

## *Original Paper*

# Transcending Boundary of Poetry and Painting: The Pictoriality of John Keats's Poetry

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### **Abstract**

*Keats lived a short life span, but in his space of 25 years' life, Keats showed the world his remarkable talent for poetry. The pictorial nature of Keats' poetry is obvious. This paper takes the boundary of poetry and painting as the starting point, mainly studying pictorial embodiment, causes, and influences in his poems. Keats' unique sense of love, imagination, and depiction of nature is strongly reflected in the sense of color and three-dimensionality in his poems, thus achieving the effect of "reading poetry as appreciating painting" for readers.*

### **Keywords**

*John Keats, romanticism, transcending the boundary of poetry and painting, painterliness*

### **1. Introduction**

Keats lived at a time when Romanticism was flourishing and art was well developed. Of all the types of art, painting was one of artistic forms that are most closely associated with Romanticism, and Romantic poetry was an art itself, with a distinctly painterly character. Poetry and painting have a long history of the association, and the two are independent of each other and closely linked as well. The development of pictorial poetry has gone through four successive periods: classical, neo-classical, romantic, and modern period. It began with Lessing, a leading representative of the German Enlightenment, whose aesthetic work *La Raccoon* profoundly explores the boundaries between poetry and painting and provides the direction for pictorial poetry.

## 2. The Evolution of Painting and Poetry

It is well known that both poetry and painting are conventionally artistic modes and share certain characteristics. They are both “art of imitation”. This concept has been interpreted by many philosophical forefathers: Aristotle in his *Poetics* pinpointed the essential feature of art—imitation, in his perspective, poetry seems to have sprung from two causes, each of which lying deeply in our nature. Imitation is our instinct nature. Next, there is the instinct for ‘harmony’ and rhythm, meters being manifestly sections of rhythm. Taine in his *Philosophie De L’Art* further interpreted simultaneously five major arts: poetry, sculpture, painting, architecture, and music (Taine, 1928, p. 44). When seeking commonly shared opinions from the two, both critics consider art as are presentation of the real world. Because of poetry, in particular, they agree on that the pictorial nature of poetry as produced out of artistic imagination is what the poet charges his fantasy into an image and then represents this image in front of its viewers.

In the contemporary post-modernism era, classification principles of modern art, which are based on aesthetic independence and artistic self-discipline, has gradually lost their theoretical legitimacy due to the constant contradiction with the currently art development reality, and are replaced by cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary exchanges and cooperation in art, which is so-called the “crossover” of art, to borrow the current fashionable term. At present, the increasingly widespread artistic reality, such as the integration and fusion of different art disciplines and styles, and even the cooperation between art and other industries such as fashion, finance, and real estate, and the lending of strength to each other, are sufficient to show that art transcending over is no longer simply a certain art event, but an art development trend that leads the current art fashion and trend, and represents a new type of art that is different from the modern aesthetic value orientation. It represents a new type of art concept that distinguishes itself from modern aesthetic values. The prevalence of art crossover is changing the history of art development, injecting much more fresh elements into the art itself, and thus art has become a more inclusive “general art”, illustrating the possibility of breakout and rebirth in the post-modern cultural field full of pessimistic arguments about the “termination of art”, and this is just like a new kind of art revolution (Chen, 2019, p. 25).

In the past, art seems to possess a boundary that is always held fast, but now it is outdated. Whoever keeps this boundary anymore is conservative and whoever breaks it up is new trendy (Gao, 2021, p. 1). After the modern art system had been established, there was a process of continuous expansion. The establishment of this system originally depended on the combination of poetry, painting, and music together. Before that, only two were combined, that is, poetry and music or poetry and painting.

