

Sensory Imagery Study on John Keats's Poems

Chao SUN*

Beijing Jiaotong University, Beijing, 100000, China

*Corresponding Author

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Abstract: John Keats is one of the most brilliant romantic poets in England. His essential characteristic as a poet is his sensitivity to beauty. One of his outstanding artistic features is his worship of sensory beauty. The poems of Keats are also characterized by sensual imagery, most notably in the series of odes. He aims to accentuate extreme emotion through an emphasis on natural imagery. Because of his dissatisfaction with real life, he creates the theory of “the beauty of imagination”, and according to this theory, he creates an ideal world in his poems, which is more beautiful than the real world. This world is full of images of “senses”, which are primarily visual, tactile and auditory images. Therefore, this paper aims at exploring the field of sensory imagery study on John Keats's Poems, from the perspectives of the origin of Keats's sensory imagery, the portrayal of sensory imagery in Keats's poems, including the unique sensory images, the combination of sensory images and the synaesthetic imagery in his poems. This paper will contribute to the creation and appreciation of Keats's poem and bring some enlightenment to other research.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction of John Keats

John Keats is one of the most brilliant romantic poets in England. His essential characteristic as a poet is his sensitivity to beauty. One of his outstanding artistic features is his worship of sensory beauty. The poems of Keats are also characterized by sensual imagery, most notably in the series of odes. He aims to accentuate extreme emotion through an emphasis on natural imagery. Because of his dissatisfaction with real life, he creates the theory of “the beauty of imagination”, and according to this theory, he creates an ideal world in his poems, which is more beautiful than the real world. This world is full of images of “senses”, which are primarily visual, tactile and auditory images.

1.2 The Present Studies and the Purpose of This Study

Foreign studies on Keats can be said to have emerged together with his poems. When Keats published his first collection of poems, *Observer* and other publications of that days had made some comments on his poems. The study of Keats continued after his death. Macmillans published *John Keats: His Life, and Poetry, Critics and After Fame*, which can be regarded as the earliest systematic study of Keats. This kind of works enabled the academic circle to have a relatively comprehensive understanding of Keats, and at the same time laid a foundation for people to pay attention to the poetics in Keats's letters and poems in the 20th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, people had a certain understanding of Keats. Besides knowing that the poet who died early had a rather tortuous life experience, they also realized Keats's talent in poetry. There exist two schools of Keats's studies in the west: the best Keats criticism school (Lionel Trilling, John Bailey, Christopher Ricks) and the smartest school (W. Jackson Bate, Paved Perkins, Helen Vender).[1] Compared with the studies abroad, the studies at home can be concluded into two stages: the first stage is the translation of Keats's poems. Among these translations, most influential versions are *Keats's Poems* translated by Zhu Xiang, Cha Liang Yong and Zhu Wei Ji. In recent years, with the exploitation of Keats's letters, the second stage of Keats's studies came into being in China, among which two schools have scored great achievements. The North School, represented by Luo Yiming

from Chong Qing Jiao Tong University and the South School, represented by Liu Zhiliang from Gui Zhou University.

Throughout the research of Keats at home and abroad recent years, the studies are mainly on the theme and content of his poems. They focus on the reality and social analysis of his poems, the study of the odes also focuses on the deep theme. Therefore, this paper aims at exploring the field of sensory imagery study on Keats, if unable to fill the gaps of the research, but at least will help to reveal the internal thoughts of Keats through the analysis of his sensory imagery. At the same time, this paper will contribute to the creation and appreciation of Keats's poem and bring some enlightenment to other research.

2. The Origin of Keats's Sensory Imagery

The pursuit of sensory imagery in the history of Western literature arose in Renaissance period. Humans' desire and passion were showed in literary works as a new expression instead of merely religious feelings. In this movement, the human mind won new heights of perception, emotion, and thought in various ways. Humanism, which sprang as a core spirit of Renaissance, regarding human as the center of the world, emphasizing human desire and human sense. In some way, it is also a paean to the pleasures and excitement of humans, which established the secular world of humanism. Vitality is the reflection of the external world when people enjoy the material pleasures: "All the artistic talents are based on the force which creates humanity in a completely new and amazing way. It creates a happier world to replace our boring and simple world (Pater, 63)."[2] Human senses had gone beyond the definition of hedonism. It stimulated human's desire for poetry, beauty, and art, which once sparked people's passion for creating a brilliant life.

