

# A Comparative Study of the Pursuit of Beauty in Keats's and Poe's Poems

Meizhen Zeng

Qingyuan Overseas Chinese Middle School, Qingyuan, Guangdong, China

**Abstract:** *Frustrations clouded Keats's and Poe's lives. Beauty was what they yearned for all their lives. They both considered beauty was the only theme of poems. To ornament beauty, they employed in their poems plenty of allusions of mythology which symbolize beauty. What they both sought after was the ideal eternal beauty teemed with imagination. However, Poe appreciated the beauty of melancholy and Keats worshipped sensuous beauty; Keats was fond of the beauty of nature while Poe stressed the death of a beautiful woman; Most, if not all, of Keats's poems were progressive, while Poe's beauty was anaesthetic and somewhat pessimistic, whereas it's worth understanding. Their original poetry has a hunting effect on the world. However, life, coarse and rough, has left them with scars all over. Beauty, anyway, accompanies with thorns. This thesis mainly makes a compare.*

**Keywords:** Poem; Keats; Poe; Beauty.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Just before trying to explore the pursuit of beauty in Keats's and Poe's poems, it will be helpful for us to look back on their lives respectively so as to conceive their poems all the better.

John Keats (1795~1821), one of the great English Romantic poets, and Edgar Allan Poe (1809~1849), the "great literary engineer" in America, occupied remarkable positions in world literature. They, as tortured geni, struck the world. Financial straits, grief, illness and fantastic tragedy crowded in upon them through their short lifetime. Above all, their hearts were overcharged with the miseries of the existing society. When still young, they lost both of their parents. In point of life, they suffered the same lot.

No other English poets lived so miserable a life as Keats did. He developed tuberculosis while nursing his brother who was seized with the same disease, which drove him to the verge of physical collapse. "I am tormented day and night." (Liao Yi, 1996), so Keats wrote. Poe's life was full of frustrations. When Poe became an orphan, he was brought up by John Allan, a merchant who refused to adopt him legally. Soon friction began to develop between them and he was ignored in Allan's will. "You had no passion for me." (Yao Qiulin, et al., 1999), Poe once wrote in his letter, then he went against Allan's wishes. Poe was, as he put it, "as poor as ever I was in my life—except in hope." (Chen Yulun, 1985). Poe was always led from city to city in the hope for a better job or the remote possibility of funding for a magazine of his own. Isn't "To Helen" a portrayal of Poe's misfortune and painful existence? "I", lonely and helpless, wandered about in the boundless sea:

Helen, thy beauty is to me  
Like those Nicean barks of yore,  
That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,  
The weary, way-worn wander bore  
To his own native shore.  
On desperate seas long won't to roam,

"I have no one now to fly to—I am among strangers, and my wretchedness is more than I can bear" (Peng Guiju, et al., 1999), Poe wrote to his aunt Maria Clemm.

Every sweet has its sour, every hardship its comfort. They came across their loves in their fleeting lives. Keats was intensely preoccupied with his love for Fanny Brawne. However, it grieved him beyond words that he could not marry her on the account of his frail health and poverty, which frustrated his dream. He failed to obtain love all his life anyway. Still, he always bore burning love inside, in his heart, for beauty. Poe considered love, "the purest and truest of all poetical themes" (Gui Yangqing, 1985), as the highest variety of beauty. He married Virginia, his thirteen-year-old cousin, but their love lasted for only a short time, which was hinted in "Annabel Lee":

"That the wind came out of the cloud by night,  
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee."

Virginia's death of consumption had crushing effect on Poe. He began to wander off in the mid-night to weep by her tomb. (Fred Mednick, 1985:105)

Worse for Keats perhaps was that he was in the danger of being attacked viciously by the conservative critics because of his

associations with the liberal thinkers of his day. They quoted derisively from Blackwood's article advised, "It is a better and a wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet, so back to the shop, Mr. John." What with illness and criticism, he died. What became of Poe? He is the most misunderstood literary figure. For a long time, few could do full justice to his immense contributions to American literary field. Even some of his contemporary leading men of letters held unfavorable remarks on him. Emerson dismissed him in three words "the jingle man" (Hu Yintong, 1995), and Lowell described him as "two fifths sheer fudge" (Hu Yintong, 1995) in his "Fable for Critics" Mark Twain declared his prose to be "unreadable" (Chang Yaoxin, 1990).