It is conventionally admitted that “painting” is considered as the art of space, while “poetry” being the art of time. The former is feasible for expressing objects, perceived by the eyes, with the highest law being beauty; the latter is for portraying actions, perceived by the sense of hearing. In *Laocoon*,

Lessing proposed that poetry and painting are like two friendly neighbors who are inseparable from each other. Although there are always a tentative exchanges across the border, it is undoubtedly a betrayal of their independence if they give up their respective independence and throw themselves completely into each other's arms (Lessing, 2022, pp. 102-187).

Painting and poetry, as two very different forms of artistic expressions, show us certain specific beauties with their specific symbols: the former depends on color, line, shape, light, etc. while the latter comes with the help of language, including the format, rhyme and rhythm, structure and narrative strategies. It was mentioned earlier that poetry and painting are both imitation arts, and when one speaks of artists imitating poets or poets imitating artists, the phrase can be interpreted from two aspects: one is that this party actually uses the work of the other party as the object of imitation, and the second is that both parties imitate the same object, while this party adopting the manner and style of the other party.

However, there also exists a difference between poetry and painting in view of conception and expression. The text is a temporal, dynamic expression, while the painting is a spatial, static expression. Words can deliver a temporal process while pictures can frame a momentary situation. A painting is the condensation of a poem while a poem is the extension of a painting.

But when poetry and painting are intermingled, they can also reflect beauty. Voltaire once articulated a beautiful contrast between the two: a painting is a kind of silent poetry, while a poem is a sound painting, which is similar to the articulation of the Chinese poet of Wei Wang, who states that painting is a silent poem and poem, a voiced painting.

Why then does Laocoon not wail in his engravings, but wail in poems? This can trace back to the physical pain with which the poet's consciousness conveys the feeling of pain while the artist is not willing to follow the cliché path. For the ancient Greeks, beauty was the supreme law of the plastic arts, but the purpose of art was to entertain, and entertainment was optional. Keats pursues beauty in his poetry, and the principle that "beauty is truth, truth beauty" has been widely recognized, which refers to beauty as the ultimate goal of art that coincides with the Greek view. Keats can be said to have accomplished the transcendence over the boundary of poetry and painting, painting in poetry and poetry in painting, independent based on fusion and coexisting in the boundary of transcendence.

However, some exceptional aspects are interpreted in *Laocoon*. According to Lessing's elaboration, "painting" refers to general plastic arts, including sculpture, while "poetry" refers to literature in general. In *Laocoon*, Lessing believes that artists should avoid depicting moments at the zenith of passion in the process of creation. According to Lessing, the sculptor should concentrate on the point before the climax rather than the very moment when sculpting, to ensure that the viewer is left with enough room for further imagination (Lessing, 1766, p. 187). If Laocoon's wail was frozen in stone from the very start, it would appear "mundane and tedious". Both Lessing's praise of poetry and

depreciation of painting, and the emphases on the past over the present, illustrate very strong enlightenment though possess certain limitations observed from the present perspective.

Bards were first a special profession in ancient Celtic society, flourishing at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, and their roots are in the musical expressions derived from the martial spirit and chivalry of the Crusaders, which led to the formation and development of music. The earliest form of literature is poetry, which circulated in oral form, and the major poets were the bards (bard, gleeman, minnesinger, and minstrel). It is only after the introduction of Christianity to England that some poems were recorded. The most representative literary work of this period is the English national epic *Beowulf*, written in head rhyme (alliteration). They were geniuses and talents in their own right, and they could come from noble and rich families or lowly and poor ones. Thanks to their wisdom, they created many novel stories and provided them with good food and lodges. However, they were rejected later due to the non-recognition of their values and even denied by the statement that their works could not amuse God.

It was not until the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe that serious attempt began to be made to link these three in an aesthetic sense. Soon it came to five: in Bartow, painting was added to sculpture, and music brought in dance, creating the union of the five: poetry, painting, music, sculpture, and dance. The crossover and synthesis of the different disciplines with each other finally developed a huge family of art (Gao, 2021, p. 2). However, from the Romantic Movement onwards to the subsequent waves of social revolutions, there was always a constant stream of interest from the folk and lower social strata brought into art, which repetitively smashed the boundaries of the original art. But the development of Romanticism also succeeded in transcending the boundaries of art, as exemplified by the transgression of poetry and painting in the poems of Keats, as Plato asserted that what the artists produced was mere “the shadow of a shadow”.

