

John Keats' s Holistic Ecological View

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Abstract

John Keats was one of the representative poets of the second generation of Romanticism in England. During his lifetime, his poetic reputation was not recognized by society, and his works faced difficulties in publication, as well as frequent ridicule and reproach from critics. After his death, the poetic and theoretical value of his works was ultimately affirmed in literary history, with odes such as "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Ode to a Nightingale," and "To Autumn" becoming timeless treasures in the history of poetry. Keats exerted a profound influence on the literary world, and Alfred Tennyson, the Poet Laureate of the Victorian era, held his poetry in the highest regard. This paper will employ ecocriticism to examine four poems— "O Solitude!" "Who Has Been Long in City Pent" "On the Grasshopper and Cricket " and "Ode to a Nightingale". By minimizing human subjectivity and amplifying the subjectivity of others (especially creatures of nature), Keats employed narrative strategies that reflect his emphasis on the importance of nature's value. However, Keats occasionally reverted to an ego-centered narrative perspective, which was a necessary narrative strategy to critique anthropocentrism. Through this, Keats advocated an ecological holistic view: human beings should break free from the shackles of anthropocentrism, recognize the subjectivity of nature itself, and humans and nature can integrate as a whole and co-exist harmoniously.

Keywords

John Keats; ecocriticism; anthropocentrism; holistic ecological view.

1. Introduction

Domestic and foreign scholars' researches on Keats' poetry can be divided into multiple categories, which mainly focus on the aesthetics presented in Keats' poetry, Keats's own poetic theory, Keats's narrative techniques, and Keats's ecological views.

As for the perspective of aesthetics, Forest Pyle believes that both Keats and Shelley have radical aestheticism, and we can encounter the scene and the effects of radical aestheticism by engaging fully the trajectory of a poetic immersion in the aesthetic[13]. Lubna Hasan argues that the conflict of ethic and aesthetics is seen in the light of Keats's concept of "negative capability" [8]. Yang Qiaonan and Wu Yongqiang publish "On the Unique Style of Aesthetics of John Keats's "To Autumn"". They make a detailed aesthetics analysis from image to rhetoric, and from structure to rhythm. Apart from that, they also analyze the beauty in ecology, nature, and harmony in "To Autumn"[17].

As for Keats's poetics, Abrams firmly argues that Keats's poetics is typical romantic poetics and belongs to expressive theories on account of his metaphorical writing [1]. Xie Haichang, with the overall consideration of historical background and Keats's poems and letters, contends that Keats's poetics is pragmatic theory instead of expressive theory [16]. Zhang Siqi makes a comparative study between Keats's poetics and eastern poetics[19]. Fu Xiuyan probes Keats's poetic within its inner logic, and comes to conclusion that "John Keats's view on poetry constitute an organic and unified theoretical system"[4].

As for Keats's narrative strategy, Scott, Grant F studies ekphrasis in Keats's poems. He especially pays intensive attention to Keats's famous odes for instance, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "To

Autumn". Keats's poems vividly represent a scroll of Grecian urn and prosperous and vibrant autumn[14]. Fu Xiuyan has analyzed sounds in Keats's poems from the perspective of auditory narration, and points out that there exists soundscape in Keats poems [4]. Zhang Yan also analyzes "Ode on a Grecian Urn" from the perspective of ekphrasis, and reveals the unique ekphrasis aesthetics of this ode [21].

As for the perspective of ecocriticism, Jonathan Bate, a leading representative in green studies in Britain, has issued several papers concerning Keats's nature poems, especially "To Autumn". He asserts that "To Autumn" is closely related to its climate condition at that time and this poem presents human wellbeing and a stable climate are codependent [2]. Fu Xiuyan analyzes a series of Keats's ecological poems, explicitly asserts that John Keats is "The Nature's Auscultator" as well as has powerfully ecological sensitivity [4]. Liu Maosheng, combining auditory narration with ecological ethics narration, focuses on interpretation of the harmonious unification between sounds and sights as well as the persistent pursuit of Keats's ecological ethics [10]. And he argues that nature inspires Keats's creative impulse, declares "the impact of ecology on Keats's artistic growth and maturity", and believes ecological consciousness plays an important role in understanding the branches of aesthetics, philosophy, and ethics in Keats's theory of imagination [10].

