that experience the enduring forms of the heart’s desires.

If the conception of modern literature is derived from progressives such as Hazlitt, Hunt, Shelley, and Peacock, nevertheless, Keats expresses his own distrust of their utopianism. As an individual artist, his sense of tragedy endows him with Promethean aspirations. Moreover, with regard to “negative capability”, his goal is a kind of aesthetic detachment or “disinterestedness” that could transform pathos into a real, tragic vision. He seems to have discovered that the way to “negative capability” is an arduous one, a descent into pain rather than ascent into romance. Using one of his best-known metaphors, he describes human life as both he and Wordsworth perceived it: “I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe ... —The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think...” From this state of innocence we are impelled into the “Chamber of Maiden-Thought,” where knowledge is exhilarating but soon discloses that “the World is full of Misery and Heart-break, Pain, Sickness and oppression,”¹³ and the chamber darkens.

Keats’s sense of tragedy shows his courage to face the miserable reality. He adores beauty, yet there is no beauty in the real world. Through his “negative capability” he arrives in a realm of natural beauty while experiencing with the subject. In a letter to Benjamin Bailey, he said, “if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel.”¹⁴ He and his subject become one. Observing the principle of “negative capability”, the poet should be concentrative in poetical creation. “Negative capability” also demands the natural outcoming of the poem. In Keats’s letter to John Taylor on February 27, 1818, he wrote: “That if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.”¹⁵ The theory of “negative capability” not only enables Keats to face calmly “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts” of the reality but also reveals his worship of beauty in poetical composition. So it is no exaggeration if we say that Keats is a conscientious and strict artist.

¹³ Abrams (1986), p.835.

¹⁴ Abrams (1986), p.830.

¹⁵ Abrams (1986), p.833.

B. “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.”

The statement about beauty and truth in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” — “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” — with which the poem ends is controversial, though famous. Leading critics differ about whether it is spoken by the poet to the reader, or to the figures on the urn, by the urn itself. I. A. Richards thinks that it is a “pseudo statement.”¹⁶ T. S. Eliot judges differently, though equally in a negative way. “I confess to considerable difficulty in analyzing my own feelings, a difficulty which makes me hesitate to accept Mr. Richard’s theory of ‘pseudo-statements’. The statement of Keats seems to me meaningless; or perhaps the fact that it is grammatically meaningless conceals another meaning for me.”¹⁷ Because of their misinterpretation of the relationship between beauty and truth, they fail to understand Keats’ poetical theory, since this concept is central in it. Some critics think that by “truth”, Keats refers to the reality. This is obviously fallible because the social reality especially the social evils are not beautiful at all. In order to grasp the meaning of truth, we must first know what Keats means by “beauty”. To do this, we should take the whole ode into consideration in the first place. Just as E. C. Pettet points out insightfully, “To elucidate the statement we must turn not to what Keats had written about beauty and truth, but to the four preceding stanzas of the ode — to the nature of the urn as he has presented it.”¹⁸

In “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, nearly four-fifths of the ode (the three middle stanzas and parts of the first and last) are devoted to a description of the beautiful pictures on the urn. The poet seems to say that the different scenes engraved on the urn can last forever. The artistic beauty which remains unchanged regardless of the passage of time is truth to the poet. Keats shows great passion toward the beautiful atmosphere on the urn.

“Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed

¹⁶ Fraser, p.128.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ E. C. Pettet, *On the Poetry of Keats*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957, p.325.

Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting, and for ever young”¹⁹

The poet seems to be so deeply absorbed in the beautiful images called forth by the Grecian urn that he is almost completely carried away to the timeless world of art in which trees are evergreen, the melodist is unwearied, piping songs are forever fresh, and love is forever warm and young. It is totally different from the real world which is depicted by Keats in the following part of the same poem. “All breathing human passion far above, / That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed, / A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.”

There are two kinds of beauty and reality. One is mortal beauty which is associated with everyday reality while the other is immortal beauty which will not change with the passage of time. What is immortal and eternal is what Keats means by truth. So eternal beauty exists on the urn in this ode. And because the urn is a form of art, it follows that artistic beauty is eternal. His indulgence in the appreciation of beauty of evergreen trees, unheard melodies and happy love enables the poet to escape for a while from the social reality as he evokes in “Ode on Melancholy” in which “Beauty that must die”.²⁰

A smooth line of interrogative form, “Who are these coming to the sacrifice?” leads readers effortlessly into the next imagined scene on the urn. The scene has no apparent connection with what has gone before: a picture of pagan sacrifice and a deserted town. The poet endows the action with a future implied in the green altar and the past implied in the little town, that is, a goal which the figures can never reach, a home which they can never return. Therefore, the religious ceremony is fixed on the urn, which can continue endlessly.

The concluding stanza is an elegantly wistful comment on the urn:

¹⁹ John Keats, *Keats Poems*, Everyman’s Library Pocket Poets, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994, p.33. The following quotations of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” are from the same source.

²⁰ Keats, p. 39.

“O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
 Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
 With forest branches and the trodden weed;
 Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
 As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
 When old age shall this generation waste,
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
 ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’—that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”

Human beings are mortal while art is immortal. Being immortal itself, the urn will always be there, along with endless generations of human sorrow, frailty and death, offering a kind of comfort. Only artistic beauty is eternal. It can be passed from one generation to another. Consequently, beauty refers to artistic beauty which is truth because of its nature of immortality.

Keats surpasses all the other romantic poets in his passionate pursuit and his intense consciousness of beauty. It is the poet’s belief “that with a great poet the sense of beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.”²¹ He also declares in *Endymion* that “A thing of beauty is a joy forever.”²² But the beauty Keats emphasizes cannot be restricted to sensibility only. The beauty also comes from his painful pondering about the real world. Keats’s aesthetic thinking is the reflection of the poet’s percipience and experience of life. The aesthetic content in Keats’ poetry is very broad. The beauty of nature, the beauty of virtue, as well as the beauty of art is all indicated in many of his poems. The beauty can be perceived by the human faculty of sight, can be appreciated through reading, but only through the comprehension of heart can the reader get the true beauty. Keats uses a lot of sensuous images to create his sense of beauty in his poems. But he concentrates more on the beauty derived from both bitterness and happiness of life. The song of the nightingale is beautiful, but the tragic beauty is more impressive. The

²¹ Abrams (1986), p.831. Quoted from Keats’s letter: “To George and Thomas Keats”, December, 1817.

²² Keats, p.71.

natural scene in autumn is attractive, but the poet's pondering about death is more aesthetically appealing. The story on the Grecian urn is beautiful, but the perpetuity of art is more moving to the human heart.

Beautiful scenes also abound in *Endymion*, one of his representative long poems, a poem well illustrative of Keats's poetic ideals. The poem is in many ways a response to Shelley's *Alastor* (1816), where a young poet dreams of an ideal mate, in fruitless pursuit of whom he quests across the world, only to die lonely and unloved. Keats's poem begins with a mortal, Endymion, who is shown to be restless and unhappy with the pastoral delights of his kingdom, for he has become enraptured with a dream vision, the moon goddess Cynthia. After a series of adventures, he abandons his restless quest, which by Book IV has come to seem illusory, in favor of an earthly Indian maid, who is eventually revealed to have been Cynthia all along. Although the actual narrative will hardly bear much scrutiny, the themes evoked here would haunt Keats all his life. Only through a love for the earthly is the ideal reached. And the real and the ideal become one through an intense, sensuous love. Thus is revealed the essence of Keats's aesthetic idea "Beauty is truth, truth beauty". The theme of a mortal's love for an ideal figure that proves either illusory or redemptive would be a continuing source for Keats's philosophical exploration, because the paradox of redemption or transcendence is evolving from a fuller engagement with human suffering and limitations.

"I have lov'd the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remembered," Keats wrote to Fanny Brawne in February 1820, just after he became ill. In Keats's work the struggle with aesthetic form becomes an image of a struggle for meaning against the limitations of human experience. The very form of his art seems to embody and interpret the conflicts of mortality and desire. The urgency of his poetry has always appeared greater to his readers for his intense love of beauty and his tragically short life.

"The excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables

evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth.”²³ Keats seems to have approached the relations among experience, imagination, art, and illusion with penetrating thoughtfulness, with neither sentimentality nor cynicism but with a delight in the ways in which beauty, in its own subtle and often surprising ways, reveals the truth. Keats as a conscientious poet does not live in his imaginary wonderland. Instead of escaping from the society, he gets the poetical material from the bitter reality and transcends the reality in his poetical creation. He has the instinct to capture beauty in daily life, yet he is not isolated from the social reality. With his sensitive heart he perceives and feels the human sufferings. His is a great aesthetist as well as a great humanist.