In English romanticism, William Blake has always been claimed to be one of the forefathers of English Romantic poetry together with Robert Burns featured with Scottish style. His early works are simple and clear, while his later ones tend to be more metaphysical and mystical. Throughout his life, he lived a simple and quiet creative life with his wife and spent the whole of his lifespan on poetry and engravings. Therefore, his works are featured by the mutual echoing of each other.

Blake was indeed a devoted genius “away from the world”, reminding people of another influential but “mad” genius of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—Van Gogh. Throughout the history of the western art world, countless famous artists have painted countless works with biblical themes, but it is William Blake that adopted them as a means to express his interpretation of the secular world in contrast to the ideal. By implementing a completely personal perspective, he focused more on observing life and depicting the details of life into allegorical works, which is similar to that of Van Gogh. Blake was once seen sitting naked with his wife in the shade of a tree in the courtyard reading *Paradise Lost*, and when he saw

someone came, he happily compared himself and his wife to Adam and Eve. The content of Blake's artworks is completely different from that of other painters. He believed that all forms were perfected in poetic conception, which was not abstract and did not come from nature, but from imagination. His poems and paintings were created in his imagination, and he stated that a person who has never been to heaven in his mind and thoughts is not an artist. It is clear that Blake was an artist of imaginative genius, and the ideas of genius are often infinitely fluid. Is painting limited to a monotonous and tedious imitation of reality? This is a question. Blake used his paintings to prove to the world that painting, like poetry and music, exists and revels in immortal ideas. As in *Auguries of Innocence*, Blake composes that we can master the principle of the world in the grain of sand" and "wildflower" and thus eventually comprehends the mystery of the world. With the development of Romanticism, the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation including Shelley, Byron, and Keats also created poems, in which they search for pictoriality with the pursuit of beauty as evident under their pen.

### 3. John Keats's Pictorial Writing

Color is the most sensitive formal element that evokes our common aesthetic pleasure. Color is generally divided into warmness and coldness, lightness and darkness, soft and hard, front and back, etc. Keats is good at making use of color in his poems to create a beautiful picture for the readers, and the sense of color is evident in the pictorial nature of Keats' poetry, which will be analyzed from the following four perspectives.

#### 3.1 Writing of Warmness and Coldness

The 1<sup>st</sup> aspect is concerned with the warmness and coldness. The color itself does not have the temperature difference between warmness and coldness, and it is the visual color that triggers people's psychological association, which in turn produces a sense of warmness and coldness. Keats makes the best use of contrast between them in order to show the sense of color in his poetry. For example, in "To Autumn", the misty season and the round ripe fruits illustrate the interweaving of white and red, and the red apples are reflected in contrast to the white foggy sky. The orange sun and the green vines also set a novel set of contrasts. Keats adopts the warm and cold relationship between colors to present readers with the beauty of a colorful early autumn morning, telling them that even autumn is a season of interwoven colors and bountiful harvests.

"Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;  
Conspiring with him how to load and bless;  
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;  
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,  
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core" (Keats, 1820, p. 248)

There are also contrasts of warm and cold colors in “Ode to the Nightingale”. The 1<sup>st</sup> half illustrates John Keats’ concerns for the green fields and the bright red spring, for the poet’s need of drinking painfully, and then it goes into fatigue, sickness and fever, irritability, gray hair, and dark blue sky. This strong sense of color expresses the transformation of the poet’s mood with happiness to be lost and thus pondering over life:

“Tasting of Flora and the country green,  
Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth;  
O for a beaker full of the warm South,  
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene” (Keats, 1820, p. 232)