To sum up, scholars and critics have done a comprehensive study on Keats's poems at home and abroad, which contributes to our comprehension towards the different themes of Keats's poems. At the outset, critics focus on language-form study. Later, with the development of different literary criticism and theory, critics take historical background and ecological crisis into consideration, and embark on such new interpretations as new historicism and ecocriticism on Keats's poems.

An important characteristic of the Romantic movement is the reverence for nature, and all romantic poets share a common preference for nature, which is prominently expressed in their poetry. Wordsworth praises daffodils, Byron lauds the sea, and Shelley eulogizes the west wind and skylarks. Based on those depiction in romantic poets' writings, nature is one of the archetypal characteristics among romantic poets and serves as inexhaustible inspirations for romantic poets. Naturally, the exploration of the relationship between humans and nature, as a prominent feature and theme of British Romantic poetry, provides fertile soil for literary ecocriticism, and it is feasible to appreciate Keats' poetry through ecocriticism.

2. The Sorrow and Solitude of Living in London in "O Solitude!" and "Who Has Been Long in City Pent"

In the 1870s, the first Industrial Revolution began in Britain, which brought rapid economic development to the country, but at the same time, it also had negative impacts. One of the negative impacts was the severe pollution of the environment in the City of London. Tuberculosis and plagues were rampant. However, sadly, the medical level did not develop cures that can effectively treat tuberculosis, and the polluted environment failed to attract the attention of the government. The government still encouraged industrialization and urbanization, and the individual ecological awareness of society was also extremely weak. Therefore, romantic poets used poetry as a weapon to expose and criticize the negative impact of industrialization.

The poet who exposes the corruption of London's environment is not Keats alone. Even before Keats, the romantic poet William Blake had already depicted a lifeless scene of London in "London". So, how does Keats feel about London? Keats appeals to his feelings in two poems, "O, Solitude" and "Who Has Been Long in City Pent".

2.1. The Loneliness and Discomfort in “O Solitude”

In January 1816, Keats wrote “O Solitude”, directly expressed his discomfort. “If I must with thee dwell, /Let it not be among the jumbled heap/ Of murky buildings. Climb with me the steep—/Nature’s observatory” (line 1-4)[14]. William Wordsworth, one of the first generation of British romantic poets, in the book seven of “Prelude”, uttered his primary apprehension regarding London: “above all, one thought/ Baffled my understanding, how men lived/ Even next-door neighbors, as we say, yet still/ Strangers, and knowing not each other’s names”. Wordsworth witnessed people were indifferent to personal interaction. By the same token, for Keats, dwelling in London brought solitude. Human’s relationship in London was alienated and inanimate. Residing alone in London whose natural environment was totally different from Enfield and Etmond, stressed in coping with daily medical training, far from his brothers and friends, Keats’s solitude was like “As a lonely stranger in the strange land, /Every holiday the homesickness amplifies” .

As far as Keats was concerned, buildings after buildings in London were eyesores which were obstacles for him to appreciate nature. and cut him off from nature. In Etmond, Keats got access to forests and green fields. If Keats was free, he must take him with books and step into forests to read [5]. Moreover, Etmond was not far from Enfield. Keats always walked to Enfield school and discussed literary especially poems with Charles Clark. In London, in order to get close to nature, Keats climbed the dell to observe nature:

Its flowery slopes, its river’s crystal swell,
 May seem a span; let me thy vigils keep
 ’Mongst boughs pavilioned, where the deer’s swift leap
 Startles the wild bee from the foxglove bell (line 5-8)[14]

Crystal river, flowers-dotted slopes, lush leaves, leaping deer, wild bee, and foxglove bell composed a beautiful nature. In Keats’s viewpoint, dwelling with nature “sure must be/ Almost the highest bliss of human-kind” (line 12-13)[6].