The emphasis on human senses and sensory imagery culminated in the Romantic period. Romantics gave primary concern to passion, emotion and natural beauty. They always sought for the Ideal (the subject world) through the transcendence of actual world. Therefore, Keats, as one of the typical figure of that period shows his great concentration on sensory imagery portrayal. Just like in Shelley's *Adonais*, which is an elegy for Keats, Shelley portrays Keats as a man "a portion of the loveliness, which once he made more lovely: he doth bear his part, while the one spirit's plastic stress sweeps through the dull dense world, compelling there All new successions to the forms they wear".[2] From his description, Keats's unique perception towards the world can be seen: he appreciates the world and tries to find beauty in everything --- holiness and evil, happiness and disaster, and therefore creates a sensory world with the combination of visual, auditory, olfactory and other senses.

3. The Portrayal of Sensory Imagery in Keats's Poems

3.1 The Unique Sensory Images in His Poetry

Many of his works were full of sensory imagery. Almost all of his odes are full of intense sensory descriptions. Everything in his poems can be seen, heard, touched, tasted and smelled. Among those sensory imagery, the auditory image system and visual image system are the most common imagery in Keats's poems. The auditory image system of Keats' ode contains a great variety of sounds, some from the natural world, some from the animal world, some from the human world, some from the spiritual world, and some from musical instruments.

The sound of nature is the most powerful voice in Keats's poems. In his poem *Ode to psyche*, he uses many auditory imagery, such as the "the whispering roof of leaves and trembled blossoms", "Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet", "pines shall murmur in the wind", "birds and bees". All these auditory images contribute to a soft, warm atmosphere, which is in harmony with Keats's description of the scene of the meeting of the two gods. In this world, Keats portrays man, god and nature is an inseparable integrity. Human voice is also a common auditory imagery in Keats's poems. In *Ode to psyche*, to describe the incomparable beauty of Psyche, he uses the sound of human to create the atmosphere: "Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan /Upon the midnight

hours” (Keats, 33).[3]The auditory image system of Keats's poems is like a vast world, where all the sounds come together. But this convergence is not random, they are like the music parts, harmoniously gather and convey Keats's unique perception towards the real world.

On the contrary, the visual image system and auditory image system of Keats' poems have different structures. If the components of the auditory image system are equal and side-by-side around a center, the components of the visual image system show a slight gradient. The primary stage of visual image system is the description of external visual scene. Everything in Keats' poems is not only colorful but also tactile. For example, Keats describes “melancholy” as follows: “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 globed peonies; /Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows, /Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave, /And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.” (Keats, 78).[3] Melancholy is invisible, but Keats attaches it to nature as if melancholy itself had shape and color. The superior stage of visual image system is Keats’s description of mind visual scene, which is the combination of imagination and reality. In *To Autumn*, the season autumn imagines herself as a part of the rhythms of the year. The final stanza shows a particular feeling of loss: “Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?” But in immediate response, the poet persuade the goddess that she has her unique beauty: “Think not of them, thou hast thy music too.” (Keats, 13).[3] Here, for the first time in the poem, the actual experience and imaginative vision achieve a poised, dialectical balance within a purely natural context. The whole poem not only depicts the realistic autumn picture, but also depicts the imaginary autumn picture -- the readers cannot tell what Keats's autumn exactly is, but cannot forget the charm of autumn: it is connected with beautiful visual scenes, but it is more hidden in the depths of the poet's heart.

3.2 The Combination of Sensory Images in His Poetry

Compared with other contemporary British romantic poets like Byron or Shelley, Keats's imagination in senses is particularly preeminent. Therefore, the combination of sensory images are quite common in his poems.

