

The Conflict between Dionysian and Apollonian in the Last Two Stanzas of Ode to a Nightingale from the Perspective of Classical Reception

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Abstract. John Keats, one of the famous Romantic poets in England, wrote many famous poems in his life, among which the odes highlighted his literary and aesthetic attainments. Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* is beautiful and fluent, which differs from the imitation of ancient Greek works in the early years. Keats naturally integrates the ancient Greek colour in this poem, puts the narrator in the jungle so that the reader can listen to the nightingale singing along with the narrator, and engender the reader to appreciate the sadness at the end of the whole poem. During such a process, Keats's emotional changes and conflicts are highlighted. Because the entire poem has ups and downs, a double interpretation can reflect the aesthetic value of Keats's poem. It profoundly reflects Nietzsche's Dionysian and Apollonian dialectics. This thesis aims to interpret Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* from two perspectives rather than a single emotional description and further extend the formation of Keats's writing style. The tribulations in life and the social changes in that era comprise the conflicts in Keats's poems, especially in *Ode to a Nightingale*, leaving readers a profound room to savour the tragic and fancy motif in the poetry.

Keywords: John Keats; 'Ode to a Nightingale'; nightingale; Dionysian; Apollonian.

1. Introduction

This thesis discusses the conflict between Dionysian and Apollonian in Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*. Analytical methods like classical reception and close reading are employed to make clear Keats's psychological transformation and nuances during the process of the ode.

John Keats was a famous English poet from the second generation of Romantic poets. Keats mostly wrote about the beauty he perceived in the world and depicted the beauty with an imaginative style. His tender voice differentiated him from the other two Romantic poets, Byron and Shelley, who were, to some extent, more passionate and revolutionary. Keats held a short life—only 26 years and died of tuberculosis in Italy. Throughout his lifetime, he was not affluent and lost his parents in his early years. Keats was well-educated and showed great affection for literature. His educational background also gave him more chances to access different classic works, among which Homer and Virgil's works significantly impacted him, engendering him to create his work by imitation. In his later years of writing, due to his tuberculosis-tortured physical state, his works touched more on life and death, a reflection of himself [1].

Ode to a Nightingale is one of those works. In this poem, Keats depicts a narrator entering a fantasy world by intoxication, hearing the nightingale singing melodiously, followingly going through the thickets, during which the narrator forgets all the hustle and bustle in his real life. Nevertheless, in thinking of the bird's immortality, the narrator realises that he is inevitably marching to death. Eventually, the narrator cannot but make a farewell to the bird and its song, not fully coming to sobriety and being at a loss of his mental state, as one who is just awake. The narrator is first immersed in fantasy during this journey and finally forced to confront the real world. This illustrates the oscillation of the narrator between dreaming and awakening, which is explained as the Dionysian-Apollonian dialectic proposed by Nietzsche in his *Birth of Tragedy*.

However, the relevant studies have focused on the pessimism in *Ode to Nightingale* and have yet to carry out more research on the emotional struggle. Others focus on the similarities and differences between Keats's writing style and Coleridge's and other romantic poets in different times. However,

this thesis will discuss the conflict between Dionysian and Apollonian spirits and the change between pessimism and optimism reflected by Keats in the *Ode to Nightingale*.

Due to space limitations, the thesis will delve deeper into the last two stanzas (the seventh and eighth stanzas) of *Ode to a Nightingale* from the perspective of the Dionysian-Apollonian dialectic. Dionysian is about intuition, sexual enjoyment, passion, and ecstasy [2]. Apollonian, different from Dionysian, is about reason, constraints, prudence, and stability. Nevertheless, Apollonian is only partially converse with Dionysian. The core of Apollonian is about keeping rational and maintaining mental stability. *Ode to a Nightingale* is a poem that expresses Keats's worldview of life and death. He projected himself onto the narrator, and through the journey with the narrator, he showed both Dionysian and Apollonian spirits. When Dionysian establishes the supremacy in previous stanzas, the mournful feeling for beauty's perishing is more obvious; when Apollonian takes the upwind, the sobriety towards life is presented. This masterpiece is a conflict between life and death, evanescence and eternity. In the third part, the formation of the conflict between Apollonian and Dionysian in *Ode to a Nightingale* will be analysed. His career and social background account for the tone of his writing.

