

The Union of Beauty and Truth—An Analysis of Keats’ Aesthetic Thought in His Odes

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Abstract: Keats is indisputably a significant figure in the history of English romantic literature in 19 century. Known as a sensuous poet, he composed a great number of influential works, among which odes are regarded as his most mature works. One of his odes, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is universally extolled which presents us his aesthetic thought, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”. The lasting power of beauty and its union with truth becomes the great message of his poetry. This keynote has been always a subject of hot controversy. This paper aims at revealing the poet’s aesthetic thought by illustrating his, “beauty is truth and truth beauty and their union” through his outstanding odes: *Ode to a Nightingale*, *To Autumn*, *Ode on Melancholy* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

1. Introduction

Keats is, like Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth, one of the great English poets. He, known as a sensuous poet, produced a variety of works, including epic, lyric and narrative poems. Odes are regarded as his most important and mature works, among which *Ode to a Nightingale*, *To Autumn*, *Ode on Indolence*, *Ode on Melancholy* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn* are most notable. One great message of his poetry is the lasting power of beauty and its union with truth. His poetry is always sensuous, colorful and rich in imagery. Love and beauty, suffering and death are the major subject matters of his poems. His poems can really help to enhance our sensory ability. He is a sincere worshipper of beauty and is eager to express what he felt straight from his heart for the splendid natural world as he wished it to be. He contended that beauty is truth, truth beauty in the closing part of his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. For him, the great beauty of poetry is that it makes every thing, every place interesting. His loyalty to this art can be easily manifested in his poems. He devoted all his life to his poems writing, in which he probed what is beauty, how to obtain it, and what is its relation with truth. Such aesthetic thought really exerts a considerable impact on his contemporary writers and arouses great attention in the literature field.

2. Different Views on “Beauty Is Truth, Truth Beauty”

The aesthetic concept that beauty is truth, truth beauty has ever evoked hot controversy among many scholars in the world. As a famous poet, T.S Eliot said that this sentence is grammatically meaningless.[1] What’s more, I.A Richards considered it to be a pseudo—statement.[2] Some

scholars argued that beauty may be true, but not all the truth is beautiful due to the fact that evil is also a truth, but it is by no means beautiful.[3] Some other scholars believed that this apothegm conveyed the poet's concept that art is superior to life and nature.[4] A Chinese leading figure in literature area, Wang Zuoliang has ever pointed that this apothegm shows an intimate relationship between artistic beauty and truth. He also pointed that this famous saying is only meaningful in the poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, out of which it cannot stand.[5]

Beauty, from Keats's perspective, can be divided into two categories. One is something that makes people feel happy and exultant. It is a kind of sensory enjoyment and can be easily obtained through our sense. It is what we usually call a direct and specific beauty. The other one can be only gained through our thinking and pains. This kind of beauty is more superior and can give us a sense of spiritual enjoyment and enhancement. Of course, it is rather hard for us to achieve this kind of beauty. However, the poet dedicated all his life to the pursuit of the latter beauty—a beauty contains a sense of sufferings and bitterness.

Truth, in the eye of Keats, is but a kind of social reality. The poet was born of poverty-stricken family. When he was very young, both of his parents died. He lived a hard life and once he was apprenticed at fifteen to learn surgery. To make matters worse, he was always defamed and attacked when he published his works. Nevertheless, it was this frustration and adversity that helped him perceive the truth, kindness, beauty, false, ugliness and wickedness in the society. In this fertile soil of social reality, he could get the seeds of beauty, gain the aspiration of art and then create a kind of eternal beauty. Even though the poet might sometimes sink into deep thinking and fancy. Never did he forget the harsh social reality.

3. Truth in Beauty

Keats spent all his lifetime pursuing the beauty, but he never estranged himself from social reality, so did his poems. He deemed that beauty and truth were closely connected. So he demonstrated in *Ode on a Grecian Urn* his eternal aesthetic concept that beauty is truth, truth beauty. The poet thought that beauty derived from the real society and existed in the universe. Yet, social reality inevitably embodied the eternal beauty. Everything in the world had an essence of truth, and a nature of beauty. All the true and beautiful things were what can provide us with a sense of pleasure. As far as he was concerned, beauty is truth meant that beauty came from real life and it reached the artistic peak after fighting against any ugliness and hideousness and obtaining spiritual enhancement through a series of sufferings. His odes were rich in bitterness and realistic imagination. All his fancy of beauty in the odes was based on truth and could be tested by truth.

