

A Poet Dwells in Beauty *A Kantian Reading of Keats's Poetry*

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Received: June 2, 2014 Accepted: August 1, 2014 Online Published: August 29, 2014

doi:10.5539/ells.v4n3p46 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ells.v4n3p46>

Abstract

John Keats, the great literary figure of Romanticism in the 19th century, was the one whose name was written in water. This essay tries to approach Keats's poetry from the perspective of Kant, the forefather of German Classical Philosophy by providing examples to show their great aesthetic features. The features can be summarized as follows: a poet should have negative capability, the ability enabling him to remain an aesthetic distance instead of using literature for utilitarian purpose; the revealing of experience of beauty that intimates the harmony within man's dual nature as free and physical being; the superiority of man's cognitive power, especially imagination and fancy, over the power of sensibility; transcendence from the sensory to the supersensible through taste or experience of beauty, and for himself, poetry.

Keywords: aesthetic feature, Kant, Keats, philosophy, poetry

1. Introduction

John Keats (1795-1821), a great figure in the period of Romanticism in the 19th century, a contemporary of Byron and Shelley, has his uniqueness and brilliance in the history of British literature. For quite a long time, he is regarded as one of the pioneers for pursuing "Art for Art's Sake", because in his poems, he creates an eternal world for truth and beauty. His world is against the unsatisfactory social reality, thus serves as a shelter for peace and tranquility and ever-lasting beauty. The great aesthetic value of Keats's poetry lies in that his great power of fancy and imagination have woven an astonishing picture of the beautiful things in nature, further leading to vivid demonstration of the relationship between man and nature; the exploration of man's senses, especially how man's art makes reality eternal; a high praise of the sublimity of man's mind and soul. Furthermore, Keats's poems transcend the boundaries of senses, touching the very core of man's spiritual world by the charm of its beauty.

Beauty is an ideal for Keats. Keats wrote to Fanny Brawne in February 1820 that "I have loved the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remembered" (Kipperman, 1990, p. 150). In the end of his renowned poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn", He wants to convey to readers through the voice of the Urn that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." This may explain the core concept of Keats's beauty: Negative capability.

To grasp Keats's ideal concerning beauty and truth, we can apply Immanuel Kant's important philosophical treatises on art to our exploration of his poems, especially his viewpoint about beauty, the human senses, the relationship between man and nature.

2. Literature Review

Some scholars have studied Keats's feeling and imagination. Patterson (1970) argues that the "daemonic" in Keats is a non malicious, pre-Christian, Greek conception, and is in conflict with his personal feeling for the actual world; Dickstein (1971) explores the contrarities in the development of Keats's imagination through close reading of the texts, especially *Endymion*, the odes, *The Fall of Hyperion*, and some minor poems.

In addition some scholars (Ridley, 1933; Allott, 1981) focus on Keats's dual development of his poetic and personal self and the relationship between them. Keats constantly sought to further the dual development of his poetic and his personal self by working hard at his craft, experimenting with different genres and metrical structures, submitting himself to various literary influences, and searching for a balance between what he called "sensations" or responsiveness to the concrete particulars of life and "thoughts" or the exercise of his powers of

intellect and understanding, and the nourishing of them by wide reading and varied personal experiences.

Kipperman (1990) discusses Keats's principle of beauty and how he realizes it in his works. His art's very form 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. Keats approaches 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.

Different from the departure points of the researches mentioned, Pyle (2003) argues for the kindling and ash in Keats's poetry. Radical aestheticism remains the legacy of romanticism. A radical aestheticism brings us the experience of something like auto-sacrifice, and the result is not in the reassuring knowledge as Bourdieu promises with his sociology of the aesthetic; it gives us an effect of what Keats calls a "barren noise"- the voids all we claim in the name of the aesthetic, which breaks the hold of the ethical and social considerations, and plays against the claims of knowledge. Something quite unexpected will result from genuine radical aestheticism.

