

The Ecocritical Analysis of *Ode to a Nightingale* by John Keats

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Abstract—John Keats is one of the representatives of romantic poets. *Ode to a Nightingale* is his remarkable poem, famous for its ecological theme and spirit. It indicates the rupture of ecological harmony and presents an ideal world which is beautiful and harmonious. This thesis, based on the previous studies, analyzes the natural view and ecological theme of *Ode to a Nightingale* from the perspective of ecocriticism.

Keywords—ecocriticism; rupture; reconstruction; call; ecological harmony

I. INTRODUCTION

In the recent three hundred years, western industrial civilization has almost destroyed nature. It has caused the global ecological crisis of the mid-20th century. This ecological crisis compels westerners to reflect their developmental patterns, life styles, and ideological and cultural roots. They have had to re-find new values and modes of action on how to correctly treat mankind and nature. In literature realm, ecoliterature, which emphasizes the relationship between human and nature and the relationship between human and nonhuman world, appeals for the preservation and protection of the ecosystem. It greatly arouses people's attention. Ecocriticism, which has an interdisciplinary feature, is the reflection to the phenomenon in literary theory circle. Ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment conducted in the spirit of commitment to environment praxis, takes an "earth-centered" approach to literary studies, and expands the notion of anthropocentric literary studies to include the entire ecosphere. [1]

John Keats, a British romantic poet of the 19th century, was one of the most outstanding representatives of the Romantic Movement. Many of Keats' poems have now become the cream of British poetry and world literature. In particular, the outpourings of love, respect and admiration to nature from his poetry make his writings full of ecological color. This color is strongly embodied in the *Ode to a Nightingale*. In this beautiful poem, through the melodious and sorrowful call of the nightingale, the poet shows us series of contradictive pictures between the realistic and the ideal world in a dreamy situation. At the same time, the poet expresses his longing for ecological harmony. This makes the modern feature and influence of the *Ode to a Nightingale* profound and lasting.

This paper, based on holism and inter-relatedness of ecophilosophy, connects nature, man and society. It combines the poet's life, social background and the poem itself to analyze the rupture of ecological harmony in *Ode to a Nightingale*. This rupture not only includes the loss between man and nature, but also contains the loss between man and society and the loss between man and man. In addition, this paper emphasizes the poet's reconstruction of the ecological harmony. At last, this paper presents the call of the poet and nature. Through this analysis, the natural view in the poem and the poet's love and respect for nature can be deeply understood. It is what ecocriticism puts stress on.

II. THE RUPTURE OF ECOLOGICAL HARMONY

In the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution quickened up the pace of urbanization, the direct influence of which was the deterioration of the environment. Man's utilitarian efforts to change and conquer the world had actually been distancing themselves from nature. In fact, "the so-called ecological crisis is in essence a crisis which is caused by separating man from nature." [2] Human-nature relationship is broken. While at the same time, human-society and human-human relationships are fractured.

Keats, the worshiper of nature, is among the very first artists who concern themselves with the human-nature relationship. His poetry takes more interests in nature. In *Ode to a Nightingale*, Keats, through his description and imagination, indicates the rupture of the ecological harmony. This rupture includes the break of human-nature harmony, human-society harmony and human-human harmony.

A. The Rupture of Man-nature Harmony

Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* is a miniature of ecological rupture. It is full of contradiction, including the contradiction between man and nature, and the contradiction between the realistic world and the ideal world. And these contradictions are acute.

In the 19th century, England underwent a revolution of its own, one which is economic and technological. Great changes had taken place in the society since the Industrial Revolution. People tried their best to pursue money and wealth. To the leaders of Industrial Revolution, the environment was primarily a source of raw materials. In the

new capitalism, the private ownership of resources fostered the treatment of the natural world as a source of commercial profit. They destroyed land, woods and built many factories. The air was polluted and the river was befouled. The manufacturing districts had black horror and reckless squalor. The city was crowded with people that drifted from rural areas to towns in search of work and money. They were alienated from nature. At that time, England was in a hell. The environment and weather was seriously destroyed.

