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**The Themes of Death and Eternity in John
Keats's Poetry**

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The work presented in this MA thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and my own work, except as acknowledged in the text. The work in this thesis has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

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Resumen

Esta tesis explora los temas recurrentes de la muerte y la eternidad en la poesía de John Keats. Mediante el análisis de los poemas clásicos *Oda a un Ruiseñor*, *Oda a una Urna Griega*, *Oda al Otoño* y *Estrella brillante*, este estudio revela cómo Keats expresa sus profundos pensamientos sobre la muerte y la eternidad a través del lenguaje, la imaginación y la estructura. Keats creía que la muerte no es sólo una parte de la vida, sino también un camino necesario hacia la eternidad. En sus poemas, la muerte no es una fuente de temor, sino un proceso hermoso y pacífico que permite una comprensión más profunda de la naturaleza de la vida. Al vincular las experiencias personales de Keats, en particular su respuesta a la enfermedad y la pérdida de familiares y amigos, la tesis explora más a fondo cómo estas experiencias influyeron en su poesía.

Palabras clave: Keats, Poesía, Muerte, Eternidad, Verdad, Belleza

Abstract

This thesis explores the recurring themes of death and eternity in the poetry of John Keats. By analysing the classic poems *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *To Autumn*, and *Bright Star*, this study reveals how Keats expresses his profound thoughts on death and eternity through language, imagery, and structure. Keats believed that death is not only a part of life, but also a necessary path to eternity. In his poems, death is not a source of fear, but a beautiful and peaceful process that allows for a deeper understanding of the nature of life. By tying in Keats's personal experiences, particularly his response to illness and the loss of family and friends, the thesis further explores how these experiences influenced his poetry.

Keywords: Keats, Poetry, Death, Eternity, Truth, Beauty

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Chapter 1: Introduction

i. Introduction to John Keats

John Keats (1796-1821) is a talented poet in the history of British literature. He belongs to the Romantic period and is one of the five outstanding representative writers of Romantic poetry. Keats's life was very short, only 25 years. His creative career is generally considered to be only four or five years. However, in his short poetic career, he completed poetry creation in many genres such as odes, sonnets, lyric poems, waltzes, narrative poems, etc. Among Keats's poems, odes have the highest artistic achievement, making Keats immortal in the history of world literature.

Keats was born at the bottom of English society. Of all the major English poets, few had a humbler origin than Keats. He did not receive higher education, he studied at a private school and then worked in a hospital as a pharmacist. But being a pharmacist was not Keats's interest, and he eventually gave up the job and began writing poetry. Keats's life was miserable, he lost his parents in childhood and contracted tuberculosis at the age of 22. He was engaged to the love of his life, Fanny Brawne, but they did not marry. He eventually died in Rome because of tuberculosis.

Keats's work was never widely recognized during his lifetime. Because of his close relationship with Leigh Hunt, his work was constantly attacked viciously by the journals of the time, especially *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and *The Quarterly Review*. Despite the harsh criticism in the early days, Keats's reputation grew after his death. More than twenty years after Keats's death, critics and readers began to take an interest in Keats, although most of them only had a one-sided understanding of Keats's work. They believed that Keats was a poet pursuing aestheticism and his poems had nothing to do with the soul. Later, Richard Monckton Milnes deepened the study of Keats in his *Life, Letters and Literary Remains of John Keats* published in 1848. In this

book, Milnes made Keats's letters and poetry drafts public for the first time and analyzed these materials in detail. This book shows Keats's inner world and proves that Keats is a poet with superb poetic skills and profound thoughts.

ii. Background and significance of the study

Truth, beauty, eternity and death are common themes in Keats's poetry. When studying the recurring themes in Keats's poetry, death and eternity are considered to be the most appropriate themes. These themes are directly or indirectly expressed in his odes - *To Autumn*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, and *Ode to a Nightingale*. Keats believes that death is an eternal process, a process of maturity and decay, unfolding and withering. Death is an aspect of existence, and if we do not understand death correctly, we cannot understand life correctly. And in life, the pursuit of eternity is also an eternal theme. In order to cultivate a sober and comprehensive understanding of life, we should face death and the so-called eternity. Keats is one of my favourite poets, and I have always wondered how he could write such great works in his short and tragic life. All these thoughts about death, eternity, and Keats inspired me to study him through his poetry. The significance of this study can be summarized into three main points: This study helps the reader to know and understand the poet Keats and his poetry, and to understand the connection and meaning between death and eternity in it through Keats' poetry.

iii. Structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters, each of which progressively discusses and supports the theme of death and eternity in relation to Keats's poetry. Chapter 1 provides the background to the study, outlining Keats's life, the significance and aims of the study, and describes the structure of the thesis. Chapter 2 reviews the existing scholarly literature on Keats, paying particular attention to studies that explore the

themes of death and eternity. It identifies key debates and gaps in the research and determines the need for current research. Chapter 3 discusses in depth the depiction of death in the *Ode to a Nightingale*, analysing the language and imagery in detail. The impact of the poet's personal experiences on his views on death is also explored. Chapter 4 explores Keats's conceptualisation of eternity, particularly through the lens of beauty and art. It analyses *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and discusses the ways in which Keats perceived "truth" and "beauty". Chapter 5 is a key chapter that synthesises the themes of death and eternity, highlighting their interrelationship and demonstrating this interplay through an analysis of *To Autumn* and *Bright Star*. The final chapter summarises the main findings of the study, reflecting on how Keats's attitudes to death and eternity provide different insights into his broader worldview. It discusses the significance of these findings for understanding Keats's poetry and suggests directions for future research studying Keats and Romantic literature. Each chapter builds on the previous one to provide a novel and comprehensive analysis of the themes of death and eternity in Keats's poetry.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

i. Overview of existing research on Keats

There was almost no objective evaluation of Keats in the 20 years after his death until Richard Monckton Milnes's *Life, Letters and Literary Remains of John Keats* was published in 1848. In this work, Milnes made an in-depth analysis of Keats's works, pointing out that Keats's works have a high degree of poetic artistry and profound thought. Since the second half of the 19th century, the study of Keats has become increasingly in-depth, and Keats's literary works have received widespread attention. In the 20th century, scholars began to analyze Keats's poems from multiple angles due to the emergence of new theories and new ideas.