The recent studies have shown that it is of significance to probe into the aesthetic value of Keats's poetry. The topics for investigation in this field conclude the artistic form of Keats's poetry, the eternal beauty Keats seeks for, the beautiful and harmonious relationship between man and nature that Keats argues for, the adoption of the concept of negative capability to understand of Keats's view on aestheticism. To approach this topic from western philosophy can be enlightening, as western philosophy and literature are interrelated. The following parts will have a preliminary study of the aesthetic features of Keats's poetry from Kant's philosophy.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Kant's View on Man's Dual Nature

Kant is forefather of Germanic Classical Philosophy and He is a literary critic (Note 1). His major works cover the true, the good, and the beautiful (Note 2). He insists that there is a gap between the physical (sensible) and nonphysical (supersensible) worlds. "The physical world is of cause and effect, and each occurrence has been determined by prior events" (Leitch, 2001, p. 500). There are some mental forms that must be placed within the perceiving subject (human mind) for any successful apprehension of the external world. He insists that the universals (e.g., cause and effect, or unity) are implanted within every human being and underwrite the very possibility of "understanding" (i.e., the ability to process, organize and comprehend the data given to our senses by the outside world), and "understanding deals with the physical world of cause and effect" (Leitch, 2001, p. 500).

The ability to think makes mankind free, but they are also physical creatures subject to physical causality. There is a gap between man's dual nature, but appreciation of beauty intimates the harmony within our dual human nature as free and physical beings.

3.2 Kant's View on Judgment of Beauty or Taste

"Judgment in general is the determination of whether a particular instance qualifies as one thing or another" (Leitch, 2001, p. 500). When one judges the object to be a *table*, he is simply "subsuming", (as Kant says) in a particular thing under the general concept of table, a concept he has already possessed. Such judgments are "determinative" and "objective". The preexisting concepts unambiguously provide the rule the judgment follows, and little room for disagreement.

But the statement "it's beautiful" is likely to provoke disagreement, though it is identical in form with "It's a table". There are two reasons. On one hand, saying "it's beautiful" means that beauty resides in the object and one is making a claim to validity beyond his individual, subjective preferences. On the other hand, *beautiful* is not a "determinative" nor "objective" concept, it is actually "reflective", occurring in the absence of a firm rule or standard, and very likely to generate disagreement. The ability to judge well amid such uncertainties is called taste, and Kant insists that everyone has the potential to achieve the highest possible taste. That is called "subjective universality" of the judgment that something is beautiful or sublime.

3.3 Kant's View on "Disinterested" Beauty

"Kant's primary aim is to establish the "subjective universality" of the judgment that something is beautiful or sublime" (Leitch, 2001, p. 500). For Kant, the good is a matter of reason, or of what we should desire. The agreeable is a matter of the senses, and of what we physically desire. "The beautiful mixes the sensible with the nonsensible, and involves no desire, thus judgments of beauty is disinterested" (Leitch, 2001, p. 501).

Furthermore, a sensory experience of pleasure can move from subjective (That is pleasing to me) to the objective (that should please everyone) only if got rid of its individual, interested elements.

The ideal of disinterestedness of beauty is extended to Kant's arguments that elevate artistic form over matter. Disinterestedness as an aesthetic ideal also entails distinguishing between the useful and the non-utilitarian work of art. The beautiful object should not be tainted with any mundane purpose. Kant expresses this aim in a famous formula: the beautiful object reveals "purposiveness without purpose" (Leitch, 2001, p. 501). That is to say, the object is comprehensible only if we assume it was made by a purposive agent (a priori condition of aesthetic judgment that Kant's critiques reveal), even though it has no particular, determinative purpose. Art objects aspire to general purposiveness in the absence of any concrete purpose.

A purposive agent means "free play" of the mind, and "free play" of the mind leads to aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is crucial to Kant because it makes possible a "harmony" between our human freedom and our physical immersion in the petty world, the feeling that is the true foundation of our experiences of beauty; however, beauty is only an "ideal", not a "concept". There is no rule of beauty: its validity for everyone will always be "exemplary" (Leitch, 2001, p. 501).

3.4 Kant's View on the Superiority of Man's Cognitive Power

Kant wants the experience of the beautiful to convey that the ideas and precepts generated by human reason are in tune with the nature of the universe itself. The experience of beauty tells us that mind and world fit. Yet there is a misfit between mind and world. When we experience an earthquake, nature appears to threaten human concerns and capabilities. The experience of the limits of the sensible, of its inability to encompass aspects of our mental world, reminds us of "the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive power over the greatest power of sensibility" (Leitch, 2001, p. 502). Performing our cognitive power can lead us away from the sensible toward the mysterious supersensible.

3.5 Kant's View on "Aesthetic"

"Aesthetic" in Kant's usage, refers more to what is experienced through the senses than to something specifically artistic (Leitch, 2001, p. 503). He focuses on the spectator's response rather than on artistic production. Kant believes that it makes no difference whether the object is natural or human-made. Actually, he is more concerned with preserving art's freedom, aligning it with beauty against the determined world of science and the utilitarian concerns of craft-than with examining the consequences of arts' being artificial.