At the beginning of “O Solitude”, Keats expressed his uneasy feelings toward the high buildings in London. In the end, Keats showed his yearning for dwelling with nature.

2.2. The Confinement and Distress in “Who Has Been Long in City Pent”

If Keats could bear the solitude and “jumbled heap of murky buildings” in January 1816, Keats could not stand the feeling of pent in city any longer after five months. It was in June 1816 that Keats’s feeling burst into a passionate denunciation in Long in City Pent, in which he asserted modernized London was a stifling prison.

To one who has been long in city pent,
 Tis very sweet to look into the fair
 And open face of heaven, to breathe a prayer
 Full in the smile of the blue firmament. (Line 1-4)[15]

The first line directly expresses that to dwell in London was to survive in a terrible prison. In January 1816, Keats felt solitude, but now Keats felt himself pent. Living in London for Keats was a kind of torture. The word “pent” served as pun. On the one hand, it well triggered that it was loth for Keats to live in London; on the other hand, it implied that living in London was linked to be jarred in prison. In the Romantic era, a sharp rise in population took place, and an increasing number of factories were established to boost industrialized economy. However, at

the same time, environmental problems became much more severe and noticeable, taking on a new sense of urgency [9]. Heaps of buildings were needed to provide abode for the large number of populations, though they blocked people's sight. Then, "fair and open" heaven was replaced with the darkness and narrowness. Sky was always enshrouded by smog and the blue firmament vanished. Keats earnestly hoped to "look into the fair and open face of heaven", and did pray under blue firmament.

The burning of coals led to air pollution. Large quantities of rural population were pouring into London. The multiple accumulation of population accelerated the process of British urbanization, but in the meantime, the roaring number of populations increased London's environmental pressure, for instance, the increase of rubbishes. Factories emitted polluted waters and gases. Naturally, at that time, environmental pollution in London evolved into a notable crisis which was menacing the existence and development of human beings.

Pollution was so rampant that thick smog always lingered in the air. Tuberculosis was so rampant that many British people died at a very young age which could explain why the death rates was roaring at that time. In the middle of the 18th century, the average life expectancy of British citizens was only 29 years old, the death rate was as high as 3.4%, and the birth rate was close to 3.5%. One of the reasons why death was so rampant was the poor sanitary conditions. Not to mention other parts of Britain, London alone had many slums lacking water supply and sewage facilities. Such poor environment deepened Keats's detest on dwelling in London. Human exerted tremendous disruptive influence on the environment.

Keats didn't display passionate resistance on urbanization and industrialization. Keats didn't depict many contaminated scenes in the city, but concentrated on the high buildings which were just like prisons jailing dwellers in London.

Environmental justice ecocritics regard ecology as the sum of natural ecology and social ecology, and environment as the joint of natural environment and man-made environment [11]. The "buildings on buildings" composed a scene of urban dense forest. The absence of urban nature and fallen environment made London a dissolute city.

Dwelling In London, Keats went through the estranged personal relationship, and witnessed the contaminated urban environment. Accordingly, Keats was unaccustomed, and refused to adapt himself to the vicissitudes of London. He was eager to retreat from the modernized London, longed for returning to fresh and comfortable nature who could give him access to his own deliriums.

Many environmentalists argue that we need to develop a value system which takes the intrinsic or inherent value of nature as its starting point [7]. For Keats, the distinction between being in city and being in nature is cardinal; Following his inner yearning for nature, Keats changed passive complains about the anthropocentrism and alienation into positive searching. Then, Keats was resolved to approach nature to receive nature's inspiration, to know bond between human and nature, to understand and respect nature's law and attain the feasible solution to effectively address the human-nature relationship.