The traditional study of John Keats's poetry began with Stuart M. Sperry, the author of *Keats the Poet*, who explored Keats's poetry from the perspective of traditional criticism. In his preface to *The Poems of John Keats*, Ernest de Selincourt examines in detail the influence of earlier poets on Keats. In the book *The Mask of Keats*, Gittings allows readers to pay more attention to the inner world of Keats through poems, *Bright Star*, *Hyperion* and *The cap and bells*, and biography related to Keats. Murry associated Shakespeare and Keats in *Keats and Shakespeare*. He said that, like Shakespeare, Keats is a pure poet. Shakespeare has a great influence on Keats. In many letters and poems of Keats, Shakespeare is the object of his worship. On April 17, 1817, Keats wrote in a letter to his friend Reynolds: "In the passage, I found a head of Shakespeare which I had not before seen... Well -this head I have hung over my books, just above the three in a row, having first discarded a French Ambassador-now this alone is a good morning's work" (Keats, *Letters* 8). He regards Shakespeare as a "presiding Genius". He said: "One of the three books I have with me is Shakespeare's poems: I never found so many beauties in the sonnets-they seem to full of fine things said unintentionally-in the intensity of working out conceit" (Keats, *Letters* 49). The theme of love and death in Shakespeare's drama is the imitation object of Keats. Pinion conducted a detailed study of Keats's life in *A Keats Chronology* and clearly showed the context of his poetic growth according to the background of Keats. Bate conducted an in-depth analysis of the life of Keats in the book *John Keats* and conducted in-depth research on the poet's inner world and poetry growth through the letters of Keats. In the 1980s and 1990s, new areas of research emerged on Keats's poetry. In her *The Odes of John Keats*, Vendler analyzed Keats's "great ode" from linguistic, aesthetic, and philosophic perspectives.

There are also many scholars in China who study Keats. Tu An translated most of

Keats's poems into Chinese. The famous scholar Wang Zuoliang briefly introduced Keats's life experience and Keats's major works. In his *Anthology of English Literature Annotated* (1987), Wang Zuoliang made insightful comments on Keats's poems. The study of the "five great odes" has also been the focus of Chinese scholars, who have tried to find their similarities and differences. They agree that the common ideas of these odes are similar, and what Keats wants to express through these five odes is that nature and art are beautiful, but human life is full of suffering. They also believe that the contemplation of death is the center of the five odes.

These studies are all valuable, but few studies have fully and specifically touched on the concepts of death and eternity in Keats's poems. Keats has a strong sense of death. Whether in reality or in consciousness, death always lingers in Keats's life. Keats himself said that someone's death or illness always destroys his time, so death does haunt his creation. He showed his view of death in many poems and mentioned death in his letters. The threat of death will inevitably make the living skeptical about the meaning of life, especially sensitive poets, who will feel the pain, misery and death in the world more deeply than ordinary people, and thus will have pessimistic or indignant emotions and doubt the value and meaning of life. Keats belongs to the minority who transcend this level, from negation to affirmation, and look at life and death rationally. Therefore, studying Keats's views on death and eternity will naturally help people further understand the changes in his thoughts and the true connotation of his works.

ii. Methodology

This thesis will explore the themes of death and eternity in the poetry of John Keats through a textual analytical approach, aiming to examine the language, imagery, structure and thematic content of his poetry. This study incorporates biographical information about Keats, with a particular focus on his struggle with illness and the

passing of loved ones and friends. Understanding Keats's personal life and life experiences not only provides insight into Keats's views on eternity and death but is also crucial to interpreting the themes of his poetry. This approach allows for a detailed exploration of how Keats communicated complex thoughts and emotions related to death and eternity through the creation of his poetry. This thesis focuses on the use of literary devices such as metaphor, symbolism, and imagery in *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *To Autumn* and *Bright Star*, analysing how Keats conveys his views on death and eternity, as well as the abstract concepts of truth and beauty, through the use of concrete words. These poems have been chosen because they deal explicitly with the themes of death and eternity.

By integrating these methodologies, this thesis aims to explore the themes of death and eternity in Keats's poetry with a comprehensive and fresh perspective that reveals the meaning of his poetry.

Chapter 3: Death in Keats's Poetry

Death is a problem that all living things must face. Everyone will die eventually, and death treats all social classes equally. The thinking or philosophy about death has developed and evolved over time, so death narratives are an important area in world literature with a long history. Most of Keats's poems are about death, and in his poems, death often embodies beauty. The article *Keats's Death: Towards Posthumous Poetics*, written by Brendan Corcoran, studies the concept of death. This article discusses Keats's "idea of death" from the perspective of "poetic representation". Corcoran analyzes Keats's concept of death in conjunction with his poems, regarding death as a theme in his poems. This article explores the poetic representation of death in Keats's poems. Joseph Severn believes that Keats comforted himself with the idea of death in his Book *Poet of Death* "Keats desires his death. Keats's idea of death seems his only

comfort and the only prospect of ease. He talks of it with delight. It soothes his present torture” (Severn 23). Severn believes that Keats longed for death to escape his “present torture”. The author believes that Keats’s desire for death may have appeared at a certain time, but it does not represent Keats’s overall view on life and death. His views changed as he accumulated life experience. In order to view Keats’s poetry as a whole, critics have been discussing its similarities. Wen Hongyu examined the common themes of his odes in *Analysis of the Theme Keats’s Odes* (1989), noting that the theme of the odes is to praise truth, goodness and beauty, and more importantly, eternal art.

i. Analysis of Keats’s depiction of death in *Ode to a Nightingale*

First of all, to interpret Keats’s poem, it is impossible to bypass the critical background of the poem - before the composition of this poem, the poet’s situation is challenging; his brother had died not long ago and his own health was not good, and these made the shadow of death haunt him; at the same time, his love was not progressing well and he suffered setbacks and blows in all aspects of his life. In the face of these pressures, the poet is very helpless and desperate. Thus, in this situation and mood, Keats reflects deeply on death in the *Ode to a Nightingale*.