C. The power of imagination

The Romantic poets and theorists think highly of the power of imagination, and are unanimous in claiming that imagination is a truly creative faculty, a vital and organic faculty that permits the mind to see beneath the illusory as well as transitory surface of the material world — to see into its essence and to perceive the intimate relationship between the perceiving mind and the objects of its contemplation.

Keats’s theoretical views regarding imagination undergo several stages of development until its maturity. In his letter to his friend Benjamin Bailey on October 10, 1817, he wrote: “A long poem is a test of Invention which I take to be the Polar star of Poetry, as Fancy is the Sails, and Imagination the Rudder.”²⁴ Later in his another letter to Benjamin Bailey on November 22, 1817, Keats greatly canonized the authenticity of the Imagination by saying:

“I wish I was as certain of the end of all your troubles as that of your momentary start about the authenticity of the Imagination. 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 — for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love: they are all, in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty...The imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream, — he awoke and found

²³ Keats, p.231.

²⁴ The letter is from the website: <http://www.john-keats.com/briefe/081017.htm>.

it truth. I am more zealous in this affair because I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning — and yet it must be.”²⁵

To his mind, imagination has the power to create and reveal, or rather reveal through creating; it transcends everyday reality because of its power to create something “whether it existed before or not”. Therefore, the works of imagination not only exist in their own right, but also have a relation to ultimate reality through the light which they shed on it. Later in a letter to Reynolds on February 19, 1818, Keats expressed the powerful creation of imagination with more sensitive touches:

“Man should be content with as few points to tip with the fine Webb of his Soul, and weave a tapestry empyrean full of symbols for his spiritual eye, of softness for his spiritual touch, of space for his wandering, of distinctness for his luxury.”²⁶

In his point of view, man should follow the expatiation of his thoughts in the universe, like the spider wandering in the direction of the web, and indulge himself in imagination, thus hoping to attain spiritual abundance and content. To Keats, what imagination captures is true. Even though this viewpoint has always been treated as an important proof of his idealism, it manifests his great emphasis on imagination as well. Imagination is the supreme manifestation of artistic creativity; therefore, passionate imagination can break through the fetters of reason, give a more susceptible observation on beauty, and thus create intense and appealing beauty. This beauty of intensity gives readers authenticity, and enables their recognition, hence, the beauty of higher value. The insistence upon the authenticity of imagination rightly displays Keats’s unswerving pursuit for beauty and truth. As C. L. Finney has defined, the Keatsian imagination is “the faculty by which the negatively capable genius intuits truth.”²⁷

Keats’s imagination is boundless, multi-directional and connected closely with beauty and truth. It is about sensations instead of logic, i.e., sense experiences as

²⁵ Abrams (1986), p.829.

²⁶ The letter is from <http://www.john-keats.com/briefe/190218.htm>.

²⁷ G. M. Matthews, ed. *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971, p.31.

opposed to truth achieved by consecutive reasoning. So his mind is just like an unblocked road out of any obstructions, thus allowing any sense of feeling flowing smoothly through it. Just as what he remarked in his letters to the effect that he was “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.

Keats seems to have been moved to an unusual degree toward almost sensory identification with things around him: “Nothing seemed to escape him, the song of a bird and the undertone of response from covert or hedge, the rustle of some animal ...,” said Haydon.²⁸ “The humming of a bee, the sight of a flower, the glitter of the sun, seemed to make his nature tremble!” This power of overcoming self through loving the world’s beauty, in fact, became a crucial doctrine for Keats. In this respect, he found his feeling here confirmed by Hazlitt’s theories of imagination which evolved into the love for the good in the moral realm. This doctrine has become Keats’s ultimate justification for the aesthetic life, and it is implied even as early as in *Endymion*.

The fact is that Keats had grown beyond *Endymion* even before it was completed, nearly a year before these reviews. His association with Bailey in the fall of 1817, and his reading of Hazlitt, contributed to a new dimension in his thinking about art. On November 22, 1817 he wrote to Bailey the first of his famous letters to his friends and brothers on aesthetics, the social role of poetry, and his own sense of poetic mission. Rarely has a poet left such a remarkable record of his thoughts on his own career and its relation to the history of poetry. The struggle of the poet to create beauty had become itself paradigmatic of a spiritual and imaginative quest to perceive the transcendent or the enduring in a world of suffering and death. For Keats, characteristically, this quest for a transcendent truth can be expressed (or even conceived of) only in terms of an intense, imaginative engagement with sensuous beauty: “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 —

²⁸ The full name of Haydon is Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786-1846) who was a painter and who met Keats at Leigh Hunt’s home in October 1816.

whether it existed before or not — for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty.”²⁹

The sublime, transcending nature of imagination is a distillation and intensification of experience. Writing to his brothers at the end of December, 1817, he criticized a painting by Benjamin West: “[T]here is nothing to be intense upon; no women one feels mad to kiss; no face swelling into reality. The excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth — Examine King Lear & you will find this exemplified throughout...”³⁰ The intensity of beauty in art here is not identical with the intensity of actual life, although there is a tendency in all Romantic theory to equate them. Keats emphasizes that the artist remains aloof from single perspectives on life, because to paint life’s intensity truly is to reveal its fiercely multi-dimensional nature and the precariousness of all attempts to fix or rationalize it.

The illusion, or trope, is that, imagination, by creating permanence and beauty, may allow the individual himself a transcendence of the mind’s fleeting sensations, like the bird’s song in “Ode to a Nightingale”. But imagination needs temporality to do its work. It then tantalizes the readers with a desire to experience the eternity of the beauty they create. Imagination seems to falsify: the more the poet presses the bird to contain, the more questionable this imaginative projection becomes. For Keats, impatience for truth only obscures it. If art redeems experience at all, it is in the beauty of a more profound comprehension of ourselves (not of a transcendent realm), of the paradoxes of our nature. To expect art to provide a more certain closure is to invite only open questions or deeper enigmas. In “Ode on a Grecian Urn” this theme is explored from the perspective not of a natural and fleeting experience as the bird song in “Ode to a Nightingale”, but of a work of pictorial art, a timeless rendering of a human pageant.

It seems that only through a profound comprehension of human beings and of the paradoxes of life can the poet create beauty in his poems. Then the beauty comforts

²⁹ Abrams (1986), p.829.

³⁰ Abrams (1986), p.830.

people struggling in a painful world. The imagination is not rootless but based on life experience. It is the sublimation of the real life in artistic creation.

In *Hyperion*, Keats brings forth the thought of justifying the life of the poet as both self-conscious and imaginative, committed to the real, public sphere even while his imagination soothes the world with its dreams. While in its sequel *The Fall of Hyperion* (unpublished until 1856), the strange, troubling, visionary fragment, is his most ambitious attempt to understand the meaning of imaginative aspiration. It is a broad Dantesque vision, in which the poet himself is led by Moneta, goddess of knowledge, to the painful birth into awareness of suffering that has deified the poet-god Apollo in the earlier version. Moneta's tragic wisdom challenges the poet in his vision with his own deepest fears, that imagination is the source of misery, conjuring ideals that for mortals only cause pain. Keats also expresses the poets' social and historical mission in this narrative poem. While the poet accepts that poets are not as exalted as the socially committed who directly reform the world, he argues that surely "a poet is a sage; / A humanist, physician to all men."³¹ Moneta distinguishes the poet from the mere "dreamer" whose imagination feeds only on its own idealisms (like Lycius in *Lamia*); true poets have awakened their imagination to tragic pain while yet striving to redeem sorrow with visionary acceptance and compassion. Yet the climactic vision of the poem, the poet's parting of Moneta's veils, reveals a withered face of continuous dying, of unredeemed tragic knowledge. A far darker poem than *Hyperion*, *The Fall of Hyperion* achieves no resolutions but rather presents both Keats's most tragic vision and his fragile but most clearly expressed hope for the redemptive imagination.

³¹ Keats, p.216.

Part Two: Greek mythology and Shakespeare — models and mediums for Keats's aesthetics and humanism

It is not accidental for Keats to combine aesthetics and humanism so perfectly. During his short writing career, Greek mythology and Shakespeare play an important role in molding his personality and his writing.