However, nature was not voiceless. She began to punish human beings. Flood, famine, drought, disease, earthquake and abruption of volcano appeared frequently. Many people lost their life. In 1815, the eruption of Tambora volcano in Indonesia killed 80,000 people on the islands of Sumbawa and Lombok. It was the greatest eruption since 1500. The dust blasted into the stratosphere reduced the transparency of the atmosphere, filtered out the sun and consequently lowered surface temperatures. The effect lasted for three years, straining the growth-capacity of organic life across the planet. Beginning in 1816, crop failure led to food riots in nearly every country of Europe. Only in 1819 were there good harvests again. This situation is presented in *Ode to a Nightingale*.

In the fifth stanza of this poem, Keats writes: "I cannot see what flowers are at my feet, nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs" (*Ode to a Nightingale* Line 41-Line 42). Here, the poet knows he is surrounded by flowers, but he "cannot see what flowers" (L41) are at his feet. In stanza four, he imagines the light of the moon, "But here this is no light" (L38). Flowers, sunshine, moonlight are all common things in real life, however, the poet cannot see them. The lack of these things indicates the break of ecological balance. The man-nature harmonious relationship fractures. "The country green" (L13) is only in memory and imagination. The ecology is seriously destroyed by human beings. The description in the poem probably referred to the Europe which experienced ecological crisis in 1816-1819.

The ecological crisis is the very reason why Keats cannot see the flowers, the sunshine and the moonlight. The *Ode to a Nightingale* is a mirror of the real life. Because of the bad weather, many people catch serious diseases. Tuberculosis is a prevailing epidemic which is caught by Keats and his relatives. His mother and brother are all killed by this disease. He himself is also seriously ill. Therefore, he is sensitive to the change of the weather and dislikes the reality.

In *Ode to a Nightingale*, through the description of the poet's observation and feeling, it indicates that the break of human-nature relationship has a fatal effect since this lack of ecological concern cannot be easily made up for, no matter what efforts man makes. The environmental disasters man has been confronted with are the bitter fruit of their own making. If man harms nature, he may suffer from it and their contradiction will aggravate.

B. *The Rupture of Human-society Harmony*

Ecocriticism is the critical and pedagogical broadening of literary studies to include texts that deal with relationships between human and the non-human world (nature). It is also

fundamentally an ethical criticism and pedagogy, one that investigates and helps make possible connections among self, society, nature, and text. Ecocriticism not only fixes on the relation between human and nature, in a deeper level, it also stresses the relation between man and society and between man and man.

Man's alienation from nature makes human love disappear. The whole society is cold, indifferent, cruel and dissimilated. Man-society harmony is broken. Most people are oppressed by the society and the social relationships are dissimilated. These topics are reflected in Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*.

With the disappointment and complaint to the society, Keats chooses nightingale as the topic and writes this poem. In this "weariness, fret" world, material interests overtops all the things. The social relationship is materialized. Man, like slaves and machines, work and live. They lose their thoughts and spirits. The loss of self-identity makes them lose human right. Equality, freedom and justice do not belong to them. The only way to live in the richness of spirituality and full of pleasure and to have a normal social relationship is to respond to the spiritual-nourishing power offered by the natural environment. The song of the nightingale is the call of nature to human beings.

C. *The Rupture of Man-man Harmony*

British ecologist thinker Peter Marshall regards an individual as a part of community, community as a part of society, society as a part of humanity, and humanity as a part of ecosystem, thus forming a wide coexistence.[3] *Ode to a Nightingale* is the portrait of the tragic life of the poet and also it is the miniature of the whole society. Keats' tragic life is the mirror of the common human misery. Through the analysis of this poem and the description of the poet's miserable experience, the rupture of man-man harmony in this poem is clearly presented.