In his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, the poet was deeply enchanted with an artistic work:

*THOU still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
... Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?[6]*

How beautiful and fascinating this idyllic picture is! The poet made this artistic beauty eternal with his own inspiration and imagination. However, when we were merged in this transience and permanence, the poet told us the realistic foundation of the artistic beauty:

*Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;*[6]

This is a love song full of bitterness. The two young passionate lovers were unable to realize their longing kiss. Even though this was an ever—lasting mutual love, it was unattainable for them. They had no choice but to face it.

*And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return*[6]

These sentences really aroused our sense of bleakness and sentimentality. It was the poet's sense of bitterness that made this ode moving and well known. Nonetheless, we should thank to this bitter love song and the solemn urn, for they gave us the beautiful eternity and helped us to reach the summit of art. So, beauty and truth were well connected to each other by this talented poet.

4. Beauty in Truth

If we say that *Ode on a Grecian Urn* manifested the truth in the eternal beauty, *Ode to a Nightingale*, *To Autumn* and *Ode on melancholy* may show us that the poet tried to search beauty, feel beauty and create beauty in truth with his artistic way and extraordinary imagination.

*NO no! go not to Lethe neither twist
Wolf's-bane tight-rooted for its poisonous wine;
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss
By nightshade ruby grape of Proserpine*[6]

In face of melancholy, the poet did not go to the Lethe. Instead, he boldly faced up to it, felt it and ultimately produced his masterpiece: *Ode on melancholy*. The poet discovered the beauty in his melancholy. This kind of beauty was just melancholy itself and could not alleviate melancholy. When overwhelmed by melancholy, the poet, however, found a series of beautiful imagery which brought the reader great pleasure and joy.

*But when the melancholy fit shall fall
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all
And hides the green hill in an April shroud;
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave
Or on the wealth of globèd peonies;
The poet was so happy that he said:
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows
Emprison her soft hand and let her rave
And feed deep deep upon her peerless eyes*[6]

Without his readiness to catch and discover, how could he feel such fantastic scene in his melancholy? The key point lies in that the poet firmly believed that even though melancholy were filled with sorrows, it could help to comfort us and offer us a kind of superior spiritual beauty. In the closing part, the poet revealed the main idea of this ode:

*Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine*[6]

In *Ode to a Nightingale*, the poet also pursued beauty in truth. He did not absolutely sink into his fancy. However, he remained conscious of the reality. Just as he wrote in the closing part of this ode:

*Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf. [6]*

As the beautiful song of the nightingale disappeared gradually, the poet brought himself back to the reality and asked himself:

*Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:--Do I wake or sleep? [6]*

Living in such a world full of sufferings, agonies and oppression, the poet preferred to let his soul be baptized by life frustrations rather than indulge in the world of sensory beauty created by himself. Such inspiring ending of this ode vividly presented us his aesthetic concept: truth is beauty.

It is the same case with the ode “*To Autumn*”. From the last stanza we can easily detect that the poet began to move from his fancy to the reality, from visual imagery to audio imagery. All the beautiful things of autumn finally yielded to the bare and bleak winter. There were nothing visible left in the field. The fruitful autumn were replaced by the bare winter, which reflected the imminent death of the poet:

*Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,-
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river shallows, borne aloft
or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;[6]*

It is obvious that the poet does not indulge himself in the sensory beauty but boldly faces his approaching death and realizes the contradiction between reality and fancy. He can accept the ruthless reality befalling him. Facing the truth can also give him a sense of beauty and spiritual enhancement. Here we can feel his aesthetic thought: truth is beauty.

5. Conclusion

As we all know, beauty is truth. Truth beauty is the keynote of John Keats’ lyrics. The poet was adept at exploring and beautifying sensual nature of life. His poems are always replete with optimistic mood and boundless love for life. He always uses clear language and beautiful artistic conception to move people. He devotes his entire career to the pursuit of beauty while he never forgets and abandons the reality. In most of his odes, the nature is always used to create image and profound artistic conception. Therefore, it goes without saying that Keats is a great and positive poet, who loves life, loves nature, loves beauty and loves continuous exploration. He never ceases his pursuit of beauty during the short career of writing poems, not only on the aesthetic thought but also on the aesthetic practices. All of his poems are in harmony with aesthetic thought and fully embody beauty. The sensory beauty of music, illusion and melancholy reflects his aesthetic pursuit. He really exerts great impact on imagism and aestheticism in a way. So his indisputable contribution to aesthetic is self-evident. All his life is full of longing for eternal beauty and immortal truth. He had said “---but I have loved the principle of beauty in all things”. Western romanticism were perfectly expressed through his pen, so he is considered as the most typical representative of Romantic Movement and the pioneer of aestheticism by western critics for a long time. His aesthetic concept that beauty is truth, truth beauty and their union unquestionably deserves our study.

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