Secondly, the rich connotation of the nightingale in Western culture should not be overlooked. In the West, there are many legends about the nightingale, such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, in which the sisters become nightingales and swallows, and fairy tales such as Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Nightingale*. In Andersen’s *The Nightingale*, the nightingale symbolises the pure beauty of nature and the art of sincerity. Compared with the mechanical nightingale, the song of the real nightingale is natural and primitive, which represents the true beauty that is not covered by hypocrisy, and expresses the esteem for natural beauty and sincere feelings. In *Metamorphoses*, the nightingale symbolises sorrow and grief. Philomela is forced to turn into a nightingale due to her

cruel torture, and her song is imbued with sadness and pain. The nightingale represents mourning here; it is the embodiment of suffering and tragedy. These stories reflect some of the characteristics of the nightingale: singing the most beautiful song in the world with all its life and highly tragic. In the author's opinion, the spirit of the nightingale is precisely the spirit of the artist, who exhausts his passion and talent to create the most beautiful works of art. The nightingale sings in ecstasy until his death, which embodies the principle of the supremacy of art, but the creation of this beautiful art world is often at the cost of life and blood. The artist's search for a poetic habitat for humanity and the rebuilding of humanity's spiritual home is a heavy price to pay, and at the same time, it is also very tragic. Death for the Romantic poet is like a blue flower of melancholy, and the poet has no fear of it but hopes to reach out and touch the hidden mystery of the flower. The poet Keats chose the nightingale as the object of his song, and the theme of death is indispensable.

Many critics consider *Ode to a Nightingale* a poem about poetry, an exposition of theories about poetry, but this is only a partial exposition. In the following discussion, the poem is textually analysed to understand the multi-layered meanings of death.

The first stanza describes the poet's dreamy and peculiar feeling after listening to the nightingale's song, and the poet begins to be in a half-awake and half-chaotic state ("drowsy numbness pains") as if he had drunk poisonous hemlock and swallowed opium. The word "ache" in the phrase "My heart aches" at the poem's beginning sets the tone. In English, "ache" means pain, but "ache for" means longing. This word contains the poet's contradictory feelings, reflecting the poet's emotional dilemma in the gap between reality and ideal. On the one hand, he seeks the ideal state in his imagination to get relief beyond the bounds of reality; on the other hand, the perfect ideal state further deepens his painful feelings towards the imperfect real world. The

struggle between the ideal and reality highlights the poem's tension. The thoughts and emotions of the whole poem ebb and flow in this tension: joy and pain, ecstasy and sorrow, imagination and rationality, nature and human nature, eternity and change, freedom and bondage, art and life, dream and wakefulness. The two poles are connected when a concept is pushed to the extreme. At the extremes, pain is also joy, and joy is also pain. Likewise, death is life, and life is death.

The poet's desire to merge with the nightingale and enter the world of the being is revealed when he gradually departs from reality and enters the natural world of the imagination. Forgetting is the first step, and forgetting provides the imagination with a world of freedom and a garden of pleasure. Thus, the poet sinks towards "Lethe-wards", forgetfulness reflecting the quest for the self and the beginning of earthly death.

The nightingale's song passes through the ears of the poet's senses and takes him from everyday life into a world of nature far removed from distractions. The poet rejoices in the joy of the nightingale, which is called the "light-winged Dryad" (Keats 233), the goddess of the forest, a term that emphasises the naturalness of the nightingale. However, the joyful nightingale hides in the "shadows numberless" (Keats 233), which in Western culture casts the shadow of death.

In the second stanza, the poet wishes to leave the troubled world of the world by drinking and to be hidden in the forest with the nightingale. The wine has been refrigerated for many years in the "deep-delved earth" (Keats 233), "deep-delved" is not lacking in the smell of death, and the lips of the drinker are "purple-stained" (Keats 233), which is stained with the pain of love, purple is the colour of pain. The poet is going to "leave the world unseen" (Keats 233) and "fade away into the forest dim" (Keats 233), which seems to imply that the poet is willing to fade into the darkness, never to return. The third stanza begins with an echo of "fade away" at the end of the

second stanza, only here it goes further, “fade far away” (Keats 234), and the idea of forgetting this world of fatigue and restlessness is clearly put forward - “quite forget” (Keats 234), and the poet comes back to reality all of a sudden and realises his situation in reality. The poet uses five “where” clauses to modify the reality of “here”, which reinforces the poet’s dissatisfaction and loss of reality:

Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
 Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
 Where youth grows 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,
 Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow (24-30).

The denial of “here”, the world of this shore, reflects the pursuit and yearning for “there”, the world of the other shore. The fourth stanza is the return to the ideal nature. The two words, “Away! Away!” (Keats 234) at the beginning of the stanza intensify the desire to escape from the real and vulgar world and ride on the “viewless wings of Poesy” (Keats 234) to search for the poetic kingdom and obtain true happiness. It is worth noting that the real-time when the poet wrote this poem was a summer morning, but in the poet’s fantasy world, the day has turned into night. Here, “tender is the night” (Keats 234), “there is no light” (Keats 234), and “verdurous glooms” (Keats 234) envelop everything. The world of the night is unique to the nightingale, and in it, the poet can seek the peace of the soul. And night is often associated with death.

The fifth stanza is still in darkness, but this darkness is “embalmed darkness” (Keats 234). Note that the word embalmed originally meant “preserving a body with spices or medicines”, it can be seen that the word embalmed itself carries an air of

death. The other senses are fully engaged when vision is barely functioning. This stanza is highly sensory, with a great deal of sensory imagery being used, and the imagination is extensively activated, mobilising the senses of taste – “each sweet” (Keats 234), “dewy wine” (Keats 234), “musk-fose” (Keats 234); hearing – “murmurous haunt of flies” (Keats 234); touch – “violets on green leaves” (Keats 234); and all the other senses; it is a gorgeous journey into the imagination. But this perceptible external beauty ultimately falls on the more profound quest of the spirit and soul. On the other hand, the depiction of the senses reflects the apparent fugitive and ephemeral nature of real things. The garden is watered by fantasy, gardens and nightingales still reek of death. This garden is also the home of death. Death perpetuates the garden of imagination.

All the previous metaphors for death are clearly expressed in the sixth stanza: “I have been half in love with easeful Death” (Keats 235), and as the nightingale sings in ecstasy, pouring out his soul, the poet as if guided by death, becomes one with the nightingale. This is the liberation of the imprisoned self, and this instantaneous death is a purely spiritual recognition of the beautiful otherworld created by the nightingale’s song. Death condenses the most beautiful moment into eternity. The poet’s sense of enchantment with death is evident, “Now more than ever seems it rich to die, / To cease upon the midnight with no pain” (Keats 235). But, if death is understood as a cruel deprivation of life in the general sense, then there is a lack of a complete grasp of Keats’s theme of death. Indeed, death is not simply extinction but completion in another sense. At the beginning of the seventh stanza, there is a change in the tone of the poem; contrary to the previous intoxication and fascination with death, it says about the nightingale, “Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird! / No hungry generation tread thee down” (Keats 235); death also contains the poet’s longing for eternal life. Here, the

poet's ambivalent attitude towards death emerges: can death lead to another realm? On the one hand, death is tempting. It can make people eliminate the horror of the world on this shore and seek eternal life in the beautiful world on the other shore. Still, on the other hand, death contradicts the poet's wish to be one with the nightingale because the nightingale is a living creature, and its song can only be heard by the living people. Therefore, in a stricter sense, the death that the poet pursues is an ontological return. Like the nightingale, it is not born for death; its immortality lies in its symbolic connotation, and the quality of life rather than the length of life is immortal. The nightingale has no fear of death but calm, and each moment of singing in the presence of death gives it eternity.