Where youth grows pale, and specter-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 tomorrow. (L26-L30)

The poet's tragic life is the reflection of most common people's suffering. The "hungry generation" (L62) and "the sad heart of Ruth" (L66), specimens of individual sorrow is the mirror of common human misery. Poverty, disease and death make people lose family, love, friendship and the harmonious relationship. Human love is indispensable to man. However, because of wealth and desire, human beings are alienated from nature. The harmony among man, society and nature disappears. Based on these situations, man only cares about money and wealth. Human love disappears. The society is full of coldness, cruelty, poverty, indifference and endless desire. The normal man-man relationship is fractured. Handicapped by the industrial civilization, man are indulgent in the pursuit of material gains in their urbanized life, which

separates them from nature and deprive their spiritual soundness.

Because of the exploitation of nature, the persecution to nature and the desire of wealth, human's inherent value and moral standards, such as the intuitive love to nature, the harmonious relations with nature, the love and brotherhood among people, are replaced by the competitiveness, indifference and acquisitiveness of material society. The harmonious relationship between man and man vanishes with the spread of industrial civilization and the break of ecological balance. It is obvious that the specific and unique humanity as well as the individual and creative responsibility of mankind has also been eliminated in the technological process. In *Ode to a Nightingale*, the description of the world "where men sit and hear each other groan" (L24) implies the unhealthy and dissimilated man-man relationship. Facing the ugly reality, the poet wants to fly away with the bird, high up on top of the world and interfuse into nature to feel the eternal beauty and quietness.

The call of the nightingale not only calls for the harmony between man and nature, but also awakes the harmony between man and society.[4] "Where but to think is to be full of sorrow / and leaden-eyed despairs" (L27-L28) is the description of the reality. The oppression of the society to man destroys the soul of human beings. They eliminate their confusion and pain through crazily destroying nature. Thus, the alienation is expanding. Man, society and the whole nature are separated.

III. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF ECOLOGICAL HARMONY

In the first three stanzas, Keats depicts a tragic picture of the human world. Nature is seriously destroyed by human beings. The serious rupture of man-nature, man-society and man-man harmony causes the poet heart ache. The desire to forget and leave is so intense when he "might drink" and "fade away, dissolve, and quite forget" (L21). The poet uses his imagination to reconstruct a harmonious world. In his "Flora and Pan" world, the ideal nature is blessed with eternity and fertility. In this ideal world, the poet sees a beautiful and harmonious picture, enjoys a happy and melodious song. The appeal of imagination makes people get closer to nature. And thus, nature and human nature reunite. The ecological harmony is perfectly reconstructed.

The last chapter displays the rupture of ecological harmony. The harmonious relationship disappears among the whole ecosystem. In the world "where men sit and hear each other groan" (L24), the poet cannot see the flowers, sunshine and moonlight. The "country green" is only a remote memory. The reality is harsh and sordid. So, the poet reconstructs an ideal world where everything is harmonious. In this ideal world, the poet can appreciate the beauty and peace of nature, and enjoy the melodious song of the nightingale.

In the ideal world, the poet perfectly presents the beauty and harmony of nature. In nature, everything is the symbol of beauty and harmony. They live together and accord with the nature law. In this paradise, nature mother and her children get together to web a net of harmonious and integrated

"oneness". Thus, nature can present her beautiful and harmonious portrait forever.

Surrounded by endless pain and ache, Keats tries his best to forget the harsh reality and fly with the nightingale to an ideal world. In this harmonious and beautiful world, the poet opens his heart and interfuses into nature. He enjoys the beautiful and harmonious portrait of nature, and appreciates the happy and melodious song of the nightingale. His heart is purified and consoled by nature. Here, human nature calms down and reunites with the outer nature. This reunion consoles the poet's soul and spirit and makes him forget the reality and get spiritual pleasure.