3. The Joy and Harmonious Human-Animal Relationship in "On the Grasshopper and Cricket" and "Ode to a Nightingale"

Keats entered Enfield School, located 12 miles north of London, in 1803. Keats' sensitivity to nature was influenced by the early natural environment in which Enfield School was located. The school was surrounded by undulating hills and dense shade of trees, with a new river channel flowing through Enfield town. Outside the school is a large, dense grassland that stretches all the way to the edge of a lush forest in the distance. Keats could hear the chirping of grasshoppers on the grass at night and the occasional nightingale singing in Enfield Forest. In such a natural environment, Keats' love for nature slowly sprouted.

Keats' sensitivity to nature also benefited from the humanistic environment of Enfield School. At that time, the principal of Enfield School was Clark. Principal Clark's educational philosophy emphasizes experiential learning, advocating for teachers to lead students out of the classroom so that they can truly feel and experience nature. In such an educational environment, Keats developed a personality that emphasizes experience and free thinking, and also developed an interest in observing nature. Keats' sensitivity to heavenly sounds comes from such an environment. The poems "On the Grasshoppers and Crickets" and "Ode to a Nightingale" show that Keats had a pair of musician ears. He not only regarded the chirping of birds and insects as music, but also heard the messages conveyed by nature to humans

3.1. The Delight and Harmony in "On the Grasshopper and Cricket"

Due to his education in Clark school, Keats innermost interests in nature was approved. Eight years in Enfield school, a progressive liberal school, greatly cultivated Keats's ecological consciousness. Teachers in Enfield school always instructed students how to observe nature. Keats clearly remembered that a teacher once let the whole class out of the school gate, pointing to the sky, and asked the students to identify groups of swallows flying south. In Enfield school, Keats studied English literature, modern languages, and Latin. Keats read Virgil's pastoral poetry.

Keats was excessively sensitive to sounds in nature and a striking feature in this sonnet "On the Grasshopper and Cricket" was that he compared nature's sounds to the poetry of earth.

In summer, "the poetry of earth is never dead" (line 1)[15]. The grasshopper is enjoying his time. "When all the birds are faint with the hot sun, /And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run/ From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead" (line 3-4)[15]. Keats unveils: "that is the grasshopper's-he takes the lead/ In summer luxury". Grasshopper's voice is running from hedge to hedge. Birds as well as grasshoppers are the singers of earth in summer.

When birds were faint, they would hide in the trees to seek cool shelter. When grasshoppers were tired, they would rest beneath the weeds. Birds, trees, grasshoppers, and weeds were interconnected. A weed is not a kind of plant, only the wrong kind in the wrong place. Eliminating weeds is obviously a problem in gardening, but defining weeds in the first place requires a cultural, not horticultural, analysis [7].

In winter, "the poetry of earth is ceasing never". Forests' voice and crickets were the singers of earth. "When the forest/ Has wrought a silence, from the stove there shrills/ the cricket's song," Forest ceased to give birth to voice, but the cricket's song came out, making the words "ceasing never" convincing. Noticeably, crickets rested beside the stove to keep warm in the long and cold winter. In the opinion of the ecological critic Neil Evernden, what is truly subversive in ecology is not its complex concept, but its basic premise: interconnection. Ecologist Barry Commoner also believes that everything is related to other things, which is the first rule of ecology. Keats saw the relationship between forests and birds, between weeds and crickets, and between stoves and crickets. Keats discovered the subtle interconnect between animals and humans.

But how was the theme of harmony between humans and animals achieved? It was worth noting that stove, a typical thing of human, signified the existence of humans in this sonnet, and it was the stove that built a connection between the cricket and humans.