Greek mythology is one of the origins of western culture. Like the Holy Bible, Greek mythology has influenced Europe for thousands of years. Both of them provide effective ways for western thinking and writing. As far as Greek mythology is concerned, it enjoys a high status in the history of European literature. Many epics, tragedies and sculptures are based on Greek mythology, which has exerted substantial influence on western authors. The Greek mythology is an unfailing source for literary as well as artistic creations in the hands of authors from Chaucer, Shakespeare, to the Romantic poets, and down to the modern writers.

No generation of writers has escaped Shakespeare's impact. Even modern plays, movies and poems have not been immune to his influence. Shakespeare's influence is summarized nicely by Thomas Carlyle: "This King Shakespeare does he not shine, in crowned sovereignty, over us all, as the noblest, gentlest, yet strongest of rallying-signs; indestructible; really more valuable in that point of view than any other means or appliance whatsoever? We can fancy him as radiant aloft over all Nations of Englishmen, thousand years hence. From Paramatta, from New York, wheresoever, under what sort of Parish-Constable soever, English men and women are, they will say to one another, 'Yes, this Shakespeare is ours; we produced him, we speak and think by him; we are of one blood and kind with him.'"³²

³² Thomas Carlyle, "The Hero as Poet" (1841) . See the website below for more reference <http://shakespeare.about.com/library/faqs/blfaqsototherwriters.htm>.

A. The theme of Greek mythology in Keats's poetry

Many of Keats's poems are related to Greek mythology, directly or indirectly. Reading Keats's poems, one feels the authentic beauty of a mythical world and can derive genuine pleasure from an evocation of an ancient land. There are a lot of allusions from Greek mythology in his sonnets, odes as well as his longer poems.

Ancient Greece enjoys a splendid and prosperous civilization in human history. The beautiful natural scenes along with people's high morality construct a paradisaic fairyland. The ancient Greeks created arts, and the arts of Greek people could most amply incarnate or embody the miracles of human beings seeking for perfection. Keats began to appreciate the youthful energy and joys of the Greek life in 1817 when he was viewing the Elgin Marbles. He believes that the work of the Elgin Marble Statue is almost the vivid incarnation of the Greek's eager searching for beauty. Keats appreciates the quiet, radiant serenity of Greek life and longs for serenity when oppressed by painful experience and stirred into a restless fever.

Greek mythology has indeed influenced Keats a lot in his composition of poems. He finds beauty and truth in the ancient Greek art and literature which are in sharp contrast with the grim reality.

In fact, the Romanticists of Keats's time were more or less under the influence of Greek mythology. Keats's friend Leigh Hunt who was a radical journalist and poet of mythological propensities once concluded that "[The Greeks] dealt in loves and luxuries, in what resulted from the first laws of nature, and tended to keep humanity alive.... [The Christians] have dealt in angry debates, in intolerance, in gloomy denouncements, in persecutions, in excommunications, in wars and massacres, in what perplexes, outrages, and destroys humanity."³³ The Romanticists sang high praises of Greek mythology where people enjoyed democratic civilization. Compared with the early nineteenth century England reality, joy and humanity could be found in Greek life.

Keats would have agreed with Schlegel that the Greeks had invented the poetry

³³ The quotation is from the journal "Examiner" [May 4, 1817], p.274.

of gladness, and he gratefully identified in them the religion of the beautiful, the religion of joy. And his hymns and odes often employ the patterns of religious ritual to express a set of values which are heterodox and suggest an alternative to prevailing Christian structures. In his “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, Keats represents two kinds of beauty in Greek life: the beauty of the ecstatic pursuing, a beauty representing youth, energy and joy; and the beauty of the pastoral sacrifice, a beauty representing serenity and the quiet piety.

Keats is so obsessed with Greek mythology that many of his poems are directly based on the theme of Greek mythological stories. *Endymion* and *Hyperion* are but two obvious examples. In *Endymion*, he recreates a beautiful fairyland through powerful imagination. And in *Hyperion*, he talks about reforms in the deity world through which we can see his political ideal in the real world.

Endymion in Greek mythology is a beautiful youth who spends much of his life in perpetual sleep. Endymion’s parentage varies among the different ancient references and stories, but several traditions say that he was originally the king of Elis. According to one tradition, Zeus offers him anything that he might desire, and Endymion chooses an everlasting sleep in which he might remain youthful forever. According to another version of the myth, Endymion’s eternal sleep is a punishment inflicted by Zeus because he has ventured to fall in love with Zeus’s wife, Hera. In any case, Endymion is loved by Selene,³⁴ the goddess of the moon, who visits him every night while he lies asleep in a cave on Mount Latmus in Caria. A commonly accepted version of the myth represents Endymion as having been put to sleep by Selene herself so that she might enjoy his beauty undisturbed.

Keats’s long poem *Endymion* narrates a version of the Greek legend of the moon goddess Diana’s (or Cynthia’s) love for Endymion, a mortal shepherd, but Keats puts the emphasis on Endymion’s love for Diana rather than on hers for him. Keats transforms the tale to express the widespread Romantic theme of the attempt to find in actuality an ideal love that had been glimpsed before only in imaginative dreams. This

³⁴ Selene, Diana and Cynthia all refer to the moon goddess in Greek mythology.

theme is realized through fantastic and discursive adventures and through sensuous and luxuriant description. In his wanderings in quest of Diana, Endymion is guilty of an apparent infidelity to his visionary moon goddess and falls in love with an earthly maiden to whom he is attracted for human sympathy. But in the end Diana and the earthly maiden turn out to be the same person. The poem equates Endymion's original romantic ardor with a more universal quest for a self-destroying transcendence through which he might achieve a blissful personal integrity.

In *Endymion*, Keats makes his first utterance on his cult of beauty, with its famous first line: "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever". Through the narration of the tale with its accompanying descriptions of woodland scenery, the poet reveals his dream of an ideal world in the patriarchal Greece mixed with fairy-land fantasy, thereby voicing emphatically the cult of beauty through Endymion's worship of Cynthia, the moon-goddess. The sensuous imageries and the great lyrical passages that include "Hymn to Pan" in Book I and the roundelay of "O Sorrow" in Book IV constitute the chief attractions in this early attempt at ambitious verse.

In the years of 1818 and 1819, John Keats was actively involved in a series of acute social reforms. In order to express his miserable feelings towards the real life around him, he once again created, on the basis of the subject of Greek mythology, his long poem *Hyperion: A Fragment* which was unfortunately an unfinished piece of work. In this work John Keats tells a story of the change in the deity world. In the description of the conflicts among supernatural powers, John Keats, in the form of romance, reflects on the historical realities of his time, i. e. the great social reforms. The feudal system which had been deeply rooted for ages was shattered to pieces to be only substituted by the winner, the capitalist society. Here, it is by means of his Greek mythological artistic technique that Keats stresses the inevitability of overthrowing of corrupt systems. This feudal system, under Keats's pen, is metaphorically revealed through a picture of the defeated Titan gods' world in Greek mythology where the Olympic gods alone reign over the universe after the defeat of Titan gods.

Such a vivid poetic description of the gods' victory reflects John Keats's artistic

expertise in revealing the social reality. Keats sings high praises of Olympic gods, thus revealing his confidence in the victory of newly-born things over the old in social matters. He seems to point out by this poem that all political regimes are subject to change when they no longer represent the progressive development of history and society as well as people in general. Vital historical change is inevitable and desirable. The victory of Olympic gods is only one of the changes in the constant universe. Even the Olympic deities can not possibly escape the fate of defeat. In this poem, John Keats expresses his skeptical attitude towards the capitalist kingdoms, his disappointment with the vulgar ideal of the forthcoming “Golden Age” predicted by those writers from the capitalist liberal groups. To John Keats, the complete collapse and destruction of gods means that all existing phenomena are temporal and changeable, thus revealing his optimistic belief in the ever advancement of society.

Keats puts his ideal of freedom and humanism into the heroic image of Apollo of Greek mythology. In Keats’s *Hyperion*, Apollo is infused with new revolutionary spirit. When Apollo is still a youth, he is destined to displace Hyperion among the heavenly powers. He lives in “aching ignorance” of the universe and its processes, but he is aware of his ignorance and avid for knowledge. To him appears Mnemosyne, herself a Titan, but one who has deserted her fellow gods “For prophecies of thee, and for the sake / of loveliness new born.”³⁵ Suddenly Apollo reads in the face of Mnemosyne the silent record of the defeat of the Titans and at once soars to the knowledge he seeks: the deep understanding, at once intoxicating and agonizing, that life involves process, that process entails change and suffering, and there can be no creative progress except by the defeat and destruction of the preceding regime. Such a principle is universally true both in the deity world and in the social reality.