Such were Keats' and Poe's lives. Much attention should be paid to the fact that the circumstances of their painful lives throw direct and great light on why they pursued beauty in all things that desperately. The more they went through, the more eagerly they chased beauty. Keats was acquainted with the miseries of the suffering and witnessed too much of the poverty and privations of the people. "What a difficulty the improvement of the conditions of such people." (Yao Qiulin, 1999). The world is filled with misfortunes, grief, sickness and oppression. Their worship of beauty bespeaks an aspiration after a better life than the squalid actuality under capitalism. The true, the good and the beautiful do not exist without the false, the evil and the ugly. Their lives are a sort of voyage after Beauty. In their opinion, beauty can compensate the drawback of the existing society and relieve one's sorrow. Let's go deeper and explore the beauty in their eyes and the beauty in their poems.

## 2. KEATS'S AND POE'S CONCEPT OF BEAUTY

What's beauty? The New Caxton Encyclopedia goes: "Beautiful is a term of evaluation or judgment which is entirely subjectively... meaning that it gives us pleasure, regardless of whether or not we can gain any material advantage from the object so described." Keats's whole life had been devoted to Beauty. He overcame all kinds of barriers and stuck firm to the pursuit of it. He held "intellectual and spiritual passion" for beauty. His exquisite fondness for beauty is fully expressed in "Endymion" which opens:

"A thing of beauty is a joy for ever;  
Its loveliness increases; it will never  
Pass into nothingness;..."

With the praise of beauty, Keats contributed to English literature greatly to the extent that he had surpassed Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton when they were of the same age. (Dong Suhua, 1999: 92) Had his short life lasted longer, he would be bound to produce much more works to world literature.

Beauty aims at "an elevating excitement of the soul" and "beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears" (Chang Yaoxin, 1990). Poe implied in his long essay on his "The Poetic Principle". He spoke of his thirst for beauty, saying: "It is the desire of the moth for the star. It is no mere appreciation of the Beauty before us, but a wild effort to reach the beauty above." (Annette. T. Rubinstein, 1988)

## 3. THEIR PURSUIT OF BEAUTY IN POEMS

It was beauty that they pursued. It was born in their haunted minds and grew alive between their poetry lines. A world of beauty is visualized through the power of language and their talented strokes of their master pens. In the recess of their hearts, they sought to express beauty in all their poems. They seemed calm and peaceful outwardly, nevertheless, at the bottom of their poems lied their resentment against the society in which they underwent great pains and hurt. In their magnificent poems, they showed all sorts of feelings ranging from gloom to love. Beauties conceived in their pens and minds were thorny.

In Poe's own words "I would define, in brief, the Poetry of words as The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty." (Janes D. Hart, 1983). He once said that a poem should not appeal chiefly to the mind or reason. For instance, when Poe wrote a poem like "The Raven", he was not interested in narrating a plot or story. Poetry, according to Poe, should present a vision beauty which is splendid enough to block out the ugly which he hated and feared, namely, beauty is "the province of poem" (Janes D. Hart, 1983). Poe took trouble revising his poems over and over again just to manifest beauty. He considered redeeming and refining expressions as his sweetheart. Similarly, Keats made the most scrupulous choice of words to satisfy his appreciation of beauty. On the spur of inspiration and beauty, Keats was adroit at improvising an excellent poem before his audience or the pretty object which caught his imagination, for example, the composing of the "Ode to a Nightingale" and "On the Grasshopper and Cricket".