In his famous poem *Ode to a Nightingale*, he writes that, “I cannot see what flowers are at my feet, / Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs, / But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet / Wherewith the seasonable month endows / The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild / White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine (Keats, 10).” [3]The yearning for nature, myth and other world is the actual sensory experience in *ode to a nightingale*. Keats’s magical combination of visual and auditory description with strong emotions creates a wonderful scene that a nightingale is singing a sweet song in a dreamy summer.

In *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Keats depicts a gallery of exquisite foods with visual, olfactory and auditory senses. Keats's concept of “beauty is truth” is widely known, and in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Keats found the relationship between romantic love and “beauty”. In *The Eve of St. Agnes*, the delicacies offered by Pope to his sleeping lover are so unique that they all have such incredible shapes. The readers can't help but want to know what they are. The “beauty” here is a tangible object, and Keats's language about food in *The Eve of St. Agnes* is exquisitely detailed.[4] Pope hides in the closet hoping to see his lover’s beautiful naked body, and Pope hopes to win lover Madeleine through the delicious food hidden in the closet: “While he from forth the closet brought a heap / Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd; / With jellies soother than the creamy curd, /Manna and dates, in argosy transferred / From Fez; / And spiced dainties, every one, / From silken Samarcand to cedar’d Lebanon.” (Keats, 17)3.

Keats puts himself in the pure poetry world, combines the senses with imagination, and turns the mundane world into the poetry world. And many of Keats's sensory imagery are organic, which make everything alive and vivid.

3.3 The Synaesthetic Imagery in His Poetry

According to *An Introduction to English Rhetoric*, “Synaesthesia” is defined as “the use of one sense to convey the experience of other sense.” Keats's poems are almost a gathering of sensory

images, of which Synaesthetic imagery accounts for the vast majority. Without sensory imagery, there is no complete Keats. And there is no perfect ode without Synaesthetic imagery. [5]Keats fuses all sounds, shapes, colors and other sensory images together, blended with compassion and empathy. There is no obvious boundary between each feeling. And Keats's imagination is infinite, multidimensional, and closely linked to beauty and truth.

For example, In *Ode to a Nightingale*, Keats describes the impression of nightingale singing with fragrant wine: "Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth, /Tasting of Flora and the country green" (Keats, 10).[3] Here nightingale's singing is concerned with auditory perception and can be properly modified by "low" or "high", "clear" or "dark". However, in this poem, the song is connected with gustation. Here the auditory sense and gustatory work together to form an synaesthesia imagery. In *To Autumn*, the application of synaesthesia in "ode to autumn" is mainly in the first stanza: " 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; /To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells /With a sweet kernel." (Keats, 13). From the poet's description of the autumn, readers can also feel sweet taste diffuse. The use of personification makes the image in the poem more vivid. The poppies, besides their color associations, seem to carry their fragrance with the wind; The slow drip of the wine give off the olfactory sense of fragrance. The use of "oozing" activates the sense of touch. In the poem *Ode to Psyche*, Keats seems to sing a song for the gods of Olympus. In describing this "sweet prayer", he employs a synaesthetic image of hearing and taste: "delicious moan." [6] Here, "moan" is auditory image, and "delicious", often reacts on people's sense of taste. Therefore, "delicious moan" is a auditory to gustatory synaesthetic image, which vividly depicts people singing the gods with sort of vague, sweet sound. The song shows the pious mind of the prayer, and the speaker's admiration for Psyche's vigor and beauty.[7]

In Keats's poems, he combines the feelings of different senses and transfers them by association. The application of synaesthesia imagery breaks through the limitation of language, enriches the aesthetic taste of expression, and receives the artistic effect of his poems.

4. Conclusion

Keats employs abundant sensory imagery to indicate his intentions. Such description only relates to people's senses, which exactly shows his unique sense of beauty. At present, Keats's poems still play an important role in literature. His successful employment of sensory imagery, and perfect combination of different sensory images as well as Synaesthesia skills are widely used by present writers. In addition, Keats's unique perception towards human senses and his exquisite writing skills as well as artistic ideas have also been widely spread, which influenced many young literary workers.

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