Greek mythology has provided Keats with rich material for poetical composition. And, through his poems based on Greek mythology, Keats voices his cult of beauty, states his eagerness for a democratic society, and claims his responsibility as a poet. The beautiful land in Greek mythology and the ugly reality contrast sharply. His

³⁵ Keats, pp.205-206.

longing for ancient Greek civilization, on the other hand, reflects his detest for the society which he hopes to reform. As a conscientious poet, he is fully aware of “the giant agony of the world”, and he wishes to “labour for mortal good” “like slaves to poor humanity”.³⁶ In a word, Greek mythology helps Keats to express his worship of beauty and his political ideal as well.

B. The influence of Shakespeare on Keats

Greek mythology aside, Shakespeare and his works also have a strong effect on Keats. In fact, Keats was so greatly influenced by Shakespeare that he kept a bust of the Bard beside him while he was writing, hoping that Shakespeare would spark his creativity. Moreover, in his personal letters to friends, Keats mentioned several times his greatest role model. In this letter to Benjamin Robert Haydon dated May 10, 1817, Keats wrote:

“I remember your saying that you had notions of a good Genius presiding over you. I have of late had the same thought — for things which I do half at Random are afterwards confirmed by my judgment in a dozen features of Propriety. Is it too daring to fancy Shakespeare this Presider?”³⁷

The trace of Keats’s gratitude to Shakespeare can be glimpsed in many of his commentaries. He left the following marginalia to Shakespeare Folio: “The Genius of Shakespeare was an innate universality — wherefore he has the utmost achievement of human intellect prostrate beneath his indolent and kingly gaze — He could do easily Man’s utmost.” This comment shows his great compliment on Shakespeare’s extraordinary handling of human intellect. Meanwhile, he highly praises and honors Shakespeare’s poems. “One of the three Books I have with me is Shakespeare’s poems.” Once he wrote to Reynolds: “I ne[v]er found so many beauties in the sonnets — they seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally — in the intensity of

³⁶ Keats, p.216. The quoted part is from Keats’s another poem based on Greek mythology: *The Fall of Hyperion, A Dream*.

³⁷ The content of the letter is from the website: <http://www.john-keats.com/briefe/100517.htm>.

working out conceits.”³⁸

Apart from his high assessment of Shakespeare’s genius and poems, Keats’s famous notion of “negative capability” is formulated from his reflection on the rich variety of life in Shakespeare’s plays. In his view, Shakespeare is able to dramatize a diversity of attitudes and temperaments, and his imaginative flexibility is so great that in his play, like *Henry IV* or *Hamlet*, characters seem to have remarkable autonomy, which seems to be intact of manipulated characterization in the interests of some propagandist statement. In his famous “negative capability”, Keats emphasizes “the quality” which forms “a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously”. By “negative capability”, he refers to an aesthetic and emotional state where “man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” just as Shakespeare did.³⁹

Keats’s poems sometimes are composed under the guidance of Shakespeare’s style and are therefore full of Shakespearean imagery. In some of Keats’s poems, the readers can see clearly the traces of Shakespeare. For example, when reading Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, one may easily think of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18, “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”. It is possible that the two poems are written with a common purpose in mind, that is, to immortalize the subjects of their poems by writing them down in verses for people to read for generations to come. By doing so, both of the poets are preserving the beauty of the subjects, which may justifiably be understood to be a young friend of Shakespeare and Keats’s Greek vase respectively.

Beginning with Sonnet 18, and continuing here and there throughout the first major group of sonnets, Shakespeare approaches the problem of mutability and the effects of time upon his beloved friend in a different fashion. Instead of addressing the problem of old age, he emphasizes his friend’s attributes:

“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.” (Lines 1-2)

³⁸ See <http://englishhistory.net/keats/letters/reynolds22November1817.html>.

³⁹ Abrams (1986), p.831.

As time and death work together to devour man's life by carving ugly wrinkles in his face and finally leading to his death, the friend would be deprived of his youth and beauty with the ravages of time and death. However, the poet has full confidence in the eternity of the friend with his beauty and youthfulness because they live in his eternal poems. Shakespeare asserts that his poetry will survive the destructive effects of time and bring eternity to his friend. Thus, the poet succeeds in making the youthfulness and beauty of his friend immortal in his verse.

“But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st,
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”⁴⁰

Just as Shakespeare is confident that his friend's youth and beauty can be kept forever in his poem, so Keats sings high praises of the immortality of the Grecian urn:

“O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest braches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe”

In the poem Keats finds the perfect expression for his longing for permanence in a world of change.

Both poets eulogize youth, beauty, eternity and show confidence in the power of poetry. They are eager to pursue beauty and eternity either in their daily life or through powerful imagination.⁴¹

⁴⁰ The sonnet is from the website <http://www.writewords.org.uk/library/7615.asp>.

⁴¹ Abrams (1986), p.793. As is pointed out by Abrams in a note, the urn “existed in all its particulars only in Keats's imagination”.

Not only is Shakespeare a great artist pursuing beauty and eternity, he is also a great humanist. Although the definition of humanism has changed from Shakespeare's time to Keats's, the basic focus on human dignity and potential does not change. The Renaissance "man" saw himself, in the words of Shakespeare's Hamlet, as "noble in reason" and "in apprehension [...] like a god".⁴² Shakespeare is both obsessed with man and disillusioned with man. So he is believed to be a disappointed humanist. He is mainly interested in the phenomenon of man as religious or doubting, virtuous or evil, witty or silly, rational or confused from time to time.

Even the characters in Shakespeare's drama, such as *Hamlet*, impress Keats deeply. Many a time Keats finds himself in an ambivalent situation just as Hamlet does. In his last letter to Fanny Brawne, he seems to be despaired for their love, as Hamlet's love for Ophelia. He wrote in a painful way: "Hamlet's heart was full of such Misery as mine is."⁴³ In addition, Keats's sense of tragedy in life has some similarity with Hamlet's melancholy character. Both Keats and Hamlet have political ideals in heart and they have passion for love. But the cruel reality obstructs the realization of their ideals.

Keats finds a good poetic model and a source of artistic inspiration in Shakespeare. He appreciates Shakespeare so much that virtually he inherits Shakespeare's artistic passion and his humanistic spirit as well. Therefore, to some extent, Keats's poetic artistry culminating in a perfect union of aesthetic beauty and humanist profundity has part of its literary indebtedness in Shakespeare.

⁴² See <http://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=1235>.

⁴³ See <http://www.nypl.org/publications/keats.cfm>.

Part Three: Keats's combination of aesthetics and humanism in his works

Humanism is a philosophy of those in love with life. So love is the key word in the definition of humanism. Love is a broad concept which includes one's love for his friends, for his family, for his lover, and for the whole society. Keats's love shines in his works, in his life and in his great concern for the ordinary people. If we have a careful reading of Keats's letters, we can see love abounds in his heart. There is a strong sense of responsibility for his family, there is the great friendship, and there is his solicitude for the suffering masses. His love for human beings aside, there is his pursuit of beauty and his devotion to poetry as well. If the former proves Keats to be a humanist, the latter proves that he is a genuine artist — a pursuer of beauty.

Keats's perfect combination of aesthetics and humanism is not just limitedly manifested in his letters. The harmonious union of the two ingredients is also present in his poetry. We can find the trace of love and beauty in almost all of his poems — sonnets, long narratives and odes. In fact, Keats's odes enjoy highest reputation among all his poems. "Ode to a Nightingale" is believed by leading critics to be his representative poem for a long time. So the second section of Part Three is mainly about the analysis of "Ode to a Nightingale" which perfectly shows Keats's aesthetics and humanism. The description of beautiful natural scenes as well as the moving song of the nightingale in the poem points to Keats's longing for beauty and eternity. There is also the dark society reflected in the poem which constructs sharp contrast with the poet's world of imagination. Keats's eulogizing of the wonderland reveals his dissatisfaction with the real world. Through his employment of sensuous imagery in the poem, both aesthetically and emotionally charged, the poet succeeds in voicing his protest against the cruel society.