The inconspicuous cricket was not killed by humans around the stove, on the contrary, cricket provided humans with the inspirations to write poems, and humans can receive information from creatures in nature. The most insignificant insects and reptiles are of much more consequence, and have much more influence in the oeconomy of nature, than the incurious are aware of; and are mighty in their effect, from their minuteness, which renders them less an object of attention [2].

If just simply saying that grasshopper was the singer of summer, cricket was the singer of winter, this sonnet was nothing more but a common one. In the last two lines, Keats wrote that "And seems to one in drowsiness half lost, / The grasshoppers among some grassy hill." The appearance of grasshopper resonated with the beginning of grasshopper. The advent of spring was followed by the end of winter. It was so surprising that Keats used a cyclic structure and made this poem replete with the unceasing sounds either of grasshopper or of cricket.

What could be noticed was that Keats just deployed a human's imagery, stove, in the poem, and detailed grasshopper and cricket. Keats nearly covered the perceived subject-humans, and considering anthropomorphism, brought the mechanical nature to life. Although anthropomorphism is the projection of humans' consciousness, it plays a role in compromising anthropocentrism. Shaviro commented that "giving emotion to stone can avoid the dualism that only human beings have emotion". Grasshopper and cricket were not aesthetic objects, and human did not gaze at and scarcely disturb nature. Human live harmoniously with non-human surroundings.

3.2. The Subjectivity and Harmony in "Ode to a Nightingale"

In "Ode to a Nightingale", Keats chose to weaken narrator's subjectivity, unified corporeal narrator with nightingale, but Keats did not totally unify narrator with nightingale from the start to the end. When it was necessary, Keats dragged narrator out of nightingale, then narrator recovered his own identity with the aim of expressing deep apprehension and solicitude towards the fallen and defiled environment and criticizing the polluted and smashing society. Keats employed this very kind of narrative strategy, simultaneously, practiced his poetics of "negative capability" and "a poet has no self" to convey that humans can integrate themselves with nature in the case of weakening human's absolute subjectivity.

That "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" opened the poem. It was known that most of Keats' poems begin with nature imagery, and it was uncommon to see Keats' subjective feeling at the outset. Most scholar pointed out that "a drowsy numbness" showed the perfect of negative capability so that Keats can enter nightingale. Keats wrote in letter as this. So, this interpretation was reasonable and convincing. The expression of "my heart aches" aroused readers' interest and stirred readers' bewilderment. Not a single reason was given when it came to the reason why Keats's heart aches. The answer to the question was articulated in the latter stanzas. nightingale a time-transcending subject.

What is negative capability? After having sunk into lethe-wards, negative capability enabled Keats to integrate with nightingale, and he further uttered that "This not through envy of thy happy lot, / But being too happy in thine happiness" It showed that Keats took nightingale's delight as his own delight. At present, empathy evidently occurred. Keats forsaken his subjectivity as a human being, and instilled himself into and integrated himself with the object, nightingale, an inseparable part of nature to indicate that he wanted to be a part of nature.

Keats was intoxicated by "some melodious plot" of the "light-winged Dryad", who was singing for summer in full ease. Both nightingale and summer kept in their own state without the interference of Keats's feelings. It signaled that Keats gave "Object priority" to nature which was an unchangeable object since the dualism of Rene Descartes. Keats can not only resonate with nightingale, but also can resonate with sunset and sparrow. "The setting sun will always set me to rights, or if a Sparrow come before my Window, I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel" (letters 55)[14].

In letter to George and Georgiana Keats, Keats openly said that I said this same Claret is the only palate-passion I have; I forgot game. I must plead guilty to the breast of a Partridge, the back of a hare, the backbone of a grouse, the wing and side of a Pheasant and a Woodcock passim (letters 258-259)[14]. Keats showed a keen fondness of wine and game. His writing of

nightingale, not to arouse our awareness of protecting wild animals, but to appeal of de-anthropocentrism.