Likewise, in “Ode to Psyche”, the poet composes blue and silver flowers, purple buds waiting to bloom, and sapphire Phoebe (Diana), by which he set the contrast in light and it shows readers a vivid painting of Greek gods: “and in this wide quietness, /A rosy sanctuary will I dress” (Keats, 1820, p. 239). Besides, in “On the Grasshopper and Cricket”, Keats composes “when all the birds are faint with the hot sun, and hide in cooling trees, a voice will run”, “in summer luxury” and “on alone winter evening” (Keats, 1817, p. 49). All of such depiction creates the hot sunlight and the shade under the trees. The hot summer day and the frosty winter night and such obvious contrast of warmth and coldness can effectively convey to readers the infinite beauty and vigorous life of nature.

### 3.2 Writing of Softness and Hardness

The 2<sup>nd</sup> aspect sets the contrast between soft and hard colors in poetry, which the feeling of light colors convey the sense of softness and expansion, such as light blue and cream. The hard and soft feelings of color are also related to purity, since high purity and low brightness of the color bring a sense of hard feeling, for example, black. It can also be based on the degree of objects in order to determine the hardness and softness, for the stone is black and hard, but the spring is soft and flowing.

In “Keen, fitful gusts are whispering here and there”, the 1<sup>st</sup> part reads as follows: “the bushes half leafless, and dry” with “the dead leaves rustling drearily”, and these look hard and cold. But the end the lyrics like “of fair-haired Milton’s eloquent distress” and “of lovely Laura in her light green dress” (Keats, 1817, p. 46) give readers a sense of soft, gentle and elegant feeling.

### 3.3 Writing of Lightness and Darkness

The 3<sup>rd</sup> aspect lies in the contrast between lightness and darkness. There is an embodiment of the contrast between light and dark in “Ode to Melancholy”, the root-deep ebony head versus the pale and forehead, the typical opposition of black and white, as the poetry says, p. “But when the melancholy fit shall fall, sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud” (Keats, 1818, p. 250). It delivers Keats’s gloomy mood as changeable as the weather itself. In “To Byron”, Keats writes “Overshadowing sorrow doth not make thee less delightful” and “with a bright halo, shining beamily, as when a cloud the golden moon doth veil”, it “through the dark robe oft amber rays prevail” (Keats, 1817, p. 328). Keats was 19

years old when he wrote this poem, and the 26-year-old Byron wrote a work that moved Keats very much. So Keats praised him, though his opinion of Byron's poetry changed later.

In addition, in "O Solitude! If I Must with Thee Dwell", which appeared in the 1816 issue of *The Observer*, John Keats adopted a set of light and dark contrasts between a bright river and a shaded bush of branches and leaves, and with a gradual manifestation of color, the poem delivers the poet's view of solitude: "almost the highest bliss of human-kind, when to thy haunts two kindred spirits flee" (Keats, 1816, p. 45).

#### 3.4 Writing of the Foreground and Background Color

The 4<sup>th</sup> aspect lies in the contrast of foreground and background colors, and the sense of it depends on different frequencies of color imaging on the retina of the human eye. Generally, red, orange, yellow and other low frequencies of light color make people feel more imminent, while green, blue, purple and other high frequencies of light color make people feel more open.

In fact, this is a phenomenon of optical illusion. Generally speaking, warm colors, pure colors, strong contrast colors, large area colors, etc. create an intimate sense of feeling, but on the contrary, cool colors, light colors, clear colors, scattered colors, etc., possess a sense of openness. This point can be echoed with the above-mentioned color contrast between the warm and cold, since the former will make people feel closer while the latter more distant.