The poet flies with the bird and wants to become one part of nature. He is the child of nature mother. His spirit and heart reunite with nature. The "oneness" makes him free of all the fears even death. The poet "has been half in love with easeful Death, / Called him soft names in many a mused rhyme" (L52-L53). Through nature, the poet realizes that death has its place in the natural order of things. By yielding to new life, death is in fact part of the process of fertility and regeneration, which is a form of immortality. Thus, the poet's fear of death disappears and he happily enjoys the consolation of nature.

Only when human nature reunites with nature sincerely can man feel the healing power of nature, get consolation from nature and regain spiritual pleasure through nature. The reunion of human nature and nature can purify man's soul and helps them construct a correct attitude toward nature. Only when return to nature and love nature by heart can man regain their spiritual home and human love. This is the call of the poet and the call of nature.

Facing the harsh reality and the serious rupture of ecological harmony, the poet uses his imagination to reconstruct an ideal world. In this world, ecological harmony gets back. Comparing with the ugly and sordid reality, the ideal world is beautiful and harmonious. The happy and melodious song pervades the whole nature. The appeal of imagination makes people get closer to nature and interfuse into nature. Thus, human nature and nature reunite. Through this reunion, man's soul and spirit can be purified and they can form a correct attitude toward nature and regain their spiritual home. This is the expectation of the poet and nature mother.

IV. THE CALL OF THE NIGHTINGALE

In reality, nature is seriously destroyed by man. The harmonious relationship among the whole ecosystem disappears. Life is harsh and sordid. Human nature and spirit are degenerate. Human love vanishes but cruelty and indifference pervade. However, in the ideal world which the poet reconstructs, nature presents a beautiful and harmonious side. The nightingale sings the melodious song to show its ease and happiness. Everything in nature enjoys this kind of peace and harmony. Interfusing into nature, people can get "country green" and purified human nature.

The intense contrast between the reality and the ideal world makes the poet expresses his feeling and thoughts. The

call of the nightingale is also the call of the poet and nature. They both call for the ecological harmony. They pursue beauty and harmony, and more importantly they call for the reestablishment of the harmonious relationship. Respecting nature can get back harmony and returning to nature can regain the spiritual home.

V. CONCLUSION

Ode to a Nightingale is a remarkable poem of Keats, famous for its natural description, view and profound themes. In this beautiful poem, through the melodious and sorrowful call of the nightingale, the poet shows us series of contradictive pictures between the realistic and ideal world in a dreamy situation. At the same time, the poet expresses his longing for ecological harmony and natural beauty.

This paper discusses the poem from the ecological perspective. It analyzes the rupture and reconstruction of the ecological harmony and presents the call of the nightingale for beauty and harmony from the perspective of ecocriticism. Nature is beautiful and sacred; it can give people beautiful experience and comfort people's sorrow. The destructive exploitation of nature breaks the harmonious relationship between man and nature. Man is alienated from nature. Because of this alienation, human nature becomes degenerate. The harmonious relationships between man and society and between man and man vanish. Facing the serious ecological crisis and the harsh reality, the poet uses his imagination to reconstruct an ideal world where nature presents her beautiful and harmonious portrait and the nightingale sings its happy and melodious song. [5] The appeal of imagination makes people get closer to nature and reunite their inner nature with the outer nature to regain their spiritual home. The sharp contrast between the reality and the ideal world makes the poet express his feeling and thought. The poet, representing nature and all the people who love nature, calls for the ecological harmony. He pursues beauty and calls for the harmony and the reestablishment of harmonious relationship. He believes that respecting nature can get harmonious relationship with nature and returning to nature can purify human nature and regain spiritual home in nature.

Ode to a Nightingale is full of ecological theme and spirit. It deeply displays the ecological rupture and acute contradictions of the real world, perfectly presents the beauty and harmony of the ideal world, and affectionately expresses the call for ecological harmony. It arouses people's attention that the ecological rupture brings people disaster and misery, while ecological harmony provides people happiness and pleasure.

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