4. Discussion

4.1 Kant's Man's Dual Nature and Keats's Long Narrative Poem *Lamia*

Kant insists that there is a gap between the physical (sensible) and nonphysical (supersensible) worlds. The physical world is of cause and effect, and "each occurrence has been determined by prior events" (Leitch, 2001, p. 500).

The ability to think makes human beings free, but they are also physical creatures subject to physical causality. There is a gap between man's dual nature, but appreciation of beauty intimates the harmony within our dual human nature as free and physical beings. Keats's long poem *Lamia* explains this idea (Note 3).

In this Poem *Lamia*, he tells us a story about how beauty or imagination is destroyed by calculation and philosophy. Imagination is an important part of man's mental world, while in this situation calculation or philosophy is particularly symbolic of the external and practical world, made up by causes and effects. Beautiful *Lamia* was once a serpent, and she was turned into a shape of woman by Hermes. *Lamia* fell in love with Lycius, a handsome man in Corinth, a Greek city. When they were about to get married, there came a philosopher called Apollonius. He had sharp eyes, and realized *Lamia* was a serpent, so he turned *Lamia* into a dead serpent by so called "wit". Lycius also died from disappointment. Lycius lamented in this poem that "all the charms fly at the mere touch of cold philosophy. Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings, and conquer mysteries by rule and line. The tender and lovely *Lamia* melted into a shade". The lamentable love story tells us that how important imagination is. Without it, the world will be plain and lifeless. But the doom of *Lamia* also tells us that though man has the mental power of imagination, he is still bound to the physical casualties and the practical world. Man's dual nature will determine his fate.

4.2 Kant's View on "Disinterested" Beauty and Keats's Negative Capability Reflected in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

Kant's view on "disinterested beauty" involves three layers of meanings: first, a sensory experience of beauty can move from subjective (that is only beautiful to me) to the object (that should please everyone) only if got rid of its individual, interested elements; a beautiful object should not be tainted with any mundane purpose, and the

beautiful object reveals “purposiveness without purpose” (Leitch, 2001, p. 501); a beautiful object is symbolic of art’s freedom, against the determined world of science and utilitarian concerns.

Kant’s view on “disinterested” beauty is similar to Keats’s Negative Capability, put forward in 1817 to define the literary quality which Shakespeare possessed so enormously. This term means that “man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Abrams, 2004, p. 174). A great poet has the sense of beauty, the overall beauty, and this sense overcomes every other consideration. This term has dimensional meanings argued by critics. Negative Capability can be taken in two considerations. First, an author should maintain aesthetic distance, as opposed to a writer who uses work of literature to persuade audience or for any other utilitarian purposes; Second, “when embodied in a beautiful artistic form, the literary subject matter and concepts are not subject to the ordinary standards of evidence, truth and morality, as we apply these standards in the course of our practice experience” (Abrams, 2004, p. 174).

Keats’s famous *Ode on a Grecian Urn* serves as an excellent example to illustrate Kant’s idea about “disinterested” beauty. The Grecian urn symbolizes time’s eternity. The poem does not describe the happy scenes at present, but the happy moment inscribed on a Grecian urn. The beauty of the scenes, not shared by people at that right moment, but for people in the past, present and the future, as the poet argues that “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter”. Beauty is not supposed to fade with fleeting time, and the only beauty that can last for eternal time can be the only beauty. The Grecian urn transcends time and history. The urn is compared to a cold yet beautiful pastoral, because it tells what is beauty and truth. “Beauty is truth and truth beauty”. Beauty, like truth, must be disinterested, universal and ever-lasting.

4.3 Kant’s View on the Superiority of Man’s Cognitive Power and Keats’s Poems *Home*, *Ode to Psyche* with *Sleep and Poetry*

Kant wants the experience of the beautiful to convey that the ideas and precepts generated by human reason are in tune with the nature of the universe itself. The experience of beauty tells us that mind and world fit. Yet there is a misfit between mind and world. “The limits of the sensible reminds us that the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive power over the greatest power of sensibility” (Leitch, 2001, p. 502).

Kant’s idea about man’s transcendence from the sensory to the supersensible finds expression in Keats’s poem *To Homer*. Homer is a legendary ancient Greek epic poet, traditionally said to be the author of the epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. He is profoundly admired by Keats, though he might not be a reliable historical figure as questioned by modern scholars. Homer is said to be blind, but Keats thinks that there is a triple sight in blindness, and he can transcend the senses to attain a higher state of mind, and finally reach the supersensible like *Dian*, Queen of Earth, and Heaven, and Hell.