A. Love — the indispensable theme of Keats's life as revealed in his letters

Not only is Keats a great poet with the instinct to pursue beauty in his poems, he is a great human being with a tender heart of love. E. De Selincourt once commented on Keats's sensuous nature in composing poems and his love for his family and his friends:

“He was doubtless a supremely sensuous nature; such is the essential basis on which all poetry builds, and it was no more prominent in his early work than it was in the early work of Shakespeare; but the strong common-sense, the sound insight into the faults of himself and others, the habitual thoughtfulness of mind, the tender devotion to his family and friends, revealed in his letters and amply attested by all who knew him, are quite incompatible with a complete absorption in the luxury of his own sensations.”⁴⁴

Two points can be concluded in the above critical comments of E. De Selincourt's on Keats. On one hand, Keats is a great poet with a sensitive mind. He can perceive the essence of life and achieve beauty by imagination. As a serious poet, he is strict with his poetical creation. Sensuous images abound in his poems. He is matchless among Romantic poets in employing imagery. On the other hand, he is a great humanist. He shows love for his friends, for his family, for his lover, and for the ordinary people. Love is indispensable in his life and the great love motivates him to write with more strength and confidence.

Keats develops great friendship with the progressive writers and poets among whom Leigh Hunt influences Keats most. Leigh Hunt worked for the Whigs and his political views were rather radical, so much so that he was frequently attacked by the Tories and even sent into prison for a period of time. However, Keats made friends with him and other radical writers in London. Charles C. Clarke, who was Keats's former teacher and close friend, wrote that “the first proof (he) had received of his having committed himself in verse was a sonnet titled ‘Written on the Day that Mr. Leigh Hunt left Prison’”⁴⁵. In 1816, in one of his published articles, Hunt highly appraised Keats's poetic style. Writing about their relationship in his *Autobiography*,

⁴⁴ E. De Selincourt, ed. *The Poems of Keats*, London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1905, pp. xxx-xxxii.

⁴⁵ See <http://www.loyno.edu/history/journal/1984-5/byrnes-j.htm>.

Hunt said that “Keats and I might have been taken for friends of the old stamp, between whom there is no such thing even as obligation, except the pleasure of it.”⁴⁶ The great friendship also enabled him to compose great poetry with more confidence.

Although Keats was not a popular poet in his life time, he was quite popular among his friends. In the last few years of his life he was totally dependent on his friends. Even today, when reading Keats’s letters to his friends, we can still feel excited and moved by their great friendship and his sincerity and loyalty to them. A tranquil poet as he was, he never lost himself even when he met with the harshest attacks in English literary history from his contemporary reviewers because his friends were always on his side. He was not alone in struggling against the critics’ assaults. Neither was he alone under the shadow of approaching death threat. Percy Bysshe Shelley, as Keats’s friend, invited him to Rome in the hope that his disease could be cured. In Keats’s letter “To Percy Bysshe Shelley” on August 16, 1820, he expressed his sincere gratitude to his friend’s kindness. The letter begins:

“My dear Shelley,

I am very much gratified that you, in a foreign country, and with a mind almost over occupied, should write to me in the strain of the Letter beside me. If I do not take advantage of your invitation it will be prevented by a circumstance I have very much at heart to prophesy.”⁴⁷

Such sincerity can be consistently traced in every letter to his friends. Reading his letters today, the readers can still feel the warmth of their heartfelt friendship.

Keats’s love for his friends aside, his love for his family is also moving to the readers. Although not much is known about the early years of their family life, it is clear that it was a loving family since John had a close relationship with his brothers and sister throughout his life. On one occasion when his brother George had left for America with his wife Georgiana in June 1818, Keats took pains to write long, affectionate, newsy journal-letters, recording daily happenings and copying out with

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Abrams (1986), p.842. According to the note on his book, “prophesy” indicates his own death.

comments many of his recent poems. In one of the long letters which took Keats nearly a month to write, Keats talked about his views about life:

“This is the world — thus we cannot expect to give many hours to pleasure — Circumstances are like Clouds continually gathering and bursting — While we are laughing the seed of some trouble is put into the wide arable land of events — while we are laughing it sprouts is⁴⁸ grows and suddenly bears a poison fruit which we must pluck.”⁴⁹

In fact, the scopes of subjects they discussed in their letters are fairly wide. They talk about life, poetry and daily trifles. The wide range of topics proves their intimate relationship. Keats’s love for his brothers is self-sacrificing. When his younger brother Tom was seriously ill, Keats took good care of him and unfortunately he himself was also infected with tuberculosis during this period. His selflessness and his strong sense of responsibility make him a true humanist.

Keats’s complex affections for his mother weighed heavily in his choice of the poetical career, and his failure to enjoy a complete and healthful maternal love made maternal longing an important theme in many of his poems.⁵⁰

Although some other Romantic poets indulged themselves in love and Keats himself had many innocent relationships with young women, he was rather serious when he fell in love with Fanny Brawne. In his letter to Fanny in June 1820, he wrote sincerely: “You are to me an object intensely desireable — the air I breathe in a room empty of you is unhealthy.”⁵¹ But his love with Fanny Brawne does not end happily. Both his uncertain material situation and his failing health make it impossible for their relationship to take a normal course. In his last letter to her, Keats seems to have completely despaired for their love.

⁴⁸ Here “is” is mistaken for “it”.

⁴⁹ Abrams (1986), p.837.

⁵⁰ Keats’s mother is Frances Jennings Keats who had four sons, one of whom died in infancy, and a daughter was born to the couple before Thomas’s (John Keats’s father) death in April, 1804 in a fall from a horse. With four very young children to care for, Frances married a man named William Rawlings in 1805, but the marriage was not successful, and, when the couple separated in the following year, she and her four children went to live with her mother. It is certain that her miserable life left an unforgettable legacy on Keats.

⁵¹ Keats, p.245.

“To be happy with you seems such an impossibility! it requires a luckier Star than mine! it will never be.... Shakespeare always sums up matters in the most sovereign manner. Hamlet’s heart was full of such Misery as mine is when he said to Ophelia ‘Go to a Nunnery, go, go!’ Indeed I should like to give up the matter at once — I should like to die. I am sickened at the brute world which you are smiling with. I hate men and women more. I see nothing but thorns for the future. . . . I wish you could infuse a little confidence in human nature into my heart. I cannot muster any — the world is too brutal for me — I am glad there is such a thing as the grave — I am sure I shall never have any rest till I get there.... I wish I was either in your a[r]ms full of faith or that a Thunder bolt would strike me.”⁵²

As T. S. Eliot said, “[I]n one’s prose reflections one may be legitimately occupied with ideals, whereas in the writing of verse, one can deal only with actuality”.⁵³ Keats’s love poems are the recording of his emotional experience. His love mixed with “happy misery and miserable misery” for Fanny Brawne can be felt in almost all of his important works composed in 1819, “the year of miracles”.

The happy and miserable love for Fanny enables Keats to form a completely peculiar view towards women and love. In his poems, women are both attractive and dangerous whereas love is sweet and terrible at the same time. On the one hand, love is eulogized in Keats’s poems. He depicts vividly the young people’s pursuit of love. In many cases, the sun, flowers, music and dance add to the happiness of the lovers and color the love with a poetical touch. Keats is bold enough to infringe on the forbidden area and portrays directly and vividly the sensuous pleasure of earthly love. In “Bright Star”, he expresses his wish to “pillow upon the fair love’s ripening breast” and “hear her tender-taken breath”⁵⁴. Keats is later accused of moral indecency for the employment of over-sensuous imagery. But few poets can match him in portraying the scenes of youthful love. On the other hand, love in Keats’s poems rarely ends happily. It means both happiness and destruction. In his three representative long narratives, the love between Isabella and Lorenzo, Lamia and Lycius, Madeline and Porphylo is illicit and fraught with danger. In the end, Isabella dies broken-hearted

⁵² The letter is from the website: <http://www.nypl.org/publications/keats.cfm>.

⁵³ See <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/Summaries/V78I4P80-1.htm>.

⁵⁴ Keats, p.51. The sonnet is written on a blank page in Shakespeare’s poems and begins with “Bright star”.

after her fiancé has been murdered; Lycius enjoys a sweet love only temporarily at the cost of his own life. As to Porphylo and Madeline, although they have successfully escaped on a stormy night, Angela, who has contributed to their union, dies tragically on that very night, foreshadowing heavily the ominous prospect of their happiness after the elopement. Keats is keenly aware of the transience of human love. In “When I have fears”, one of his best sonnets, he expresses his fear that he would never be able to look at his “fair creature of an hour”.⁵⁵ While in “Ode to a Nightingale”, he laments that “new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow”. It must be noticed that women in Keats works are both beautiful and dangerous. They mean to men at the same time irresistible temptation, intense happiness and inevitable destruction. Keats’s paradoxical view towards women and love also shadows his happy but tragical love with Fanny. He is looking for the true love yet he is sensitively aware of its impossibility. Like Hamlet, the poet is in an ambivalent situation.