2. Dionysian—the Tragedy in Life and the End of Ecstasy

Dionysian is about intuition, sexual enjoyment, passion, and ecstasy. Dionysian is also related to the tragedy. Tragedy in ancient Greek is mainly about the burst of one's emotion naturally. Understood, thus, tragedy in Nietzsche's theory is not contradictory with ecstasy, as ecstasy is also a natural expression of one's emotion as well as tragedy is a more general concept. What tragedy indeed contradicts is the Apollonian style of interpreting one's emotion—through pretending and beautifying the truth. As Nietzsche puts it in his book *Birth of Tragedy*, “the wisdom of the Dionysian world, reflecting the primordial contradiction and primordial pain” [3]. In the ode, tragedy and the ending of ecstasy is the fundamental tone in the last two stanzas.

In the seventh stanza, a Biblical idiom of Ruth is employed. In lines 66-70, the narrator in Keats's poem imaged a picture—Ruth, a girl who was stuck by her mother-in-law after she herself was widowed, stood lonely in the cornfield, bursting into tears and failing to get rid of her tragic life. The description is totally different from previous stanzas, which are more optimistic, melodious, festive, and wonderful. On the contrary, the atmosphere is more pessimistic and gloomy, to a forlorn extent, desperate. The nightingale's voice did not remind the narrator of some mystic and fabulous fantasy as before but about a suffering female in history. Then the ode is not about the intoxication in the beginning; it is about reflection towards the tragedy in one's life.

In the poem's last stanza, Keats starts with the word “forlorn”; a depressed feeling is directly expressed. Then he followed by using a simile—he compared his hearing the word to the hearing of “a bell (Line 71).” The “toll (Line 72)” of the bell is radically different from the tender voice of the nightingale, as he mentioned previously. The toll beckoned the narrator to wake up and leave all his enjoyment in his dream, irrelevant to real life. It marks an end to the wonderful journey, and the toll is almost so solemn and respectful that the narrator cannot but return to the cruel real world [4].

In Line 73 and Line 75, Keats repeatedly wrote “Adieu” three times to form an atmosphere for leaving. Additionally, he metaphors the bird's song to an anthem and uses more than three lines to describe the fading voice in every part of the imaginary world (Lines 76-78). It is even crueller than the alerting sound of the bell. The bell can be an alarm that warns the narrator to return to reality, and the narrator still holds the right to choose whether he would like to stay [5]. Nevertheless, fading voice and melody manifest that even if the narrator decides to stay, the world will be demolished, and the song is destined to disappear. The narrator has nothing to grasp and can do nothing about that.

Unlike the adoration before, the narrator even regards the nightingale as deceptive (Line 74). Currently, the bird is incapable of indulging the narrator in fantasy and letting him forget all the painful experiences in real life. The narrator tends to blame the bird for not encapsulating him in the world, and he realises the irretrievable sound keeps vanishing. He would like to catch the sound, and at last, he fails. The farewell is too hasty and hangs on the narrator's mind for only seconds.

Significantly different from the melodious and elegiac voice described in stanzas ahead, in the last stanza, Keats compares it to an anthem, a kind of music frequently heard on ceremonious and solemn occasions. Then the bird's song is more like an anthem of a funeral to mourn the fading and collapse of the imagined, fantastic, and ecstatic world [6].