In "To Autumn", Keats in the 1<sup>st</sup> stanza writes "to bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees, and fill all fruit with ripeness to the core", which juxtaposes the contrasting colors of the red of apple and the pale green and thus gives readers a sense of proximity. But in the 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza, the sentences like "thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind; or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep" (Keats, 1820, p. 248) present the golden wheat fields and the light blue creek, which gives readers a feeling of openness and distance, just like an observer watching the hard-working people at sunrise and sunset from afar.

In short, the color contrasts in Keats' poetry are strong: warmth and coldness, hardness and softness, lightness and darkness, foreground and background color, all of these are reflected in his poetry. They are not only integrated with each other and being part of his poetry, but also becoming independent of each other, with their own particularities and distinctions.

The peculiarities lie in the fact that Keats focuses more on the "scene" when writing about the contrast between warmth and coldness and foreground and background colors, because spring and summer will give people a warm feeling, while autumn and winter are on the cold side. Subsequently, the foreground and background colors of the scenery are more likely to show readers the contrast, with the distant scene indistinct and vague and the near scene oppressive and massive.

What's more, Keats focuses more on "object" when writing about the contrast between lightness and darkness and hardness and softness of colors, because objects are easier to "feel" than scenes, whether they are tactile or visual. Keats has made good use of these skills to give his poems more character and

beauty.

#### 4. Origin of Keats's Pictorial Writing

Why does Keats' poetry reflect such a strong pictorial nature? His personal experience in both his life and his poetry writing cannot be ignored essentially.

Initially, his self-experience offers him a chance to contact the artistic world. On October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1820, after more than a month at sea and ten days of isolation on board, Keats and his companion Joseph Severn disembarks the Gulf of Naples. On that day, Keats had just turned twenty-five years old. He had come to recuperate from his illness in Italy where the climate was temperate and the sea breeze fresh which appears in his poem: "Oh ye! who have your eye-balls vexed and tired, Feast them upon the wideness of the sea" (Keats, 1820, p. 335).

For the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation of Romantic poets, Italy was in a sense of the spiritual homeland, the birthplace of the classical tradition alongside Greece and the source of the Renaissance, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it became a mandatory stop on the Grand Tour of Europe. Byron and Shelley spent much of their time here. Byron also called Italy "the garden of the world, the home of all art...even your weeds are beautiful, your barren riches, your ruins glorious, your ruins flawless" (Byron, 1812) in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

Near Naples, Keats saw a fresco depicting the nine muses and Apollo. It was already November, and there were still many flowers in bloom along the roadside, p. myrtle, laurel, cyclamen, like a garden of the god Pan. Keats was surprised to see roses at this time of year, so he went up to them, but found that they were no longer fragrant. He lamented, "what is a rose that has lost its fragrance?" At the place where Cicero perished, Keats remembered his 1<sup>st</sup> encounter with classical literature, and he was attributed by his classmates to a solid foundation in classical languages, so he chose to abandon medicine and devoted himself to his pursuit of poetry. This would have been Keats' 1<sup>st</sup> encounter with painting, and such beautiful art unfolding before his eyes gives Keats an infinite vision of beauty, into which he put his future poetry.

The subsequent source comes from his precursors and his peer poets. Keats always admires Milton, and his poetic technique possesses a Miltonic flavor. Milton's poetry has been known for its pictorial nature, which exerts a profound influence on Keats. Keats is also influenced by Spencer and he even imitates him in "Imitation of Spencer", in which Keats portrays the elegant and noble swan, which is as white as snow and sings to the sky with a curved neck (Cui, 2019, p. 73).

Influenced by Milton and Milton's ability to turn the most insufferable things into picturesque things, John Keats transfers his commitment to the beauty in written words. For example, both Milton and Keats are committed to the beauty of the images in words, as exemplified by the swan in both. In Milton's writing, the white swan washes her fluffy breast on the silvery lake; she sometimes uncovers

her cloak-like white wings and gracefully paddles her houseboat with her paws; she also raises her strong feathers and leaves the water as if floating in the air. “Knowledge enormously makes a God of me. /Names, deeds, gray legends, dire events, rebellions, /Majesties, sovran voices, agonies, /Creations and destroying, all at once /Pour into the wide hollows of my brain, /And deify me, as if some blithe wine /Or bright elixir peerless I had drunk, /And so become immortal—Thus the God(Keats, 1820, p. 276). It is clear that poet’s desire to surpass his predecessors’ courage, determination and practice is shown.