## 4. THE SIMILAR TRACES OF BEAUTY IN KEATS'S AND POE'S POEMS

To achieve beauty, many allusions of mythology which symbolize beauty are employed by Keats and Poe to show the images of charm. In one of Keats's poems entitled "Ode to a Nightingale", "Flora" is the goddess of flower and spring in Roman mythology. "Apollo" appears in his "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" as God of beauty, youth, poetry and music. The Helen of Greek myth in "To Helen", which Poe described as "lines written in my passionate boyhood, to the first, purely ideal love of my soul", (Cheng Aimin, 1996), represents the traditional type of beauty. "Naiad" in Greek mythology are beautiful

maidens living in fountains and rivers, and "Psyche" is the goddess of the soul, symbolizing beauty, youth and purity. Also, in Poe's "To Science", "Diana" is a symbol of the goddess of moon in Roman myth, and "Hamadryad" embodies the goddess in mountain village.

Secondly, both Poe and Keats were inspired poets, and their beauties were abundant in imagination. As poets, their minds were always brimming with enthusiasm and passionate imagination. They light it up, and let it sparkle, then set it grow! "I am certain of nothing", Keats wrote, "but of the holiness of the hearts' affection, and the truth of Imagination. What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth, whether it existed before or not." (Paul Hunter, 1986). His leading principle is "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty" as he expressed in "Ode on a Grecian Urn". He emphasized that if Beauty and Truth cannot be centralized in reality, then let them both be integrated in imagination. He regarded imagination as the decisive quality of poets. Only with it can people visualize beauty, truth and life. While composing "Ode to a Nightingale", he indulged his imagination in letting it gallop like a winged steed so that he was wondering whether he was awake or asleep. Also, in his "Ode on the Grecian Urn" there are these paradoxical lines on music:

"Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter..."

There rise in our imagination the vague enchanted melodies. Keats pointed to the strange truth that what we imagine is often more beautiful than what actually exists.

In the same way, Poe always searched his imagination and pampered his train of thought, leaving it whistle by and run far away to the destination—Beauty. He explained that it was not the beauty of nature which he valued but that of the imagination. Poe's subject matter is the poet's abiding preoccupation with the imagination as it reaches out to union with the beautiful. Once he said: "My imagination is a monastery, and I am its monk."

The third similarity is that they both believed that the pursuit of beauty was their supreme aim and that it was the only theme in composing poetry. They worked towards this goal with their whole beings. Keats "pursued the principle of Beauty in all things." (Liu Bingshan, 1981). A similar perception was held by Poe, who elucidated that poem's chief aim is beauty, namely, producing a feeling of beauty to the readers. Furthermore, the beauty they pursued was supernal and ideal. Both beauties contained the meaning of reverence which is not just appreciated through senses but with heart. For Poe, his beauty exactly means "distillation" besides reverence. He related that the function of beauty is to create a mood in which the soul soars towards supernal beauty. Poetry must concern itself only with "supernal beauty" (Hu Yintong, 1995). "The sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration" (Paul Hunter, 1986). Such words of Keats declare his keen worship of ideal beauty. Their profoundest understanding of beauty came from life. They knew clearly what life and beauty meant to them. Isn't it the most beautiful and goodly?

Love beauty, beauty is truth,  
Love truth, truth is with life.

## 5. THE DISTINCT AESTHETIC PERCEPTIONS IN KEATS'S AND POE'S POEMS

So are what they are in common. However, their beauties are somewhat different in certain ways.

Keats is known as a sensuous poet. His poems are characterized by sensuous beauty. Compared with Keats, Poe attached emphasis on the beauty of melancholy.

Keats's "Bright Star", written on his voyage to Italy in 1819, marked the finishing touches of Keats's poems as well as his life. It is laid on the appreciation of sensuous beauty, terrific and divine. With the smooth flow of this poem, Keats revealed his perseverance and confidence:

"Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art—  
...  
No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,  
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,  
To feel for ever its soft and fall,  
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest  
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,  
And so live ever—or else swoon to death."