Keats drank a drought of vintage, was eager to leave the world and fade away into the dim forest. "Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget/ What thou among the leaves hast never known/" Why did Keats want to leave the world? How was the world? In the forest, Keats encountered "the leaves hast never known". Since the Bible, nature was prescribed to serve the ends of humans, and humans' endless exploration on nature was justified. By "dissolving" with nightingale, on the one hand, Keats could de-enchanted the nature as such, on the other hand, further weakened anthropocentrism. Keats is expert at this vacillation. Obviously, Keats was now dragged himself out of nightingale, not always being immersed in nature, and was in his own self, and employed deformalization to re-enchanted the nature. In addition to that, a parallelism was employed: to describe the situations in the world which was full of weariness, fever, and anxiety.

where men sit and hear each other groan;
 where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
 where youth grow 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, (Lines 24-29)[15]

Some evil spell had settled on the world: Men, the paralyzed as well as the youth were in a forlorn state. Beauty and love are reduced to the victims of the polluted world. Everywhere was a shadow of death. Keats explicitly introduced four kinds of group to explain the reason why he would rather fade into forest than live in the world. So ridiculous were those specific scenes. The industrialized and urbanized Britain should be so hopeless and lifeless. Though fading into forest, Keats could not forget the world and brooded over the reality. "But the world is full of troubles and I have not much reason to think myself pestered with many." (Letters 55)[14] Keats recognized a world repeatedly disfigured by contaminated environment. Keats propelled us into fusion an ecstatic commutation with the Other, but the moment cannot stay-it is reneged upon -and we are delivered back to ourselves with an overpowering self-awareness.

After overtly expressing his despondency and despair when confronting such a world, Keats was with nightingale again by means of the wings of Posey, namely, Keats melted into nature again. "But here there is no light, / Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown/ Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways." With the aim of finding somewhere unpolluted in forest. Disappointingly, even if in the forest, the environment was so terrible. Green was not conspicuous on account of pollution, and the thick mist nearly blocked the light. Keats cannot see what flowers are in his feet, nor soft incense on the boughs. Then, Keats found:

The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
 White-hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
 Fast-fading violets covered up in leaves;
 And mid-May's eldest child,
 The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine (Lines 45-49)[15]

These flowers and trees naturally appeared in the speaker's perspective, but they did not surrender to the human's perspective, but showed vitality. The reason was that the speaker overcame self and weakened the subjective consciousness, gave object priority to nature.

“Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain/ To thy high requiem become a sod.” nightingale’s song was not melodious anymore, but was a requiem. Maybe, now, here “I” did not refer to Keats only, but refer to the humans in the world. Because of polluting natural environment, humans were waiting impending death.

Keats asserted that nightingale was immortal bird, and no hungry generations could tread it down. Moreover, “Perhaps the voice I hear this passing night was heard/ In ancient days by emperor and clown”

Perhaps the self-same song that found a path/ Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home, / She stood in tears amid the alien corn;” Here, Keats compared himself to Ruth. Ruth stood in tears amid the alien corn. Now, Keats was worried about the vicissitude of Britain’s environment. Two key contrasts in this period were highlighted in the pastoral tradition: the spatial distinction of town and country, and the temporal distinction of idyllic past and fallen present[7].

4. Conclusion

Keats expressed the sorrow of living in the city of London in “O Solitude!” and “Who Has Been Long in City Pent”, and the joy of being close to nature in “On the Grasshopper and the Cricket” and “Ode to a Nightingale”. Keats filled in the blanks with the entities of grasshoppers, crickets, and nightingales in his poems “On the Grasshopper and the Cricket” and “Ode to a Nightingale”, allowing his imagination to run freely and narrate from the perspectives of grasshoppers, crickets, and nightingales to the fullest extent possible. These poems collectively express Keats’s ecological view: human and nature, who have inherent similarities, have subjectivity. Human beings should break free from the rigid thinking of anthropocentrism, recognize the nobility of nature, coexist with nature, and build a community of harmony between man and nature.

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