Besides, Keats made many friends in his life, including painter friends who are particularly close to him, and this also exerted an influence on his poetry. Hayden is a painter and an intimate friend of the Keats. In Keats’s “To Hayden”, he writes “thou hadst beheld the full Hesperian shine of their star in the east, and gone to worship them I” (Keats, 1820, p. 334). The great souls are said to refer to the poets Wordsworth, Leigh Hunt, and Hayden. It must be said that these three men’s appreciation of painting also invariably influenced Keats’ aesthetic approach to painting.

Hayden’s intense pursuit of art had a profound influence on Keats. Convinced of the educational value of history painting to the nation, Hayden dedicated his life to the creation of everlasting history paintings. On March 2, 1817, Keats visited the British Museum with Hayden and Reynolds and they walked through almost the entire Elgin Marble Statue Gallery. Byron was strongly opposed to plundering of the treasures of the Athenian Pantheon by the British. In his travels, he had rebuked Lord Elgin and the British government for their banditry: they see the palm trees of the English, destroy your walls, and tear down your decaying sanctuary, but do not weep, for their eyes are exceedingly dull. While Hayden argued with Richard Payne Knight about whether the statues were Roman or Greek in origin, Keats had long since drowned in the huge cluster of statues: serene horse heads, mutilated river gods, Lapidians fighting with centaurs, etc. The treasures of the great sculptor Phidias shook him: “my spirit is too weak—mortality, weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep. And each imagined pinnacle and steep. Of godlike hardship tells me that I must die, like a sick eagle looking at the sky” (Keats, 1817, p. 333).

The line “the sick eagle looking at the sky” in “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” conveys the honesty of the Romantic poet and the characteristic humility of Keats. Although it is difficult for him to reach the high artistic level of the ancients, he can see through these fragmented sculptures the view from before the beginning of time. This poem is one of the most mature Keats’ early works, and his only complete long poem, consisting of more than four hundred lines. Like Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey*, which traces different stages of spiritual growth and imaginative development. Keats sees antiquities, one after another, piled up into history, which has disappeared, leaving behind reality. Keats laments the artifacts and hates that no one can empathize with them, so he looks at these ghostly works with a “fragile mind”, which makes people dazzled and distressed.

In addition to friends, his beloved also constitutes a particular origin for his composition of paintings for John Keats' life. Keats lived a short life and he unfortunately was deprived of his life at the gold age of 25 in 1821. Lucky for him since he met his lifelong companion—Fanny, whose heart-thumping love letters also brought Keats beauty and added to the pictorial nature of his poetry. Keats and Fannymet in spring just as a red leather diary met a stamp with a Greek lyre design, and their love sprouted. Keats was so excited to write these lines: “The reach of fluttering Love, and make him cower lowly while I soar? No, that is vulgarism, Shall I gulp wine? A heresy and schism, Foisted into the canon law of love;—No,—wine is only sweet to happy men” (Keats, 1820, p. 328). A light and lovely picture of spring love emerge, as if the pink cherry blossoms and the bright green branches of the trees are intertwined.