The seventh stanza moves from the historical "the emperor and clown" (Keats 235) to the Biblical "Ruth" to the purely fictional "faery lands forlorn" (Keats 235), where fantasy reaches its zenith, signalling the poet's return to reality. In the eighth stanza, the bells of the Lost Lands are used as a symbol of the poet's return to reality. In the eighth stanza, beginning with the bell-like "forlorn", the poet awakens from the imaginative state of silence in the nightingale's song back to reality, which reflects the poet's return to the sole self after reaching the eternal moment. The poet bids farewell to the illusion, to the song of the nightingale, and the last two lines of the poem are thought-provoking: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music: —Do I wake or sleep" (Keats 235)?

ii. Keats's reflections on mortality

Death is the most significant dilemma facing human beings, and it is also one of the mother themes of artistic creation. Generations of artists have formed death images and death-related plots in their artworks, which have built up a unique aesthetics of death. The aesthetics of death is an analysis of human existence. The aesthetics of death in

English poetry advocates that death overpowers the rationality of the existent so that people can move from vulgarity to true moral freedom, and it requires art to present the state of human existence directly. In this sense, the aesthetics of death coincide with the existentialist view of death.

Heidegger, a modern Western philosopher, regarded death as the mode of existence of human beings, and it is only when human beings go to death first, that is to say, “live to death”, that they can realise the infinite possibilities of life. Death is not an end but a unique possibility of existence. From death, infinite possibilities radiate into the present. That is to say, only when one is aware of the existence of death can one cherish every minute and every second of one's life and treat every moment of one's life as if it were eternity. By looking at death through poetry and appreciating the infinite through death, Keats's poetry also embodies the existentialist's view of death. Throughout his life, Keats was obsessed with the theme of death and wrote many poems about it. Keats explored the sadness of human life and believed that there is joy in sadness. Keats believed in beauty and that there was beauty in sorrow. Therefore, Keats always called death “sweet death” and maintained true peace and optimism in suffering. Keats's writing has a “revolving door” between death and life. The living will undoubtedly die, but death can also lead to life.

In five years of writing (1816-1820), John Keats produced a series of works of enduring value until, at the age of 25, when tuberculosis ruthlessly took his life. Under the torment of illness, Keats's poetry has an ethereal and fleeting beauty, directly facing death, grief, and sorrow, yet it is also connected with love, passion and life. For Keats, the disease made him long for an ideal world on the other side. In this sense, the image of death brought to Keats by tuberculosis also gave him a kind of dream, a kind of life. For him, death was only a kind of happy demise, an escape from suffering. The god of

death swings his scythe, and the poet calmly watches everything coming. Inspiration is running high, poetry is redemption, death is so sweet, but the desire for life is strong. Keats was a poet who lived to death. He did practise such an attitude in his life. No matter how close to death his life was, he would blossom again in life through imagination, nature, and poetry.

Chapter 4: The Concept of Eternity

In *Ode to a Nightingale*, although Keats retains the Christian idea of “from dust to dust”, he completely rejects the Christian belief in the immortality of the soul or the belief in heaven or hell and argues that man does not have an immortal soul, but that the soul dies with the body, and that the death of the body is the end of life. Clearly, Keats did not believe that religion could help mankind gain eternity. Keats’s attempts to escape or transcend finite life and reach eternity in *Ode to a Nightingale* failed, but in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, the poet finally found the secret of eternity, which is art. In the author’s opinion, the poet wants to use perfect art creation to transcend the limited and painful life because of the difficulties in his life, and he regards art as much higher than life.

- i. Exploration of how Keats portrays eternity through beauty and art in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

Ode on a Grecian Urn is a poem written by Keats in 1819. An urn is a marble or glass vessel used by the ancient Greeks to hold ashes or as a decorative object, and it is often painted with human and animal designs. These patterns are no longer straightforward, inanimate lines in the poet’s writing. They present instantaneous images of human life, capturing the eternal passion and beauty of human life.

At the very beginning of the poem, the poet refers to the ancient urn as “Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness, / Thou foster-child of silence and slow time” (Keats 236),

for time has not changed the figures on the urn, and these figures are frozen in time. Then the poet shouts at the urn, “Sylvan historian” (Keats 236), the paintings on the urn are referred to as “A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme” (Keats 236). The picture is frozen: “What men or gods are these? What maidens loth? / What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy” (Keats 236)? A young man passionately pursues his beloved, a young girl is shy and mysterious, and music, gongs, and drums are playing in this pursuit of love. This picture has a vivid vitality and brings unlimited imagination to the viewer. The artist depicts it on the ancient urn, which, together with the urn, enters the hall of the eternal art of humankind. But the poet’s pen makes it immortal: the urn as an object may be destroyed, and with it, the art on it. The art on it will disappear with it, but poetry will live on in the memory of humankind.

In the second stanza, the boy under the tree plays the bagpipes, but frozen in time, we cannot hear the music. In the poet’s view, “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter” (Keats 236); because it “Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear’d, / Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone” (Keats 236). We are asking what kind of music this tender bagpipe will play to touch the heart of a young girl. Music brings to the human soul an instantaneous feeling of beauty. We can enjoy music, but no one can catch it. Here, the music of love is captured. The poet has crystallised this music in his eternal verse so that, just as Shakespeare notes in Sonnet 18, so long as man can breathe or eyes can see, “thou canst not leave / Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare” (Keats 236); this tender bagpipe will go on forever.

Then the poet exclaims:

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,

Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;

She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,

For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair (18-21)!

The words “winning near” indicate the possibility of fulfilling this line of action.

This moment of pursuit becomes the eternity of love, Time, the killer of love, is helpless in front of the young couple’s relationship.

In the third stanza, the poet expresses this sentiment:

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed

Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;

And, happy melodist, unwearied,

For ever piping songs for ever new (22-25).