Furthermore, the experience of beauty through man’s mental process can lead man from the sensory to the supersensible. Keats is the poet who highly values man’s mental power. In his poem *Ode to Psyche* he explains what fancy can bring to a man. *Psyche* was originally the Goddess of mental world in Greek mythology, the symbol of man’s soul, and it always in a female image, and she is love of *Eros*, i.e. , *Cupid*. Keats compares *Psyche* to a winged girl with awakened eyes. This lovely spirit, though without altar heaped with neither flowers nor sweet incense, is more beautiful than any other Gods living on the *Olympus*. She can fly and run wild, making people submerge in beautiful fancy. Therefore, the poet wants to “be her priest, and build a fane in some untrodden region of his mind”.

4.4 Kant’s View on Aesthetic Taste and Keats’s Poem *Sleep and Poetry* and *Ode to a Nightingale*

Kant thinks that “subjective universality” renders people taste for beauty. The experience of beauty can intimate the harmony within our dual human nature as free and physical being.

“Poems exist in words, not in direct sensations, and its true role is not to outdo the vividness of the world of sense impression, but to provide us with something else” (Brooks & Warren, 1978, p. 68). For Keats, the beauty is sought after and experienced through poetry.

In his long poem *Sleep and Poetry*, he describes that Poetry is like wide heaven, yet he is not a glorious citizen of its realm. By writing poems, his young spirit can follow the morning sunbeams to the great *Apollo*. He describes many fanciful and beautiful scenes he can view by writing poems. In *Ode to a Nightingale*, Keats describes the power of poetry is much stronger than any power which can only bring joy to only senses, for example, the power of wine god *Bacchus*, and this reminds us of *Edwin Arlington Robinson*’s famous quotation “Poetry is a language that tells us, through a more or less emotional reaction, something that cannot be said” (Beaty, 2002, p. 1235). With the viewless wings of *Poesy*, the poet can fly with the nightingale to the solemn forest, the beautiful and mysterious land, leaving behind all the weariness, the fever and the fret. This kind of

true poetry, a symbol of true beauty, feeds upon the burrs and thorns of life. Only true poets can experience true beauty, and compose true poems. The poets have their souls on earth and also souls in heaven, and they can have a double life.

5. Conclusion

John Keats, one of the seven great poets in the 19th century Romanticism, has his uniqueness and brilliance in the history of British literature. He seeks for eternal truth and beauty in his poetry. For long time, he is regarded as one of the aestheticians with the pure aim of “Art for Art’s Sake”, but this essay, through detailed analysis based on concrete examples, tries to prove that his poetry means more than that.

To better appreciate the great aesthetic value of Keats’s poetry, this essay has applied German Classical Philosopher Kant’s views on man’s dual nature, judgment of beauty or taste, “disinterested” beauty and the superiority of man’s cognitive power and aestheticism to his poems.

With a lot of examples concerning the aesthetic features and the core concept of negative capability, we have found out the great aesthetic features of Keats’s poetry are as follows: a poet should have negative capability, the ability that enables him to remain an aesthetic distance instead of using literature for utilitarian purpose; the revealing of beauty that intimates the harmony within man’s dual nature as free and physical being; the superiority of man’s cognitive power, especially imagination and fancy, over the greatest power of sensibility; transcendence from the sensory to the supersensible through taste or experience of beauty, and for himself, poetry. Keats uses poetry to explore the senses, and draws for us an astonishing picture of the beautiful things. What’s more, he transcends the boundaries of senses, touching the very core of man’s spiritual world.

The study of aesthetic features is of great significance, because those features have a great impact on his contemporaries and those to come. Byron compares him to Adonis, the Roman mythological figure loved by Aphrodite who symbolizes love and beauty. T.S.Eliot recommends Keats as a 19th century poet who has the modernistic style. In some European countries, Keats also enjoys a high reputation for his profoundness and beauty embedded in poetry.

Acknowledgments

This essay is supported by “the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities” (SWU1309243).

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Notes

Note 1. Kant, born in Königsberg, East Prussia, began his early excursion into aestheticism through his works: *Observations on the Feelings of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764).

Note 2. Kant’s major works are *the Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), *the Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and

the Critique of Judgment (1790; trans.1987).

Note 3. All the lines of Keats's poems quoted and discussed in this essay are from www.John-Keats.com.

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