

# Fallen Stars: A Comparative Study of the Poetic Works of John Keats and Li He

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**Abstract.** Due to the short lives and similar poetic styles, the British Romantic poet John Keats and Li He from the Mid-Tang dynasty have always been the hotspot for research. However, most past research compared them by stating the superficial, factual details and failed to address their subtle differences and attribute them. Therefore, this paper aims to compare the pursuit of the ideal, use of imagery, and presence of the narrator to thoroughly contrast Keats' and Li He's poetic works and then propose personal and cultural reasons for such differences. It is concluded that Keats pursued poetry to reach the idealized integration, while poetry for Li was a means to enter the political arena until reality turned him down. Regarding imagery, Keats followed the "the death of beauty" pattern, while Li directly utilized macabre imagery to express his poignancy. Finally, Keats' narrator demonstrates a shift between "realm with the poet" and "without the poet" due to his existential anxiety, while Li's work demonstrates an unorthodox "realm without the poet", where the narrator utterly detaches himself from the poem. While Keats' poetry highlights a struggle to grasp the ideal, metaphorically an impeded upward tendency, Li He's poetry reflects a downward tendency of merely portraying the macabre, the grotesque, and the degenerate. Personally, this could be attributed to Keats' internal locus of control and Li's external locus of control, while culturally, abundant social outlets for a poet in 19<sup>th</sup> century England and limiting careers for those in the Mid-Tang dynasty explained those discrepancies.

**Keywords:** Romanticism, John Keats, Li He, Comparative Literature.

## 1. Introduction

John Keats (1795-1821) was a British Romantic poet of the nineteenth century who, despite his short life of 25 years plagued by illness and denigration, was deemed one the most influential poets in English literature. Known for its imaginative power, his poetry explored the dynamics between nature, love, beauty, and eternity. Li He (790-816), courtesy name Changji, was a romantic poet during the Mid-Tang Dynasty. Influenced by Confucianism, he aspired to gain a dominant position in the political arena to save the declining Tang Dynasty. However, fearing calumny, Li did not participate in the highest level of imperial examination for entered graduates, or imperial scholars and was never able to fulfill his high aspiration. Mournfully, he died at the age of 26 from illness. His poems are famous for their macabre imagery, and he is often referred to as the "talent of specters".

As two Romantic poets with great imagination but both short-lived, Keats and Li He lightened literary history as two fallen stars and have always been the hotspots of research. Comparative studies of the two poets are already detailed and comprehensive. For example, Xu Zhixiao has compared their perception of the dynamics between beauty and truth, their creative styles, etc., and explained this similarity in terms of the poets' similar biographical experiences, while Changming Yuan elaborated on the relationship between their poetry and political mechanisms [1,2]. Furthermore, scholars have compared their use of imagery or applied the Freudian psychoanalytic theory to their works [3,4]. However, many scholars only state the factual materials rather than analyzing them. Thus, the comparison remains at a superficial level. Other times, they either stay at the similarities but do not dig deep into the differences or fail to explain the significance of those differences.

In addition, as Cai Lun has pointed out, a comparative study easily falls into the "trap of comparative literature", that is, to only probe into the social influences on the poets as opposed to a close analysis of the texts [5]. Therefore, the writer believes that a proper comparative study should stem from close reading of the texts and then be complemented by personal and cultural reasons to

explain the significance of the similarities and differences. This paper adopts this strategy by comparing and contrasting their pursuit of the ideal, the use of imagery, and the narrator's presence in their works. Afterward, personal and cultural reasons will be proposed to explain those differences and their significance.

## 2. Organization of the Text

### 2.1. Pursuit of the Ideal

Both Keats' and Li's poetry unfold around certain ideals. The pursuit of them or failure in doing so becomes thematized and thus is key for the understanding and interpretation of their poetry. While the pursuit of truth and beauty through poetry is the end goal for Keats, composition to Li He was a channel to the political arena.

#### 2.1.1 Keats: Truth and Beauty

Keats' ideal develops around the dynamics between truth and beauty. His poetic objectives are characterized by creating "a symbolic world in which the qualities of the spirit modify harsh facts of nature": in other words, where his imagination transcends human transience and grasps permanent beauty by constructing symbols of immortality [6]. In his letter to Benjamin Bailey, he explains the relationship between beauty, imagination, and truth: "What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not" [7]. This constant pursuit of beauty and truth through imaginative efforts is typified in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn", where the poet is evoked by a Grecian Urn decorated with images featuring Greek pastoral life.