No matter how immersed in the world before, the narrator irrevocably returns to reality. All tortures and diseases engulf him again, all beautiful things perish in an unthinkable cruel and sudden manner, and the final half-sobriety mood leaves the narrator to ponder on whether he ever holds such beauty, even in his imaginary world. This ode expresses a tragedy of evanescent and ethereal beauty, hard to catch and impossible to preserve. More tragically speaking, beauty is imaginary and only glows in one's dream. The enjoyment the narrator previously acquired and the destruction of the beauty is typical of the Dionysian theme [7]. This can be interpreted as Keats's life path as well—the enjoyment he acquired in the literary world was impaired and finally vanished with the aggravation of his tuberculosis.

3. Apollonian—the Grand Narrative and Rational, Introspective Meditation

Apollonian, different from Dionysian, is about reason, constraints, prudence, and stability. Nevertheless, Apollonian is only partially in conflict with Dionysian. The core of Apollonian is about keeping rational and maintaining mental stability. Additionally, Apollonian can assist with one's retrospection towards the world as Apollonian advocates fantastic expression of the world—even through pretence and camouflage. Due to the characteristic of Apollonian, the style is mainly employed in works about the grandeur experience of a hero or a grand narrative of a country.

In the seventh stanza, Keats first accolades the immortality of the bird (Line 61) and further indicates that its voice has been heard by thousands of people from all walks of life over thousands of decades (Line 63, 64). "Hungry generations" is an implication of the current society, and at that time, the narrator gradually came back to sobriety. The word "tread" indicates the incapability of ordinary people when they encounter irresistible social changes and brutal slavery by aristocrats and capitalists (Line 62). What Keats and the narrator hear is the calling for subsistence in life by ordinary people who suffered a lot due to deprivation by the upper classes. All this extends the comprehensive content of the ode. Furthermore, the poet, instead of confounding his thoughts of death to the Nightingale alone, extends his thoughts to a grander world—there were echoes of generations, places, and people, and in their complex and deep melodies, the struggle to pull away from and back to the reality grew more rampant, and at last the sense of enchantment that had begun the poem vanished. The rhythm and tone of the poem take a sudden turn for the worse.

John Keats ends the poem with two rhetorical questions and the first deals with the narrator's wonder that the illusion is a vision or a waking dream. Vision and dream are both unreal, but a vision might be an imagined picture of a world quite different from the current, and a dream is about the projection of reality in one's mind. This is one explanation, and the word "or" in Line 79 might also be a signal of stressing the same meaning. Keats is not indicating his indecision to differentiate the two concepts. What he would like to underlie is that the scenario and pictures in the previous stanzas are all imagined, unreal, and illusory. Therefore, the narrator here already has the answer; it is a dream and a vision, not reality. The narrator poses the first question as a signal of his introspective meditation. Introspection is a way to keep rational. The narrator ponders on the previous journey and gradually blends with reality, as the rejection of returning to reality can hardly be seen in the last two lines [8].

Furthermore, extended meditation is expressed in the second rhetorical question. The melody is completely fading away; never could it be captured again. The narrator then wonders if the reality is truly real and could the real world be a dream. This question is as philosophical as the three ancient classical questions—Who am I? Where am I from? Where am I going? This time the narrator doubts the authenticity of the real world. The ending is not a reverie, a wish to stay in an exact world, or an assertion. Therefore, the most important thing is discovering reality and the boundary between dreams and reality. The spirit of inquiry and delving deep into an esoteric question is typical of Apollonian

[9]. The pursuit of an imagined and fantastic world is no longer lingering, and the avoidance of returning to the real world disappears. The ecstasy cannot be perceived by the end, and rationality takes hold. Suppose anyone proposes that Keats wrote this poem to show his unwillingness to die and that the imagined world he depicted is an ecstasy where the narrator can be immortal. In that case, the final lines can tenably deter all the speculations as what disturbed him is how to face death. He finally decided to express his dauntlessness to face reality and his willingness to accept anything fate endowed on him. He dragged himself through Apollonian rationality and further imagined that death could be another state of a wake [10]. That is his attitude towards life, sober and imperturbable.

4. The Cause of Formation of Keats's Writing in *Ode to a Nightingale*

An author's writing style is closely related to their life experience and social background. John Keats is not an exception. His rough career and the turbulent time in England are two main factors that account for the conflict between Apollonian and Dionysian in his works.