Keats’s love is not limited to his family, his friends and his lover; it also goes to the ordinary people who are suffering in an age of turbulent changes. He remarked in his letter to Richard Woodhouse on October 27, 1818: “I am ambitious of doing the world some good.... All I hope is that I may not lose all interest in human affairs — that the solitary indifference I feel for applause even from the finest Spirits, will not blunt any acuteness of vision I may have.”⁵⁶

Keats sympathizes with the ordinary people. As a poet, with his sensitive heart, he understands them. In his eyes, the beautiful nature, the charming and immortal art is a comfort for the suffering people because the social reality is too disappointing. Providing people with beautiful eternity, the poet’s social role is important because “sure a poet is a sage; A humanist, Physician to all men.” And the poet is “The one pours out a balm upon the world”⁵⁷.

If Keats’s love for human beings justifies him as a true humanist with high morality, his love for nature and for beauty will prove him to be a genuine artist with

⁵⁵ Keats, p.17.

⁵⁶ Keats, p.243.

⁵⁷ Keats, p.216.

full devotion to poetry. His love for beauty, together with his love for the human beings, constitutes the perfect combination of aesthetic ideas and humanist spirits in his letters.⁵⁸

Keats's letters serve as a running commentary on his life, reading, thinking and writing. It is a key for his readers to come near to him, and understand him as well. He has presented in his letters many issues, such as nature, existence, truth and soul, but by far the majority of the letters are filled with the poet's love and concern for his addressee. The conclusion that Keats's heart is filled with love can be attained through a thorough analysis of his letters.

B. "Ode to a Nightingale"

1. Keats's innovation of the "ode" form

All artists must be, in a certain period of their creativity, in search of an art form most suited to their own expression of thoughts and beliefs. Keats is no exception. And, maybe more than others, Keats is self-conscious of this necessity. In the poem "If by Dull Rhymes Our English Must Be Chained", he wrote:

"If by dull rhymes our English must be chained,
And, like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet
Fettered, in spite of pained loveliness;
Let us find out, if we must be constrained,
Sandals more interwoven and complete
To fit the naked foot of poesy;
Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress
Of every chord, and see what may be gained
By ear industrious, and attention meet;
Misers of sound and syllable, no less
Than Midas of his coinage, let us be
Jealous of dead leaves in the bay wreath crown;
So, if we may not let the Muse be free,
She will be bound with garlands of her own."⁵⁹

In this sonnet, "Sandals more interwoven and complete" is the "ode" form Keats

⁵⁸ See Part One for the poet's love for beauty.

⁵⁹ The content of the sonnet is from the website: <http://www.online-literature.com/keats/473/>.

created which is the artistic form that he finds suitable for his poetic feelings. “In a letter including this sonnet, Keats wrote that ‘I have been endeavoring to discover a better sonnet stanza than we have’, objecting especially to the ‘pouncing rhymes’ of the Petrarchan form and the inevitable tick of the closing couplet in the Shakespearean stanza”.⁶⁰

Each stanza in “Ode to a Nightingale” consists of a Shakespearean quatrain followed by a Petrarchan sestet. So he works out a new rhyme scheme for his ode, namely, ababcdecde. And all the stanzas contain ten lines. Take the first stanza for instance:

“My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains	(a)
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,	(b)
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains	(a)
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:	(b)
Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,	(c)
But being too happy in thine happiness, –	(d)
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,	(e)
In some melodious plot	(c)
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,	(d)
Singing of summer in full-throated ease.”	(e)

The first four lines, with their rhyme scheme of abab, constitute a Shakespearean quatrain. And the following six lines of the stanza form a Petrarchan sestet.

The creation of this “ode” form is a noteworthy technical achievement. It gives Keats just what he wants as a vehicle of expression, avoiding the intrinsic defects of the conventional sonnet forms. The innovated “ode” form not only avoids monotony of sonnets but also offers reasonable freedom of movement within the stanza. Maybe that is why Keats’s odes enjoy highest evaluation among his poetical works. His other famous odes such as “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, “Ode on Melancholy”, “On Indolence” have similar rhyme schemes in each stanza as in “Ode to a Nightingale”.

⁶⁰ Abrams (1979), p.822.

2. A comprehensive analysis of “Ode to a Nightingale”

In “Ode to a Nightingale”, the poet’s wish is to escape from a world of misery to unite with the bird in ultimate happiness. But he fails at last, consciously or unconsciously; he chooses to stay, or rather, he has no alternative but to stay. He does not believe in art’s deceiving role in helping him escape to a realm of ecstasy. He has grown in mental maturity with a better knowledge of the courage and bravery he needs to carry on.

It might give us a better understanding of the poem to know that, at the time of writing the poem, Keats was in a state of poor health and suspected that he had probably infected with tuberculosis. At that time tuberculosis, or consumption as it was called then, was a virtually incurable disease that had spread in epidemic proportions throughout Europe. It was responsible for the deaths of all his family members. His brother Tom had died of tuberculosis only months before. What is more, it was unlikely that his publisher would sell his books because of the savage criticism on his poems. And it was around this period of time that Keats fell in love with Fanny Brawne only to find soon that he could not marry her on account of his poverty and poor health. It is safe to assume that when he wrote “Ode to a Nightingale” Keats was a man in pain, living with the dreadful realization that his life was destined to be brief and end in sorrow.

Charles Brown, with whom Keats was living in Wentworth Place, related the circumstances of the composition of the “Ode to a Nightingale” as follows: “In the spring of 1819 a nightingale had built her nest near my house. Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song; and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast table to the grass-plot under a plum-tree, where he sat for about two or three hours. When he came into the house, I perceived he had some scraps of paper in his hand, and these he was quietly thrusting behind the books. On inquiry, I found those scraps, four or five in number, contained his poetic feeling on the song of our nightingale. The writing was not well legible; and it was difficult to arrange the stanzas on so many scraps. With his assistance I succeeded, and this was his ‘Ode to a Nightingale’,

a poem which had been the delight of every one.”⁶¹

As Keats sits under the plum tree in the garden of Wentworth Place and listens to the song of the nightingale, he is stoically, almost apathetically, despondent. His heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains his sense as though of hemlock he “had drunk”. He does not envy the happy lot of the nightingale, who sings of summer in full-throated ease, but her happiness makes him intensely conscious of his own sorrows. Thus the ode starts:

“My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:”⁶²

Keats uses “aches” to express his feeling. But the word has many layers of meaning. It refers either to “pain” or to “eagerness”. The word is used to depict not only sufferings in real life but also the poet’s eagerness for that beautiful world. The happy illusion mixed up with painful sorrow makes his heart ache. “Drowsy numbness” can possibly relieve his sorrows and to eliminate his emotional unrest, but what the poet feels is that “drowsy numbness pains my sense”. With “hemlock” and “opiate”, by sinking into “Lethe” the poet might get calmness for the soul, but his heart is caught with pain and doubt. Here we have a state in which self-consciousness is not yet lost but in the process of being lost, and the hope of identification is rising.

In the second stanza of the ode, Keats longs for a draught of wine so that on the wings of intoxication he may escape from his sorrows into the happy world of the nightingale. The wine has been “Cool’d a long age in the deep-delved earth”. A taste of it may remind the poet of “Flora and the country green, Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth”. With the power of wine, the poet seems to have forgotten all the miseries of reality. He feels intoxicated at the “blushful Hippocrene”. With the wine, the poet may leave the real world and fly away with the nightingale to the forest.

⁶¹ See <http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/rpo/display/poem1131.html>.

⁶² Keats, p.28. All the following quotations of the poem are from the book.

Keats sublimates that love of wine, transforming it into a pure and exalted kind by sensuous images such as “beaded bubbles winking at the brim” and “purple stained mouth”. He infuses the love of wine with poetic associations, making it as suggestive as it is sensuous. With three or four suggestive details he creates a warm and charming atmosphere.

The third stanza shows clearly Keats’s sympathy towards the ordinary people. The poet seems to have viewed back at the miserable world when his mind is flying with the bird. He says he would like to forget “The weariness, the fever, and the fret” because “Here men sit and hear each other groan”. He denounces openly the world and leaves behind the sad scene:

“Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow.”