The poem opens by addressing the urn as the "bride of quietness" and "foster-child of silence and slow time", personifying its close relationship with mystery and eternity [8]. It then portrays the urn as "Sylvan historian, who canst thus express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme", suggesting this artwork's captive ability of beauty is even stronger than poetry, more generally language [8]. In stanzas two and three, the poet addresses images of the piper, two young lovers, and tree boughs, arguing they are "for ever warm and still to be enjoy'd, For ever panting, and for ever young" - though time fleets in reality, the inanimate quality of the urn preserves the beauty intact and therefore reaches the eternal, where existence becomes still [8]. As Guo has proposed, humans being able to experience and appreciate beauty without fearing its loss or death marks the ideal state after the integration of "beauty" and "truth" [9]. In the last stanza, the poet reinforces this relationship as he writes, "When old age shall this generation waste, Thou shalt remain", indicating the urn's ability to continue existing in the future as an immortal artwork, contrasting its longevity with the transient existence of a human generation [8]. The beauty that extends forever in history and the future enters the realm of "truth", as the famous ending line states: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" [8].

#### 2.1.2 Li He: Poetry and Political Aspiration

As opposed to Keats' pursuit of beauty and truth, Li He's poetic concerns are to achieve himself as a politician, though he never rendered philosophical utterances about it. Even when this ideal was turned down, Li was still aspirational and ambitious in his political career at first.

Li's ballad "Bring the Wine" was composed in the year 809's winter, just after he was deprived the eligibility for the highest level of imperial examination for entered graduates. The ballad describes the poet drinking with a friend, who adopts classical Chinese allusions to alleviate Li's pain. Eventually, the poet bestirs himself by writing "I have an errant soul no one can summon: at one call of the rooster all beneath the sky turns white" [10]. The first line exemplifies the desolation and self-pity the poet felt after being denied access to political examination opportunities, while the second line bluntly contrasts this low-spirited tone and adopts powerful visual and auditory imagery, paralleling the friend's insightful reassurance to the awakening call of a rooster at dawn time. The poet stiffens his determination to achieve politically as he continues to write, "the thoughts of a

youthful mind ought to grab the clouds; who cares about this forlorn chill where I sob in vain? [10]” Personifying his thoughts as aspiring to parallel the clouds, the poet illustrates his high ambitions and asserts agency to himself as an able, hopeful youth.

However, when Li’s general resigned from the frontier fortress and made futile his desire to fight the separatist forces, the poet acutely sensed his incapability in the political arena and the impending death that stemmed from his incurable disease. In this period, Li’s poetry utterly deviates from hope and optimism but delves into the world of the grotesque. The poem “Autumn Comes” features such a pattern. It depicts the poet sitting in solitude, with unsettling wind and cold rain surrounding his room, fantasizing about ghosts coming to mourn him - the poet experimentally subverts the roles of the alive and the dead as opposed to the orthodox manner of humans tributing the ghost, reinforcing his unequaled level of anguish. Furthermore, by suggesting that his “aggrieved blood” endures a millennium, becoming “green jade in the dirt”, the poet allusively intensifies his unappeasable resentment towards unfair political treatment [10]. Therefore, Li was never able to realize his ideal of accomplishing politically, while he turned to the world of poetry as a “talent of the specter” to express his poignance.

## 2.2. Use of Imagery in Daydreams

Some scholars have adopted the Freudian psychoanalytic point of view to compare the two poets’ works. This essay hopes to build on Xu’s conclusion that both Keats’s and Li He’s poetry were a product of their daydreams through aesthetic techniques [4].

### 2.2.1 Keats: the Death of Beauty

Keats’ daydream – his imagination about nature, time, and love - unfolds surrounding his ideal of creating immortal symbols that integrate beauty and truth. However, when this attempt fails, “the existential anxiety of the unsatisfied individual breaks through to destroy the symbol” [6]. This constant struggle between the temporal and the eternal features the theme of the “death of beauty” in Keats’ poetry – to demonstrate tragic experiences by portraying the unreachability or loss of something beautiful or essential, while this loss is due to the limitation of humanity or the shift of seasons (natural metabolism).