Though the life expanse of Keats is relatively short, he has achieved many that one cannot easily imagine. Born in 1795 in London, Keats and his family were not affluent compared to other romantic poets like Byron. He lost his parents in childhood. Keats was talented in medicine, and when he was only 21, he received an apothecary's license after only five years of study with a doctor. However, he has always been an avid reader. His reading list covers all kinds of books from ancient Greek to his time. This extended him to different characters and heroes in Greek mythology. He once imitated Virgil and Homer; most specifically, he not only imitated, but he also discovered how he could get rid of their limitations of them and find a new way to create.

Rejecting the dreary life of a surgeon, he decided to devote his life to writing. His publisher, Hessey, introduced him to other great poets like Byron, Shelly, and Coleridge. Considering Keats's social status, it is impossible for him to get along with people from the upper classes. What he could constantly witness was the everyday life of ordinary people. Although he is listed as one of the poets representing Romanticism, like Lord Byron and Percy Shelly, the writing style of Keats is comparatively more pessimistic and meticulous—mostly depictions of his personal feelings towards life. Though Keats lacked the experience of national revolution in Rome and Greek like Byron and Shelly [11], his observation of the ordinary people is also of high literary value, and his insight into the pain is the origin of his Dionysian spirit that constantly appears in his poems.

Other tortures impaired his life. Inflected by his brother's tuberculosis, his tone in words was about escaping the real world. As the camouflage of real life is an expression of Apollonian, his other odes, like *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and *To Autumn*, are all indications [12]. Nevertheless, the struggle in his life is the origin of the painful depiction in his poem, especially the end of his hallucination in *Ode to a Nightingale*. In 1818, he met Fanny Brawne, 18 years old and a talented dressmaker. They fell in love. *Ode to a nightingale* is said for Fanny as the publishing date is during their love and his death. Keats did not propose or even ask for marriage, as he knew he was in poverty and did not own a promising prospect. Since Keats constantly tended to his tubercular brother Tom, he was also infected. When his health was continuously impaired, he was suggested to go South for treatment. He left, and Fanny stayed in London, writing letters to express her isolation. Unfortunately, all these letters had not been received by Keats, and the young, 26-year-old poet died in Rome, buried silently with Fanny's letters. The epitaph was already written by himself: here lies one / whose name was writ in water / Feb 24th, 1821

Given that his life experience is full of struggles and dim, painful prospects, he placed his imagination and inspiration in his work to depict a wonderful, beautiful, archaic world where happiness will last, and beauty will not perish—a representation of Apollonian. However, he cannot completely eliminate the tribulation in life, and he witnesses too many tragedies of different ordinary people—giving rise to his pessimistic view of life, which was continuously indicated in his works. Then the release of his pessimistic feelings is a representation of Dionysian. The two themes intermingle with each other and form the conflicts in Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* and other poems.

5. Conclusion

This thesis analyses the Apollonian and Dionysian dialectic reflected in Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* from the perspective of classical reception. The last two stanzas are the focus of conflict. The two stanzas describe the ending of the narrator's journey and the finality of an imaginary and immortal world. The narrator expressed his profound thoughts about life and death, extended his ideas to a broader scale, showed his solicitude for humankind, and further made a choice, even to some extent out of force, to return to reality and accept it. The turbulent changes of feelings from the previous ecstatic atmosphere are the climax of the poem and give a sublimation to the philosophical meditation in this ode. The theme of chasing immortality is impossible to reach, and the fantasy land can never be one's final destination. The ending tone leads readers to return to reality and keep an observation towards life. The release and enjoyment during the journey, as well as the expression of loneliness, is the representation of Dionysian. The grand narrative of people in history and the rational perception gained through introspective meditation represent Apollonian. Keats's rough life experience and the turbulent social changes give rise to the conflict and form this masterpiece that was accoladed by different readers in different periods.

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