Here we have a very vivid picture of his own personal woes and of the miserable people he is too familiar with, including the groaning crowd old and young, the beautiful and the sick, and the despairing and unhappy lovers. And here we see also the poet’s inner contradiction between the ugly social reality all around him and his vain wish to leave it or forget it. The four “wheres” evoke a strong sense of abominable distress in the real world. Through these lines, the readers can deeply understand that the poetical soul is filled with tremendous sorrows. His soul is eagerly longing for eternity and beauty. However, the cruel reality goes directly to the opposite. Tearing himself away from the sorrowful world is not that easy through the effect of wine and the wings of the nightingale. Keats’s imagination brings him into the world of beauty in which he imagines the nightingale lives and sings; but his painful consciousness of real life accompanies him. His description of the world of the nightingale is not only richly sensuous but also is somber and sad. The mood of sorrow with which he views the scene makes the beauty of the nightingale’s song

more intense and poignant.

When Keats gets disappointed with the cruel reality, it is natural for him to be absorbed in the song of the nightingale. His heart is comforted with it, yet he also puts his own feeling of the real world in terms of allusion. In the lines “Where youth grows pale, / and spectre-thin dies”, Keats refers to his brother Tom, who has died a slow and lingering death, wasting away under the ravages of consumption. And in the lines “Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, / Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow,” he alludes to his love for Fanny Brawne.

The poet longs for a more spacious world “on the viewless wings of Poesy” in the fourth stanza instead of being “charioted by Bacchus and his pards”. Though the dull brain perplexes and retards, the poet is determined to fly to a higher, farther and better world of the ideal. “[T]ender is the night, / And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne, / Cluster’d round by all her starry Fays”. The beautiful scene far away is beckoning to the poet. And “here” with “verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways” there is a kind of mythical hue. It is aesthetically appealing to our sense of seeing, and evocative of many different implications. For instance, the word “gloom” may refer to the dark forest, the dark night, and the dark reality. “S” sound is prominent in this stanza, which is suggestive of some fairy-like dreamy quality of the night scene. It is possible that now the poet’s heart is really flying away and the painful consciousness has slowly been calmed down.

In the fifth stanza, the poet loses the way in the mythical kingdom with the flowers at his feet and with soft incense hanging upon the boughs. He gets lost in this “embalmed darkness” of poetical imagination. Merry, relaxed, and intoxicated, the poet depicts the flower, the grass, white hawthorn, pastoral eglantine, “fast fading violets cover’d up in leaves”, “the coming musk-rose” and even the murmuring flies. But the beautiful scenery actually conceals something unpleasant “in embalmed darkness”. With the word “darkness” one cannot help thinking about “death” and the dark society in Keats’s time. It arouses people’s different associations and suggests the “death” theme in the next stanza.

In the sixth stanza the poet’s emotional keynote has changed. The comfortable

soul suddenly becomes complicated. Although the poet is eulogizing in the whole stanza, yet in fact, there is profound melancholy in his inner heart. When the poet is listening to the nightingale sing “in such an ecstasy”, he comes across a strange idea: death is the ultimate relief and comfort. It is superficially a passive idea. But Keats is showing that the social reality is abhorrent to him by saying “for many a time I have been half in love with easeful Death”. Another poem in which he has involved death as a certain solution to his bewildered situation is the sonnet “Why Did I laugh tonight?”. In the sonnet, he considers the painful problems of his experience — the problems of poetry, ambition, and love — and he decides, after an empirical analysis of the problem of evil in nature, that death is the only solution to these problems. “Verse, Fame and Beauty are intense indeed / But Death intenser — Death is Life’s high meed.”⁶³

“The awakening of the philosophic mind marks the end of the aesthetic trance; just as Keats comes near to abandoning himself altogether to death or trance.”⁶⁴ Instead of giving out sheer description of natural beauty, Keats explores further in the realms of his mind and hungers for a sort of solution to his previous memory of ill-soaked life. The stanza relates the ode to that spiritual humanism by means of which he overcomes his despair. It seems to him “rich to die”, “To cease upon the midnight with no pain” while the nightingale is “pouring forth” her soul in “such an ecstasy”. He recalls that “many a time” he has “been half in love with easeful Death” and has “Call’d him soft names in many a mused rhyme.” Some of Keats’s critics believe that the wish for death and the escapist tendency are shown in the “death” stanza. In fact, it is nowhere more apparent than in this stanza that the poet’s disappointment with and protest against the social status quo are revealed through his repeated use of “die” or “death”.

The idea of the seventh stanza comprises of several pairs of symbolic contrasts. First, there is the contrast between the mortality of man and the immortality of the

⁶³ Keats, p.26.

⁶⁴ Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats*, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1983, p.93.

nightingale through the poet's apostrophe to the bird. The bird is immortal. It will not disappear with the passage of time while the lives of human beings are transient. Second, with an acute sense of pain, the poet contrasts the joys of the "immortal bird" with the "hungry generations" and the "sad heart of Ruth", specimens of individual sorrow as well as common human misery. The bird is far away from earthly trifles while human beings are suffering from them. Last, the world of the nightingale is fair because "The voice I hear this passing night was heard / In ancient days by emperor and clown". But in social reality, there is no justice. Keats expresses his democratic idea in the turbulent age and the Romantic spirit is best seen here.

In the final stanza of the ode, Keats describes his return to the world of reality. He admits the inadequacy of the romantic escape from the world of reality to the world of ideal beauty. "Adieu!" he says to the nightingale, "the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf". Though regretfully enough, a return to consciousness of reality is the necessary end of such a romantic escape into an imaginary world. In his earlier poems such as *Endymion*, this escape has given him a momentary forgetfulness of reality and a momentary happiness. However, in the "Ode to a Nightingale", the consciousness of painful reality has accompanied him into the ideal world of the nightingale. Up to this point in the ode, Keats has made a clear contrast between his own sadness and the happiness of the nightingale; but in the final stanza he calls the nightingale's song a "plaintive anthem", reading his own sadness into the song of the nightingale:

"Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music: — Do I wake or sleep?"

The poem ends, as it begins, with the heart, but with the heart now questioning. Keats's sensitiveness for happiness and beauty at last makes him suspicious of them. The poet has clear sense of reality, and he cannot leave the real world. However, he cannot help longing for illusory beauty in his imagination. As is concluded by the poet himself, it is a "waking dream". The poem not only reflects the conflict between the illusory world and the real world, but also shows the poet's paradoxical attitude in

pursuing the illusory beautiful world. Although Keats now and then stands in the dilemma of the reality and the fancy, he still can pull himself into the reality at the end, and he can realize the truth of life. He cannot break away from the sorrows of life; neither can he neglect the reality. The painful reality makes his heart ache, yet it also becomes a motivation for his poetical pursuit.

The poem is famous not only for its content. The poet's successful employment of sensuous imagery also provides the poem with new glamour. V. B. Shklovsky once remarked that "Without imagery, poetry is meaningless. Poetry-composing largely depends on poetic imagery-creating. Poetic imagery is a means of creating the strongest possible impression."⁶⁵

In "Ode to a Nightingale", Keats uses some sixty images related to our four senses — of seeing, of hearing, of smell and of taste. This suggests that his images have more implications. He invites us not only to see and hear but also to feel and think. The following lists could prove this point:

Sight-related Images:

trees, beechgreen, shadows, country green, sunburnt, blushful, bubbles, winking, purple-stained, unseen, fade away, forest dim, dissolve, leaves, grey hairs, pale, leaden-eyed, viewless wings, no light, mossy ways, verdurous glooms, flowers, darkness, grass, fruit tree, hawthorn, violets, eglantine, Mid-May's eldest child, tears, meadows, valley-glades, vision.

Hearing-related Images:

singest, provencial song, groan, mused rhyme, high requiem, plaintive, anthem, music, murmur, still stream,.

Images of Smelling:

dewy wine, soft incense hangs upon the boughs, sweet.

Images of Taste:

hemlock, drunk, opiate, a draught of vintage, tasting of Flora.