The poem “When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be” epitomizes this pattern. The speaker fears the descent of death before his pen has “gleaned” his “teeming brain” [11]. He resists decay because he “shall never look upon” his lover more and “never have relish in the faery power / of unreflecting love” [11]. The imagery of harvesting thoughts through a synth highlights the narrator’s talent and prolificacy, demonstrating his longing for accomplishment as a writer. However, the repetition of “never” three times throughout the poem underlines the devastating effect accompanying death – it prohibits him from realizing both as a writer and as a lover, disabling him from either capturing or appreciating beauty.

In “Ode to a Nightingale”, excessive sensory imagery is at first employed to suggest the beauty of nature in stanza 5. Although the speaker “cannot see”, he imagines and visualizes the “white hawthorn” and (purple) “violets”, featuring a colorful, vibrant summer scene [12]. While the phrase “soft incense” is both a practice of olfactory and tactile imagery, the mentioning of “musk-rose” emphasizes this appealing fragrance, and “dewy wine” adds a gustatory stimulus to the sensory experiences [12]. Therefore, a wondrous, harmonious, and flourishing summer scene is constructed by gratifying each of the speaker’s senses. The fifth sense – the auditory – has symbolic significance. While the song of the nightingale introduces the poet to this “daydream”, symbolizing a concrete, eternalized form of beauty, “the murmurous haunt of flies” intrudes into this perfection [12]. The onomatopoeia reminds both the narrator and the reader about the decay and death that follows autumn, distinguishing the real and the fantasized, and the poem progresses into a recognition of the transient nature of humanity: “Darkling I listen; and, for many a time / I have been half in love with easeful Death” [12]. The sound hints at the shift of mood in this poem, and Keats highlights the contrast between perpetuity and ephemerality through the unreachable, corrupted ideal.

### 2.2.2 Li He: the Macabre

On the other hand, most of Li He's fantasy features a macabre, ghostly atmosphere as his ideals were constantly turned down by reality. In "Little Su's Tomb", the poet laments the death of a renowned female singer, Little Su, during the Southern dynasties, and fantasizes about her soul's futile await of an imagined lover [10]. The opening sentence "dewdrops on secluded orchid / like tearstained eyes" compares the glistening dewdrops to Little Su's eyes [10]. While the literary tradition tends to liken water drops to one's tears, this unorthodox simile characterizes Li's imaginative power and uncanny compositional style. On the one hand, the visual imagery portrays Su as a fragile, melancholic beauty; on the other hand, it establishes an unsettling tone that permeates the whole passage, with the word "secluded" reinforcing her solitude and ghostly nature. The poet continues to depict Su's soul waiting in her wedding carriage comprised of natural landscapes: "Wind is her skirt; water her pendant. [10]" The first half appeals to thermal sensation, suggesting a gust adhering to her skin with sharpness and coldness. The second half employs visual imagery, as the liquid's translucency parallels that of the pendant, and the water drops imitate the shape of the beads. This bleak scene contradicts Keats' imagination where he embraces nature's warmth and prosperity.

Su's endless loneliness is reinforced as the poet continues to write "cold emerald candles / exhaust their brilliance" [10]. Here, the poet contrasts the candle's auspicious, celebrative, and wedding purpose with the ghostly will-o'-the-wisp that gleams cold fire around Su's tomb, while the verb "exhaust" underlines the futility of her ceaseless awaiting. The ending line, "Beneath the western mound / wind blows the rain", extends the imagery of wind and rain to portray a subdued and somber scene around her burial place, strengthening the tragic theme of Little Su's death, as well as the poet's pessimistic view of his own unaccomplished life [10]. In conclusion, Li He majorly uses multifaceted, bleak imagery to convey tragic themes.

### 2.3. Presence of Narrator

Although both poets utilize their imagination to create "daydreams", the narrative voice differs in the presence of the poet. As Wang Guowei proposes in "Poetic Remarks on the Human World", there are two realms, or states, of poetic composition - in the realm with the poet, the poet beholds the external in terms of themselves; thus the external receives the projection of the self; whereas in the realm without the poet, it is the external beholding itself. Therefore, the self and the external couldn't be distinguished [13]. However, since the process of poetic composition entails the author's narrative voice, an absolute "realm without the poet" is unrealistic [13]. It stands more for an immersive experience during the appreciation of beauty, where the poet observes the external serenely without projecting their internal demands and almost integrates themselves into it [13]. Thus, the presence of the author is not deduced from the presence of first-person pronouns, but from the subjectivity of the author when interacting with the external. Both poets have a great number of works featuring both realms; however, this essay hopes to only point out the one(s) that's most distinctive of their composition.