The poet calls all this “happy”: nature is happy because it has an eternal spring; the piper is happy because his music is never tired, and happiness is condensed at this moment. Then the happy tune continues: “More happy love! more happy, happy love! / For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d, / For ever panting, and for ever young” (Keats 237). Here, in addition to the continued repetition of the word “happy”, the word “for ever” is also mentioned. The maiden will neither lose her beauty nor grow old; her affectionate lover will not lose his love for her: the bagpipes will always play beautiful music. There will be an everlasting spring on earth. But the poet concludes, “All breathing human passion far above, / That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy’d, / A burning forehead, and a parching tongue” (Keats 237). “Cloy” means fulfilment. It means an assortment of happiness, the result of which is boredom. It is a fact of life that you will inevitably fall when you reach the top. But with art, we never tire.

The poet turns to the other side of the urn. On it is depicted a picture of a sacrifice:

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?

To what green altar, O mysterious priest,

Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,

And all her silken flanks with garlands drest (32-35)?

The sacrifice was to take a calf and lead it to the place of sacrifice. In the first stanza, the poet used many questions to find out what kind of love this was, and in this section, the poet still asks many questions, echoing the first stanza. As well as not knowing what these people are and where they are leading the calf, he does not know where they are from: “What little town by river or sea shore, / Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel, / Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn” (Keats 237)? The urn cannot answer these questions. In the end, the poet expresses this sentiment: “And, little town, thy streets for evermore / Will silent be; and not a soul to tell / Why thou art desolate, can e'er return” (Keats 237). The town's streets will always be “silent” because people will always be on their way to the festival. The time of the festival is so far in the past that we do not know what it all means. However, the urn presents us with such a past, making us speculate and explore what it all means. Apart from reproducing the unchanging love of humanity, art also preserves for us the past and history of humankind.

From the poem's first three stanzas, we can see that the poet is depicting eternal love, and the tone is beautiful and passionate, with the word “happy” alone appearing repeatedly. The poet imagines the sincere love of young boys and girls in ancient times and creates a dreamy and beautiful atmosphere of love, and even the leaves of the tree are not peeling off, never leaving the spring. However, from this stanza onwards, the poet shifts the focus of description to another theme – the sacrifice. The sacrifice and love can be said to have almost opposite emotional colours, love is beautiful and passionate, sacrifice is solemn. The description of “sacrifice” in this stanza awakens the reader from the dreamy atmosphere of love, and then takes the reader into the ordinary

life of hard labour. Sacrifice was another major event in human life during that period (Sheng 99). People in those days make sacrifices to seek the gods' blessing to protect their earthly life, and the suffering of the earthly world begins to appear vaguely between the lines of the poem.

As mentioned above, Keats's life was miserable. However, his misfortunes did not affect Keats' pursuit of beauty, and he once coined the phrase "negative capacity" in a letter he wrote to his brothers George and Thomas in 1817; he describes it as "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats, *Letters* 57). The word "desolate" expresses the change in the poet's mood; love is eternal, and so is the lonesomeness of humankind.

In the last stanza, the poet seems to want to reconcile the two contrasting tones presented earlier: passionate love and silent life, and so he first returns to reality. He no longer romantically refers to the urn as "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness, / Thou foster-child of silence and slow time" (Keats 236), instead, it is matter-of-factly called "O Attic shape! Fair attitude" (Keats 237)! And the image above no longer reads "A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme" (Keats 236). He realises that all this is just "Of marble men and maidens overwrought, / With forest branches and the trodden weed" (Keats 237). The words "marble" and "trodden" have such a strong sense of reality that we almost wonder if they come from the same poet as the previous lines. Though the urn is full of idyllic scenes of enduring beauty and enduring love, "silent form, dost tease us out of thought" (Keats 237), yet it's still just a cold piece of art. The soft bagpipes play only cold pastoral songs at this time.

The poet then sighs sadly: "When old age shall this generation waste, / Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe" (Keats 237). At this point, the poet may be imagining the transience and hopelessness of the earthly world: even though we were once young and

beautiful, we will soon grow old, and all our dreams will wither away. Perhaps only the beauty of the urn is accurate and reliable. The poet concludes with a philosophical sigh: “Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st, / Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (Keats 237). “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” was originally a view put forward by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, who believed that the realm of beauty is the highest in the ideal world. Only the poet can create the realm of beauty in poetry; that is, he can see the highest truth. Keats gives a new meaning to the poem here. Art is inseparable from reality, and only what is true is beautiful. People generally think that reality is cruel and full of suffering. It is ugly. Art is an idealised reality, a glorified reality. Keats’s “negative capability” affirms the helplessness of reality on the one hand, but on the other hand, he thinks that it does not affect the truth of beauty. He believes that the harmonious, idealised and imaginative reality found in ancient Greek art and poetry is the reality of beauty.

In a letter to John Taylor dated 27 February 1818, Keats said: “That if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all (Keats, *Letters* 93)”. Keats believed that poetry should reflect the truth, and nature is the highest realm of beauty that poets seek; beauty can cover everything, and beauty is eternal.

ii. Discussing Keats’s approach to the perception of “truth” and “beauty”

How does Keats acquire his “truth” and “beauty”? This does not seem to be a problem, for a quick look at Keats’s letters reveals that Keats perceived “truth” and “beauty” through his intuitive sense of “beauty”. “To say that a thing was ‘true’ because it was reasonable would have been to Keats merely foolish. If a thing was reasonable, it was reasonable, and no more; its truth was a matter to be settled in another court, where the reason was not the judge but was itself on trial” (Ridley 6). Who, then, is the judge? “Beauty”. “And his test for a ‘truth’ is whether he can or cannot gain a clear perception

of its beauty: ‘I never can feel certain of any truth but from a clear perception of its Beauty.’” (Ridley 5). In this way, Keats found his own way of entering into the “real” - the way of intuitive perception.

In a comparative study of Chinese and Western philosophies, some critics have put forward the characteristics of transforming knowledge into wisdom in Western philosophy and the transformation of wisdom into reality in Chinese philosophy. The so-called “transformation of knowledge into wisdom” refers to the understanding of the meaning of life and the wisdom of being a human being through the examination of reason, or “knowledge”. And “the excitement of Chinese philosophical metaphysics is not so much about arguing why man has metaphysical wisdom as it is about the ways in which this metaphysical wisdom is presented and realised. This philosophical and metaphysical enquiry can be described as a way of ‘turning wisdom into reality’. The word ‘wisdom’ here refers to the value of life and the ‘principles’ of being a human being, and the word ‘realm’ refers to the realm of life” (Hu 34, translated by Mengting Sun). It can be said that Western philosophy is characterised by an emphasis on logical thinking, while Chinese philosophy is characterised by an emphasis on perception.