The austere scenes" refine one's sensual vision into a sort of north star which can never cease to be open lidded and stedfast over the wonders of the great Power". (Wu Weiren, 1988). The eternity of the stars is an abstract beauty, while the sweetness of love is a kind of concrete beauty. Keats hoped that he would be "still stedfast, still unchangeable" in love as the strong-willed bright star. All in all, Keats's ability to appeal to the senses through is virtually unrivaled.

The most satisfying beauty in Poe's eyes is always associated with death, terror, dark-night or nightmare. He thought "melancholy is the most legitimate of all the poetic tones"(Chang Yaoxin, 1990). His awesome and melancholy tone draws the readers into a mysterious atmosphere. The solemnity is clearly seen when reading "Annabel Lee", which is believed to be dedicated to the memory of Virginia. With the insistent and cumulative repetition of [i:] as in "sea" "we" "me" "Lee" and the refrained sentence " In this kingdom by the sea" and the girl's name—Annabel Lee, one finds to be sharing his sad feeling he experienced unconsciously. As the poem gradually works itself up to the emotional climax, a sullen defiance feeling creeps over whoever reads it:

"And neither the angels in Heaven above  
Nor the demons down under the sea,  
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee:—"

No other American poet ever matched Poe's power in employing English language as a medium of pure musical and rhythmic beauty. "Annabel Lee" is highly appreciated for its delicate musical quality:

— —  
For the moon never beams without bring me dreams  
— —  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee  
—  
And the stars never rise but I see the bright eyes  
—  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee:

The anapestic iambic rhythm sounds like drumbeats on your heart. The poem seems to be richly furnished with numerous melancholy bells. Once they ring, your heart breaks for the beauty of melancholy.

Next, Keats drank in the ever beauty of nature and works of art as seen in " To Autumn", "Ode to a Nightingale", "Ode on a Grecian Urn ", "On the Grasshopper and Cricket" and so forth. Keats is "perfectly content to reflect some splendor of the natural world as he saw or dreamed it to be"(Zhang Kuiwu, 1994). He was not blind to the ever beauty of nature as well as to the beauty of life.

It is said that all Keats's personality seemed to be breathed into his odes, of which the best one is "Ode to a Nightingale". In it, Keats expressed his raptures upon hearing the beautiful songs of the nightingale and his exquisite desire to go to the eternal world with it.

"Leave the world unseen  
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:"

Keats enjoyed the immortal beauty of its song to his heart's content, but finding himself drop into the situation of a dilemmatic contradictory psychology and perplexity "To be, or not to be: that is the question." "My heart aches" and "being too happy in thine happiness" appear as a pair of paradox. At that time, Keats's brother, Tom, had just passed away, and he himself was threatened with consumption. The song of the nightingale symbolized for him a lasting beauty of nature which lured him temporarily away from his disagreeables to the Queen-Moon:

"Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
Or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow"

In the ode, the poet seized the beauty of nature not merely with the visual and auditory but with the communication of his own heart and beauty. One can see it, feel it and even touch it. The nightingale flew away with its sweet song, leaving only the poet to face the cold reality. Oh,

"Was it a vision, or a waking dream?  
Fled is that music—Do I wake or sleep?"

"The poetry of earth is never dead... the poetry of earth is ceasing never" this theme in "On the Grasshopper and Cricket" denotes Keats' intense insight into the perpetual beauty quality of great nature and the eternal drive of life. Shelley hailed Keats as genius and praised "He [John Keats] is made one with Nature" (Liu Bingshan, 1981), or rather, Keats is part of the nature he described.

In contrast to Keats, Poe assumed that the most poetical topic in the world for poems was the death of a beautiful woman. In "The Raven" and "Annabel Lee", a sense of sorrow over the death of a beloved beautiful young woman pervades the whole poem. Moreover, the sound of Poe's dismal words casts a magic spell over the readers. Is that "There is no excellent beauty, that



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