In “Bright Star”, Keats wishes to be as firm as a star but unwilling to hang high in the night sky alone. The 1<sup>st</sup> half of the poem is on the moor, the mountains, and the snow, creating a sense of desolation, but then immediately turns to warmth: The sweet breast and gentle breath of a lover. Such warmth and coldness make the reader feel so comfortable that they cannot help continue reading. This poetry shows Keats' awareness, pursuit, and interpretation of beauty and the poetic expression and reproduction of beauty, showing that the poet places beauty at the center of his poetic beliefs and regards it as the true meaning of poetic beliefs. Keats does not deny the beauty of reality, but is more attracted to the beauty of the senses. He is more interested in the beauty of sense, the beauty of Greek and Roman mythology, and aspires to make beauty constant through imagination (Cui, 2019, p. 168). In his heart, Fanny is compared to the flowers that spawn love, turning into a poem that blooms on Keats' desk. Once autumn arrived, the fresh scent of melons and crops replaced the flirtatious marriage of spring. One day, Keats met with a freshly harvested wheat field, which was gold and warm, superior to a large oil painting, which gave Keats an urge to embrace it and kiss it as if he could have kissed Fanny for thousands of times. Keats thumped his heart because Fanny was always new, as if he was seeing her for the first time forever. This impulse led to the later publication of “To Autumn”. In this poem, the poet sits like an elf in a barn and a threshing floor, picks up wheat and crosses a stream, and watches the wine drip down in a slow line by the fruit squeeze. In this way, a small ditty is depicted in words, and finally a succession of levels into one of the most beautiful pictures of autumn in the history of English literature.

### **5. The Significance of Keats's Pictorial Writing**

The aesthetic character of Keats' poetry is rich in its expressions of positive democratic consciousness, the pursuit of freedom, equality and true love (Zhang, 2002, p. 67), which is a poetic and aesthetic close to perfection.

First of all, Keats' pursuit of true beauty is constant. From the perspective of his personal life, Keats' short life was undoubtedly full of hardships and difficulties, but varied with different styles. The twists

and turns of Keats's journey made him persist in eulogizing an eternal ideal, which is "beauty". His long narrative *Hyperion* demonstrates the leading character's fierce pursuit of the moon goddess Cynthia, which is a spiritual symbol of the poet's pursuit of pure and genuine beauty, as a common feature of the times. Keats claims the aesthetic principle of "beauty is truth, truth beauty" and this aesthetic idea of the equivalence of beauty and truth is one of the most important psychological qualities of Keats as a Romantic poet, which emphasizes the inevitable connection between the principle of factory beauty and things (Qiu, 1992, p. 46), thus giving Keats' poetry a deeper touch of sincerity and sensitivity. The tremendous artistic power of Keats' poetry comes first from his "true feelings"—he feels the nature, the society and the glory of art with his own heart. He once expressed that he could never write anything with false feelings (Oxford, 1970).

Second, Keats' poetry is full of feelings and senses. Possessing a wealth of ideas and emotions, Keats possesses a keen sense of society and life. What Keats got was precisely an artistic space full of objects and emotions, with imagery becoming indispensable. For instance in "Ode to a Nightingale", Keats writes "O, for a draught of vintage! That hath been/Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth/Tasting of Flora and the country green/Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth/O for a beaker full of the warm South/Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene/with beaded bubbles winking at the brim/And purple-stained mouth/That I might drink, and leave the world unseen/And with thee fade away into the forest dim" (Keats, 1820, p. 232). Here, we cannot help but admiring the poet's taste, for his vision and color sense are so delicately developed, and his association and imagination are so dense and open. In the flow of these sensations or images, various facets and subtle tremors of Keats's mind are expressed rarely and tangibly.

Keats is not in his passionate love with Fanny but with quite contradictory feelings and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" echoes such feelings. When this poem was written during that period, Keats and Fanny were passionately in love, and it is based on a 1424 French poem of the same name by the French poet Alain Chartier (1385-1430), but the original poem is centered on the "courtly love" and it is undoubtedly much deeper and darker. Keats combines the seemingly contradictory themes of love and death in this single work in order to achieve a powerfully contrasting effect.