Keats’s understanding of “truth” comes closest to the “transformation” process. There is no better illustration of this than his famous statement of “negative capability”. Negative capability requires “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats, *Letters* 57). This “stay” stage is experienced as a contemplation of the transformation of wisdom into reality. Because it is due to the “stay” that the poet discovers beauty, it can be inferred that this “stay” stage plays a crucial role in the poet’s perception of “truth” and “beauty”.

In May 1818, in a letter to J. H. Reynolds, Keats said:

I compare human life to a large Mansion of many apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon me. The first we step into we remain as long as we do not think. We remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second Chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten to it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by awakening of the thinking principle within us—we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight. However among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man—of convincing one's nerves that the world is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness, and oppression—whereby this Chamber of Maiden Thought besides of it, many doors are set open—but all dark—all leading to dark passages. We see not the balance of good and evil; we are in a mist, we are now in that state, we feel the “Burden of the Mystery” (Keats, *Letters* 129).

The “Chamber” that Keats refers to is similar to the world he has always loved, which he has been banished from by reason, but Keats is no longer satisfied with the knowledge of this world, as he has now discovered the driving force of thought, and therefore he “no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought” (Keats, *Letters* 129)”. It is worth noting that Keats's visualisation of this “Chamber of Maiden-Thought” (Keats, *Letters* 129) suggests a deepening of his understanding of the world. What we achieve in the second Chamber is not tragic vision—we do not know realise that the world is ugly and not beautiful, evil and not good, we realise that it is good, evil, beautiful, ugly, comic, tragic, noble, ignoble, intelligible and absurd, and that all these opposites exist incorrigibly together.

The sense of perplexity illustrates just how deeply Keats experienced the difficulty of perceiving the objective world. Susan J. Wolfson notes,

Romantic texts show a restless play of possibilities. Skeptical inquiry, for instance, may be seen both to challenge what Keats calls ‘fixed points and resting places in reasoning’ and to enhance a longing for them; certainties dissolve under the pressure of inquiry, but inquiry may be undertaken to secure a more comprehensive certainty, which renewed inquiry may in turn destabilise. These activities of mind at once presume and produce one another (Wolfson 20).

Keats’s odes often end with a question, a reflection in the text of Keats’s confusion about the perception of “truth”. Keats has always been a philosophical poet. He was consciously aware of his poems’ rational component at work.

Keats’s reflections on arriving at the realm of “truth” mark the maturity of his thought. Keats’s poetic wisdom is precisely the perfect combination of sensibility and reason. Exploring the meaning of Keats’s “truth” also proves this point. Imagination from the source of fantasy, through the judgement of “beauty”, distinguishes the “true” from the “untrue” to reach the grasp of the “true”, and this sifting process is, of course, itself a process of rational contemplation. On the one hand, Keats was a poet who was able to immerse his whole soul in the senses, and the rational factor was not sufficiently important to him; on the other hand, the characteristics of intuition itself also make Keats naturally ignore the role of rational factors: “Sometimes intuition manifests itself in a high degree of simplicity of logical procedure, where the detailed processes of logical thought are omitted, many intermediate steps are transgressed, and the question is answered at once” (Jiang 17, translated by Mengting Sun).

Chapter 5: The Interplay of Death and Eternity

September 1819 was the penultimate autumn before Keats’s death. While his life

was fading away, he was at the peak of his poetic output. However, at the time, and for a long time afterwards, there were few positive and welcoming voices in the critical community. Between the joys of poetry and the pressures of illness and criticism, Keats faced a difficult choice.

i. Synthesis of how death and eternity are intertwined in *To Autumn*

To Autumn is one of the poems inspired by nature. The three stanzas of the poem describe the scenery of autumn in the morning, midday and evening: the misty autumn morning is full of expectation, just like the beginning of life; in the afternoon, the satisfaction of labour, the laziness of lying in the field, and the state of mind of the harvesting stage of life; at sunset, the birds and insects chirp as if the music of life has already been played, and swallows are about to leave, which indicates that everything will gradually lose its vitality. The swallows are about to leave, signalling the loss of all life. However, amid the sunset and the reddish haze, outside of the melancholy and sadness, the murmur of the swallows hints at the hope of the return of spring to the earth. As the seasons change in the scene, the poet's mood naturally transitions between joy, weariness, sadness, and hope.

In the first line of the poem, Keats gets right to the point: "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness" (Keats 242). Layers of mist and fruits, the two most common things in autumn, seem to be casually used by the poet, but in fact, they are setting the tone for the whole poem. The mist covers the fields in autumn, making everything seem real or imaginary; the ripe fruits look tempting and sweet, exuding the charm of autumn. The mist's emptiness and mistiness exude a light sadness; the fruit's fruitfulness and sweetness give people warmth and pleasure, which are the two moods that unify the whole poem, which is not only the poet's intuitive feeling of being in the middle of the autumn morning, but also a true portrayal of the poet's state of mind at that stage of his

life.

The feeling of warmth and pleasure runs throughout the poem's first stanza. Looking at the fruitfulness, the poet playfully imagines that autumn must be allied with the sun: "Conspiring with him how to load and bless / With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run" (Keats 242); The word "conspiring" alludes to the fact that the autumn harvest is not an instantaneous event but requires long-term planning. And how can one not smile and develop a heartfelt love for autumn and autumn sunshine when the result of such conspiracies is fruitfulness? The poet then uses a series of tactile, visual, and olfactory images to create the fullness of autumn. Ripe, sweet fruit, fruit trees bent over with apples, swollen gourds and bulging hazelnut shells, sweet kernels, and sticky beehives. It makes the warmth come in, the fruitfulness calls out, and even the air swells with the joy and sweetness of the harvest.

The fruits are ripe, and the farmers are about to harvest them. In the second stanza, the poet sees autumn transformed into one "thee" after another, working and resting in the autumn fields. "Thee" under the poet's pen is a bit lazy, a bit of female charm, sometimes too tired to sleep, sometimes in a hurry to work, and occasionally sitting quietly for a long time, patiently waiting. Autumn harvest brings "thee" satisfaction and pleasure but also lets "thee" feel a little overwhelmed by the exhaustion. Is this "thee" the autumn or the poet himself?

From the warmth and sweetness of the first stanza to the quietness and serenity of the second stanza, from the busyness of the bees to the laziness of "thee", the pace of autumn slows down step by step, and the excitement settles down a little. The twice use of the word "sometimes" once again suggests that life is like "mists", mysterious, difficult to grasp, and it seems that even the joy of the harvest has become less precise, a bit of unwarranted bewilderment, but also mixed with a bit of sadness.