#### 2.3.1 Keats: Shift between Realms

Keats' poetry often demonstrates a shift between the "realm with the poet" and "without the poet": when the narrator's attention gets grasped by the beauty and thus reaches eternity, he enters the realm without himself. In fact, Keats has proposed the theory of "negative capability", which bears an astonishing resemblance to Wang Guowei's theoretical scaffold, to explain this state of composition: Keats holds that negative capability is when a poet is capable of "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" [7]. In other words, he praises the ability of an author to naturally, objectively accept and appreciate the external without judging or reasoning it subjectively [14]. However, when the lingering existential anxiety re-emerges into the poet's consciousness, he again concentrates on this paradox between transience and permanence and re-gains subjectivity.

This struggle is demonstrated in the ode “To Autumn”, where the narrator observes the beauty of the bountiful season but shifts to mourning for the coming decay. The poem opens with positive, descriptive language, portraying fall as the “season of mists and mellow fruitfulness” and “close bosom-friend of the maturing sun”, suggesting that the season and the sun work together to produce ripened fruits, such as ones on the vines, apples, gourds, hazels, and flowers [15]. Notably, the narrator remains anonymous and genderless during the process of observation. Their subjectivity is weakened as they immerse themselves in this lively, flourishing natural scene, demonstrating the “realm without the poet”. However, as it gradually transits to dusk time, distress towards the “dying day”, symbolic of the impending decay and death following autumn - the death of the beauty – becomes intelligible from the pessimistic narrative that reads “then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn” as if the insects form a chorus to elegize fall [15]. The poem ends with “gathering swallows twitter(ing) in the skies”, an evocative imagery that features swallows mourning on the darkening day, reinforcing this existential anxiety through an open ending. Therefore, the narrator’s subjectivity gradually uncovers itself, shifting to “the realm with the poet”.

### 2.3.2 Li He: Detachment from the Narrative

On the other hand, Li He demonstrates an uncommon type of “the realm without the poet” in some of his macabre compositions. This approach deviates from Wang’s theoretical scaffold in that the poet completely detaches himself from the narrative and reinforces his reputation as a “talent for specters”. As David Mc Craw has pointed out, Li “phantomizes himself by eliding his own presence”, and the “absence of self-reference points” results in “a ghostliness in the [poet]”, who features “an alien creator with some superior occult knowledge” [16].

In “Tune for ‘Divine Strings’”, the narrator describes a worship of the god that exorcises evil spirits. Although the whole scene is derived from the poet’s imagination, the narrator utterly veils his thoughts and emotions from the audience. The poem opens with a darkening sky at sunset time, with the whirlwind sweeping up a horse, depicting the descent of the god [10]. Together with an unreal visual imagery of the horse treading on clouds, the narrator reinforces the otherworldly nature of the descender and establishes a mysterious and unsettling atmosphere that pervades the whole poem. After describing the welcoming music and dance performed by the worshipers, the narrator pictures the god utilizing its power that makes “osmanthus leaves comb the wind” and “the osmanthus sheds its drupes”, foreshadowing the ominous coming scene [10]. Then, animals deemed monstrous and evil get attacked by the god’s power: “a blue civet weeps blood”, “the cold fox dies”, the Rainmaster expels “a multicolored dragon with a tail of gold leaf” into the autumn pool, while an “old owl” achieving “tree-sprite form” laughs with its nest burnt by “jade-green flame” [10]. The lurid color contrasts of blue, red, gold, and green, the gruesome laughing of the old owl, and the brutality of the bleeding, dying, and fleeing animals all portray this scene as hell-like and horrifying. Though some critics viewed the poem as criticizing the religious practices prevailing in the mid-Tang Dynasty, the author of this passage maintains the absence of an explicit attitude from the narrator - he acts as a standby that truthfully and indifferently documents his frightening imagination. No clues are buried in the text to reveal the narrator’s attitude; readers are left with this evocative imagery and abrupt ending that frustrates the expected “personal response to poetic stimuli” [16].