There are also strong contrasts in warmth and coldness and lightness and darkness in this poem: "I see a lily on thy brow/with anguish moist and fever dew/And on thy cheek a fading rose fast withereth too" (Keats, 1819, p. 303). The white lily-like forehead corners and rose-colored cheeks are the use of color contrast, the cool color of white contrasts with the warm color of red, symbolizing death and life. Secondly, some expressions including "I met a lady in the meads", "I made a garland for her head" and "She found me roots of relish sweet/And honey wild, and manna dew" (Keats, 1819, p. 303) illustrate the brightness of daily life. But in the last stanza, Keats writes "I saw pale kings, and princes too/Pale warriors, death-pale were they all" and "I saw their starved lips in the gloam/with horrid warning gaped

wide” (Keats, 1819, p. 303), which symbolizes the darkness of death in sharp contrast with the previous contents. The expression “quickly withering” implies the poet’s despair. So Keats’s dreams of the Merci Dame, and the white glowing skeleton in the darkness foreshadowed the impending disaster. The contrast between the withered reeds and the squirrel’s nest filled with food in the poem reflects the emptiness and abundance, just as the love between Keats and Fanny, since death and passionate love illustrate the embodiment of this contradiction.

The plot of the poem is hidden, seemingly abrupt, but with an air of gloomy mystery that invites imagination. The “Merci Dame” in the poem became one of the synonyms for “serpentine beauty” in the literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century European. At the time of the poem’s composition, Keats was in a sweet but obstructive relationship with Fanny on the one hand, and suffering from illness on the other hand (although tuberculosis had not yet been diagnosed), so the theme of love and death in the poem undoubtedly has some realistic elements, but what is more touching are the haziness, mystery and ambiguity.

The picturesque writing of John Keats influences his own poetic style, and his poetry also deeply influences the English literature. The influences can be mainly summarized in three categories: the rich depiction of the senses, the idealization of the Middle Ages, and the paradoxes about art and thought, which were generally positive and beneficial. Keats mainly manifests his influences on many English poets and their works in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As one of the five major poets of the English Romantic period, Keats exerts historical importance due to three main reasons: first, in terms of the form and style of his poetry, he is the most romantic one of the English Romantic poets, and his language is opulent and flamboyant in dealing with Greek themes, without any restraints of Greek art. Keats is thus known as the goldsmith of language and the poet of poets.

Second, he was indifferent to the impulses generated by the social dramas and the fraternal enthusiasm of the French Revolution. In his view, poetry was detached from contemporary life by going back to the past, and poetry itself should serve beauty entirely. Because of this, he seems bound to stand behind his time.

Finally, there is a great influence on subsequent generations of poets. From the mid-nineteenth century to the twentieth century, Keats had had a profound influence on many poets and artists. Certainly, if we admit Keats is in-depth influenced by painting, then his poems represented by “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” also offer inspiration to other artists to produce their paintings based on his writing. A large number of British painters have painted various versions of “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, including Sir Francis Bernard Dixie, President of the Royal Academy of Arts, John William Waterhouse, a former Raphaelite, Arthur Hughes, and Flint, a Scottish watercolorist, among others. Although Keats’s creative career lasted only four short years, it is evident from the continuous derivation of “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” over the past century that the poet’s immortal soul continues to haunt and reverberate in the

pantheon of generations of subsequent generations of artists.

## 6. Conclusion

The expression “beauty is truth, truth beauty” has been used throughout Keats’ life. Keats struggled for beauty throughout his life, both in his poetic writing and in his personal life. The pictorial nature of his poetry shows a certain extent of his relentless pursuit of beauty. By excelling in depicting natural scenery and the external appearance of things, expressing the sense of color and three-dimensionality of scenery, attaching importance to writing techniques, and pursuing flamboyant language, he greatly influenced the creation of lyric poetry by later generations. Rich in imagination, brilliant in color, and overflowing with the desire for freedom, his poetry perfectly embodies the characteristics of Western Romanticism and shows the progressive tendency of anti-classicism.

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