In this stanza, the poet compares autumn to a soft female figure, reminiscent of the goddess of art, the Muse, and thus connects autumn with literary creation. The poet writes: “Or by a cyder-press, with patient look, /Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours” (Keats 243)”. The word “oozings” depicts the situation of “dropping” and reads soothingly long, as if to tell the reader that perseverance is the only way to brew the wine of life; perseverance is the only way to harvest the fruits of literature. The word “oozings” suggests a long period, sadness, and the poet's hidden wish. For the poet, whether it is autumn, his creative inspiration, or his own life, he hopes it will be like cider syrup, which flows on for a long time. The word “patient”, like the words “mists” and “fruitfulness” in the first stanza, is the finishing touch to the whole poem and is also the poet's inner confession: be patient, persevere, and wait.

In some of his early works, death and destruction always follow Keats in his short and difficult life. The fragile and sensitive Keats was also afraid and fearful of life's sorrows. But Keats, in September 1819, was already in the autumn of his life, full of wisdom.

The poet faces the cycle of seasons and the impermanence of life with calmness and openness. At the beginning of the third stanza, the poet asks himself: “Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they? / Think not of them, thou hast thy music too” (Keats 243). The imagery of “spring” continues the theme of literary creation from the previous section, with the double meaning of “spring”, which can also be interpreted as a “source of inspiration” for creativity, while “songs” and “music” are often used to refer to literary creations such as poetry.

After plants and people have been the protagonists, in the third stanza of the poem, the poet brings out another protagonist of nature, the animals, in turn: the little flying insects under the river willows wail; the crickets under the hedges sing; and the flock of

sheep about to be slaughtered bleats; the red-breasted robin also whistles. Is there no resonance in the poet's voice in this autumn chorus? Although Keats was a man of great talent, he was short, unattractive, and often ill. His poems have been passed down through the ages, but he had only a few friends during his lifetime. However, the poet wants to use birds and insects to show that even the humblest life also sings their joys and sorrows.

When the reader's mood is towards hopelessness and greyness, the imagery of swallows makes everything bright and even cheerful again. In the last line of the third stanza, the poet writes: "And gathering swallows twitter in the skies" (Keats 243). This not only echoes the word "spring" in the first line of the stanza but also politely gives the answer: the song of spring is here.

Compared with the static images in the first two stanzas, the third stanza of *To Autumn* combines static images and dynamic images. A series of movements, such as insects flying high and dropping down, robins whistling, swallows gathering in the sky, etc., emphasise the sense of movement and change, suggesting the change of seasons and the unstoppable life cycle. Keats contrasts the laws of life with those of nature, not only because he is psychologically ready to accept the death implied by winter after autumn but also because life as fruitful as autumn makes the poet feel fulfilled and serene. The poet's tireless pursuit of life has finally been realised and reached a successful conclusion, so there is no regret in death. No wonder what we feel at the end of the poem is the sadness of approaching death and the calmness and openness after the harvest of life.

ii. Analysis of the dichotomy between death and immortality in *Bright Star*

Of Keats's life's work, the sonnet *Bright Star* has lesser poetic status and achievement than the other works for which he is known, but as Keats's last and finest

Shakespearean sonnet, it still represents Keats's highest artistic achievement. The poem celebrates the sanctity of the heart's love, and it is fitting that the cloud of death lingers in the poem. Keats could not marry his beloved Fanny for financial and health reasons. What is most impressive about this sonnet is the intertwined contradictions of death and immortality throughout the poem, revealing the poet's inner struggle with the desire to immortalise earthly love.

A thorough reading of *Bright Star* reveals that the poem contains two obvious levels: the transition from heaven to earth and from natural landscapes to the secular world. In the first eight lines of the poem, Keats humanises the natural world and traces the meaning of life. In the first four lines of the poem, by anthropomorphising and calling out the "bright star", the poet begins to paint a background picture of a brilliant night sky with twinkling stars: the bright stars are shining in the night sky, watching everything on earth as if they were a "patient, sleepless Eremite" (Keats 337). This brilliant and shining star, which never sleeps and never changes, inspires the poet's yearning and desire to "stand fast as thou art" (Keats 337). However, the poet also realises that this brilliant star is not without flaws - although it shines brilliantly, it can only be "lone splendour" (Keats 337); although it is eternal, it can only be "aloft the night" (Keats 337), a feeling of loneliness and despair cannot help but overflow. The implication is that, in the poet's eyes, this brilliant star is too lonely and transcendent because it is miles away from the secular world. Then, the poet sketches a picture of earthly nature with sacred colours to set off and compare with this brilliant star. "The moving waters at their priestlike task / Of pure ablution round earth's human shores" (Keats 337), "Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask / Of snow upon the mountains and the moors" (Keats 337). All of these present the peace and harmony of nature itself, but not without despair and loneliness. The poet uses the words "priest-like" and "ablution".

These words have religious meanings, so the image of the eternal, holy and transcendent star is self-evident.

From the ninth line onwards, the poet's brush takes a sharp turn, and the word "not" shifts the mood and vision of the poem to the worldly world, or to be precise, the warmth of human lust and the warmth of the beloved, which the poet truly loves and remains in love with. Obviously, "not" reveals the poet's emotion that he does not want to be as indifferent and abstinent as the stars, though he still longs to be as steadfast and eternal as the stars. Only in the poem's last six lines can the reader find out what the poet longs for in the poem - sweet and intoxicating mortal love. In the last six lines, the poet turns his attention from the sacred and cold nature of the universe to the warmth of love in the present world. For the poet, the warmth of present love lies precisely in the fact that his "fair love" is not as far away as the stars but so close at hand that he can rest peacefully on her "ripening breast" and feel "its soft fall and swell" (Keats 337) and hear "her tender-taken breath" (Keats 337) all the time. All these make him feel "in a sweet unrest" (Keats 337). The poet here uses a lot of delicate and bold sensory perceptions, mobilising the full range of sensory experiences, such as vision, feeling, touch, hearing, etc., to present a real and warm mortal lover, although not inevitably shrouded in erotic colours, but its conveyance of the poetic meaning and emotion is real and moving, and unknowingly eclipses the eternally immortal but ice-cold and distant stars. Compared with the cold, distant, faraway universe and stars above the poet's head, his beloved is the whole universe and world in his eyes. Here, the purpose of the poet's recitation of nature is revealed - the poet cleverly uses the things in nature as the medium and support to reveal his deep, touching, and steadfast love for Fanny. Because being with the beloved brings such worldly bliss, the poet stays in the world of lust and prays to be as firm and eternal as the brilliant star, thus prolonging the ultimate bliss of

earthly love. This wish is so strong for the poet that he uses word repetition many times in the poem to express it - four times “still” throughout the poem, three times “ever”, and “steadfast” followed by the synonym “unchangeable”. This once again reinforces the poet’s hope for eternity, or to be more precise, the poet’s desire to “live ever” in the arms of his beloved, no matter how much time passes.