In this poem, Keats makes full use of synaesthetic imagery to create a series of

⁶⁵ V. B. Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" in *Russian Formalist Criticism*, ed. by L. T. Lemon and M. Reis, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1965, p.7.

sense-impressions. It is not over-used but adequately employed. Keats's odes are always sensuous, colorful and rich in imagery, which expresses the acuteness of his senses. For example, in the fifth stanza the imagery is particular and sensuous, but not highly visual. "Hawthorn", "eglantine", "violets" and "musk-rose" are important chiefly for their pastoral associations. "The grass, the thicket and the fruit tree wild" have tactual and plastic qualities. The "fast-fading violets" are invested with organic sensation through empathy by being "covered up in leaves" and the associations of the musk rose include taste and sound.

Keats's images present us not only a picture of natural beauty but also a real portraiture of life and society. So there are two worlds in the poem: the visionary and the social. They are contrasted in a variety of ways. Firstly, the visionary world is colorful while the social reality is colorless. In the poet's ideal land, the nightingale sings beautifully with its full throat. There are trees, flowers and grass with their sweet smell. The poet feels intoxicated with the wine taste of Flora and the country green. But there are only "the weariness, the fear and the fret" in the true life. Gloom hangs on everywhere. Secondly, the visionary world possesses the quality of fertility, while death is always lurking somewhere in the real world. All kinds of trees, flowers and grasses grow prosperously. Not only "hawthorn", the "eglantine", the "violets", the "musk-rose" flourish, but also the "flies" are murmuring happily in the summer evenings. In Keats's real world, death is inevitable. His wish for death shows his worry about his health since he is suffering from tuberculosis, and shows his dissatisfaction with the social reality as well. Thirdly, the immortality of the nightingale and the shortness of life form a sharp contrast. "Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird! / No hungry generations tread thee down; / The voice I hear this passing night was heard / In ancient days by emperor and clown." It seems that the more the poet eulogizes the immortal bird, the more the bitterness and transience of life are revealed. There is a terrible irony in this poem. A nightingale sings beautifully with its full throat while Keats cannot sing with ease. So he lets the nightingale voice his dream and hope for happiness.

In the use of sensuous imagery, Keats is matchless among the Romantic poets.

Keats's use of the sensuous imagery is not a rhetoric technique in its own right, but an exquisite writing technique involving many other figures of speech such as allusion and contrast. The sensuous imagery in Keats's poems changes the readers' habitual aesthetic perspective, enlightens all the organs of senses, and at last producing an ever-lasting and profound aesthetic effect.

In a word, Keats representative poem "Ode to a Nightingale" epitomizes a perfect combination of aesthetic beauty and humanist spirits. It is through the poetical devices such as sensuous imagery that Keats's protest against the social reality and his longing for beauty are revealed. The poet creates a beautiful wonderland while listening to the nightingale's attractive song. In this poem, through the use of images, myths, symbols and legends, Keats seeks to find a fairy land to get away from the reality. Yet he realizes the impossibility. So after a long time of immersion in the forest with the nightingale's song, Keats returns to the reality. So the apparent "escapism" of the poet is actually his way of protesting against the miserable society which is only too real to him.

As in many of his other famous poems, Keats succeeds to unite form and content harmoniously in the creative composition of "Ode to a Nightingale". The innovated "ode" form is the best vehicle for Keats to express his poetic feelings and provides the poem with more aesthetic touches. Through employment of imagery and with the rhetorical devices such as contrast and allusion, the poet's detesting attitude toward the real world and his passionate pursuit of beautiful vision are vividly revealed to the readers. Aesthetic ideas and his humanist spirits are best exemplified in this poem.

Conclusion

“No one can read Keats’s poems without an undersense of the immense waste of so extraordinary an intellect and genius cut off so early.”⁶⁶ What he might have accomplished is beyond conjecture; what we do know is that when he stopped writing at the age of twenty-four, his achievement had greatly exceeded that of Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Milton at a similar age.

Although Keats was attacked severely in his short life by some of his contemporary critics, his works arouse more and more academic attention nowadays. His pursuit of beauty can be perceived in almost all his writings. Keats’s passionate longing for beauty aside, the readers can also discern the poet’s humanistic spirits exemplified in his poems and in his letters.

Aesthetics and humanism are aligned perfectly in Keats’s works. His poetical theories such as “negative capability”, beauty and truth, and the power of imagination contain his aesthetic ideas as well as his humanistic spirits. With “negative capability”, the poet transcends the “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts” of real world and becomes identical with the poetical object. For Keats, beauty is the ultimate goal for poetical composition because “With a great poet the sense of beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.” The famous statement “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” shows that beauty and truth are inseparable. And imagination plays an important role in the whole process of Keats’s poetical creation. Keats believes “what the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth”. What is more, the harmonious union of content and form, the natural expression, and the intensity of language are highly valued in Keats’s poetical theories. It is quite clear that Keats is strict with himself as an artist. His development of poetic principles and theories proves his aesthetic maturity. Instead of setting up his poetical theories abstractly and groundlessly, like building castles in the air, Keats bases his poetic tenets on his full and acute understanding of the social reality of his own time.

⁶⁶ Abrams (1979), p.789.

He is not an escapist, but a humanist who cares about the social reforms and living conditions of ordinary people. With wings of imagination, he finds beauty and truth. And he believes his poetry is a comfort for the suffering human kind.

Greek mythology and Shakespeare serve as models and mediums for Keats's perfect combination of aesthetics and humanism in his works. His constant employment of Greek mythology in his poems shows his longing for the ancient Greek civilization. His pursuit of beauty is revealed as well. He worships the ancient Greek heroes and endows them with more charm and more revolutionary spirits in his writing. He does not depict the wonderland which he longs wistfully to immerse himself in by sheer imagination. In fact, the content of his poetry is closely related with the social realities, so that we cannot fail to see an artistic mirror of aesthetic beauty as always contrasted with the grim social realities. *Hyperion*, a poem created on the basis of Greek mythology, shows the poet's belief that all political powers are subject to change when they cannot represent the progressive development of history. Keats is not far away from politics, but cares about politics and longs for a democratic social system. This political consciousness implies Keats's humanistic beliefs.

In addition to the Greek mythology, Shakespeare's influence on Keats cannot be neglected. Shakespeare is a pursuer of beauty as well as a great humanist. Shakespeare sets a good example for Keats. Both his artistic aesthetics and his humanist spirits provide Keats with enlightenment for his poetical creation.

The perfect combination of Keats's aesthetics and humanism is manifest in his letters as well as in his poems. Through a careful analysis of Keats's letters, the readers can draw the conclusion that love is indispensable in Keats's life. His love for his friends, for his family, for his lover and for the whole society fully proves that he is a true humanist since love is a key point in the modern definition of humanism. The great friendship with the radicals such as Leigh Hunt encourages him a lot in composing great poetry. And his love for his family shows his strong sense of responsibility. Not only does he care about his friends and his family, he cares about the whole society as well. His heart is always with the poor and the miserable who suffer in the world. Like other Romantic poets, Keats portrays heterosexual love in his

works especially in his long narrative poems. But youthful love in his poems is always mixed with happiness and misery. His sensitive mind and his tragic view on love is also the reflection of love between Fanny Brawne and him.

Keats's representative poem "Ode to a Nightingale" is a good example to further illustrate Keats's perfect combination of aesthetics and humanism. Firstly, his innovation on the ode form demonstrates his courage in breaking off from the tradition. His creative spirit as an artist and a humanist is exemplified as well. Secondly, the content of the poem reveals the poet's dissatisfaction with the cruel social reality. In the touching song of the nightingale, he dreams to fly away with the bird and to leave behind the painful sorrows in the real world. The world of the nightingale and the real world form a sharp contrast. The ideal world is colorful and fertile while the social reality is colorless and dying. These contrastive pictures well point to the poet's aesthetic ideas as well as his own covert statements on social and political matters. In the last stanza of the poem, he comes back to reality. His courage to face the reality again reveals that he is not an escapist. Finally, his brilliant employment of sensuous imagery endows the poem with aesthetic appeal and humanistic concern. The aesthetic poetical technique helps the poet to voice his dissatisfaction with the reality. The technique, together with the content, makes the poem immortal.

Few poets can ascend to the level of John Keats, and even fewer ascend to that level at such an early age. John Keats was only twenty-six years old when he died; however, he was considered, along with Wordsworth, to be the most popular Romantic poets of the nineteenth century. Seldom is there a poet more devoted to his ideal, entirely independent of success or failure. Keats's devotion to poetry, his cult of beauty and eternity, combined with his strong sense of social responsibility and high morality justify him as a genuine artist and a true humanist. It is his distinctive poetical aesthetics and his humanist spirits that have made Keats enjoy high reputation among his readers.

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