## 3. Comparison

### 3.1. Differences in Keats’ and Li He’s Composition

After comparing the pursuit of the ideal, the use of imagery, and the presence of the narrator in Keats’ and Li He’s poetry, it is concluded that Keats pursues an idealized integration of beauty and truth through imagination and art, while Li aspired to accomplish himself as a politician until this ideal was harshly turned down by his deprived eligibility for the imperial examination, the resignation of his general from the frontier, and his premonition of death; in regard to the construction of “daydreams”, Keats’ compositional pattern features “the death of beauty”, while Li directly utilizes

macabre imageries to express his poignancy; adopting Wang Guowei's framework, Keats' poetry epitomizes "the realm without the poet", while Li's work demonstrates an unorthodox "realm without the poet", where the narrator utterly detaches himself from the poem.

Scholars have already explained comprehensively the personal reasons for the similarities in their imaginative power, attributing to their bumpy life experiences: with both parents dying after eight years old, living with poor financial conditions, and having a premonition of death at a young age, Keats had a similar discontent towards life and society with Li He, and therefore sought relief and relish inside the world of imagination and poetry [1]. However, most scholars have failed to explicitly point out the difference in tonality between Keats' and Li He's poetry, let alone the reasons behind such a difference.

Although both had a bumpy and short life, Keats' imagination was driven by his love and passion for the world, explaining why he hoped to immerse and integrate into nature through "the realm without the poet". Due to the constraints of human existence, this passion was never to be truly fulfilled, which led him to seek eternity through his poetic endeavors. Therefore, his poetry demonstrates struggle and reflection in the pursuit of a higher existence – an impeded upward tendency - namely the compositional pattern of "the death of beauty". On the other hand, Li He's imagination was propelled by his disappointment and poignancy of himself and the decadent society. He was utterly deprived of hope in his final years. Since he had no more faith in accomplishing his ideal, his poetic style deviates from that of Keats, reflecting a downward tendency of merely portraying the macabre, the grotesque, and the degenerate, as shown in his use of imagery and detachment from the narrative.

### 3.2. Personal and Cultural Explanations

The reasons that contributed to such a difference are multifaceted, while the author hoped to argue from two main aspects: the personal and the cultural. First, Keats' ideal of integrating truth and beauty required his own endeavor as a prolific poet (internal locus of control). Although his disease and the negative feedback from literary critics could impede the realization of this ideal, his reflection and response to those challenges instead deepened the themes of his poetry and nurtured him as one of the most accomplished Romantic poets. On the other hand, whether Li could accomplish himself was utterly determined by the political mechanism (external locus of control). Regardless of his continuous effort, he failed to gain a prominent government position – the sense of incapability and powerlessness kept torturing him mentally until he completely gave up hope.

Second, poet as a career was legitimate in 19th century England. By publishing their works in literary magazines and newspapers, poets often both earned recognition and received financial support from wealthy individuals or institutions. The individualistic culture of the West also encouraged poets to discover themselves and pursue beauty, literature, and philosophy. Therefore, Keats' becoming a poet was his initiative and was with social outlets. However, in the mid-Tang Dynasty, the primary function of education and literary composition was to succeed in the imperial examinations. Composition, prior to its aesthetic purpose, measures one's political ability. Furthermore, the imperial examinations were practically the only channel for individuals without family backgrounds to enter the political arena: in other words, the only channel for the educated to realize themselves under the Confucianism doctrine. Therefore, ineligibility in the examination had a devastating effect on Li's career, while he had no alternative social outlets; recommendations from prominent officials had a minimal impact on his promotion. Witnessing a society fragmented by the separatist forces and a court disrupted by factional political struggle, Li had no choice but to delve into his poetic world of the macabre.

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper compares and contrasts the works of John Keats and Li He from their pursuit of the ideal, usage of imagery, and presence of the narrator. Keats' poetry reflects his love

and passion for the world because his ideal was of an internal locus of control and his poetic career was justified in 19th century British society. On the other hand, Li's poetry conveys his disappointment towards himself and society because his political ideal was of an external locus of control, and his only social outlet has been blocked. Adopting conclusions about their similarities in poetic composition, this paper delves deeper into their subtle differences and provides explanations from personal and cultural lenses. However, due to time constraints, this paper fails to discuss more texts in greater detail that may better represent the poets. In the future, researchers could adopt this paper's scaffold to conduct a more comprehensive comparative study of their whole poetry collections.

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