However, a wish is just a wish, and one cannot help but die. At the time of writing this sonnet, Keats was still battling with his illness, but his health was deteriorating, and death could strike him at any moment. Keats himself knew that he was dying and that he and Fanny would never be married. This sadness and despair are expressed even more bluntly in another poem of his, *When I Have Fears*.

Keats is deeply concerned that time is like the passing of a foal, and he is afraid that it will be difficult for him to immortalise his poems in his short life. He is terrified that death will eventually carry him away from his lovers and the earthly world. These lines convey the poet’s anxiety and fear of cherishing his love and life before death and the possibility of losing both at any time, revealing his doubts, fears, and despair in the face of death. However, in *Bright Star*, the poet seems to overcome the fear of death and chooses another way. If he cannot escape from the clutches of death, then he decides to “swoon to death” (Keats 337) in the sweet lust of his and his beloved’s love. In this sense, the poet seems to have achieved a new kind of immortality that he could only dream of, namely, dying in the arms of his beloved to immortalise their love - perhaps, in the moment of love’s ecstasy, death gives the poet a sense of eternity. How does the poet transcend the transient life of human beings to attain the immortality of love? The answer to this question can be found in the poem’s last line. In the last line, the poet seems to imply through the conjunction “or else” that for him, “And so live ever” (Keats 337) is the same as “swoon to death” (Keats 337) because both are ways of

attaining the eternal state. In this way, one can think of a similar situation in the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, in which the youth of a man and a woman in love is immortalised by the framing of the image of the two lovers chasing each other on the urn, and thus their love, though unfulfilled, is eternal.

In addition, by comparing the two versions of the poem, it is possible to better understand the poet's attitude towards death and eternal life in his call for love. The two versions are almost identical except for a very small number of alterations, the only more noticeable alteration being in the last line. In the first version of 1838, the last sentence reads "Half passionless, and so swoon to death", while in the second version of 1848 (and the one that is now widely circulated and generally recognised), it becomes: "And so live ever-one else swoon to death" (Keats 337). Two changes are particularly noteworthy here: firstly, by changing "Half passionless" to "And so live ever", the word "ever" is semantically duplicated, and Keats's desire for steadfastness and immortality is expressed; secondly, through the change of the conjunction, i.e., "and" to "or else", the poet seems to intend to highlight the obvious contrast between love and death. The poet seems to tell the readers that death is natural after the climax of lust, that is to say, after the extreme happiness brought by the worldly lust between lovers, human death is natural and inevitable. As mortal flesh must perish, so mortal affection is inevitably fickle or perish with it, and therefore the poet's prayer for the eternity of love is in vain; whereas "or else", as analysed above, at least suggests that, though he is in the flesh, there is still the possibility of immortality, but in another form, that is to say, his love for his beloved can be immortalised in the culmination of their sweet erotic experience. This choice, though not without a certain degree of futility and self-deception, is in keeping with the strong desire expressed in the poet's text, and skilfully resolves the contradiction between the eternal and the temporal that the poem begins to create.

In the sonnet *Bright Star*, there are many contradictions: the star is eternal and immortal, but lonely and cold; the star is beyond the world and does not eat earthly food, but therefore lacks earthly warmth; earthly love is warm and sweet but will cease one day; the poet himself is facing death at any time, but still prays for eternal life. Although these contradictions cannot be resolved, Keats achieves some kind of compromise and balance, and even transcendence, through his poems. Reading through the poem, one can find that Keats presents two kinds of eternity in the poem: one is the eternally orbiting but lonely and ascetic cosmic star, while the other is the eternal and fixed secular union between the poet and his lover in their personal universe, which remains unchanged even when time passes. The poet, as an earthly individual with a short life and desires, honestly faces his own limitations as a worldly mortal, and ultimately chooses the latter - he rejects the immortality of the sacred and vast universe in favour of the inferior earthly desires, placing his lover and his sweet carnal union with him in a shrine, and thus being able to immortalise his love in a world of tension and imagination created by the poem. And thus, to immortalise their love in the tense world of imagination created by the poem. Death itself does not really deter him, and if he has to die, he is willing to die without regret in the bliss of sweet love.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Death and eternity are the most important themes in Keats's poetry. In his meditations and poetry writing on the themes of life and death, Keats constantly and freely expresses his thoughts and emotions. In Keats's poems, death is not a daunting and frightening issue. On the contrary, Keats often portrays death as a beautiful thing. In his poems, Keats escapes from the various sufferings of real life and gains a moment of tranquillity in his thinking about death. And this process, in turn, makes Keats face life more bravely and optimistically.

What Keats reveals to readers is obvious in his poems. He is clearly and brilliantly portrayed both as a mature man and as an explorer of life and death in the secular world. Keats's life was short but brilliant. His poetry offers us a perspective. Keats reminds people that life will eventually fade away, but "truth" and "beauty" are immortal. He tries to harmonize the various lovely aspects of life with the transience of beautiful things and the tragedy of life. Keats reconciles the conflict between life and death, transience, and eternity, in his own inimitable way. Through poetry, Keats tells that death is not actually the opposite of life. On the contrary, it is a part of life. Death has always been the biggest threat in Keats's life, but he has never been afraid of it. He thinks about death calmly and does not treat it as a terrifying or abominable thing. He bravely fights it and transcends it to achieve eternity through poetry. A person should be as strong as Keats, bravely challenge fate, and achieve eternity through art, love, truth, beauty, and death. True life does not exist in empty flesh that fades quickly; it exists in thought, in faith, in the conviction and creation of the most beautiful eternal things in the world to Keats. Death is not the end, but a necessary path to eternity. Death is eternity to Keats.

Keats was unfortunate to have experienced extreme ups and downs and hardships in his short life. In Keats's poems, Keats expressed his love for the world, his fantasy of beauty, his nostalgia for life, and also reflected calmness and peace in the face of death.

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