

## John Keats: The Enigmatic Poet's Journey through Spirituality and Existence

จอห์น คีตส์: การเดินทางของกวีผู้ลึกลับสู่จิตวิญญาณและการดำรงอยู่

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### Abstract

This paper explores the spiritual journey of the narrator in John Keats's poems and shows how themes such as loss and illness make the narrator reflects on life, death, and spirituality. It examines Keats's admiration for Shakespeare, particularly how the balance of good and evil influenced the narrator's view of human experiences. By comparing the spiritual beliefs presented in Shakespeare's Hamlet and Macbeth with those in Keats's poems, this study highlights the narrator's evolving understanding of suffering and joy, especially in works like The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream. The narrator's appreciation of the divine is also examined, particularly through the connection between beauty and philosophical truth, as illustrated in Ode on a Grecian Urn. Through an analysis of key poems like When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be, Bright Star, To Autumn, and Ode on Melancholy, this paper shows that Keats's spiritual ideas are shaped initially by personal experiences and later by literary influences like Shakespeare. The study emphasizes how the narrator's journey moves beyond traditional Christianity, reflecting a deeper search for meaning through beauty and truth. Although it is challenging to interpret Keats's narrator from the perspective of Southeast Asian readers, this paper aims to offer a new perspective on how Keats's spiritual themes resonate with a broader audience, transcending cultural and religious boundaries.

**Keywords:** John Keats, English Literature, Poetry, Spirituality

### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้สำรวจการเดินทางทางจิตวิญญาณของผู้บรรยายในบทกวีที่ประพันธ์ขึ้นโดยจอห์น คีตส์ และแสดงให้เห็นว่าประเด็นปัญหาที่เกี่ยวข้องกับความสูญเสียและความเจ็บป่วยนั้น ทำให้ผู้บรรยายครุ่นคิดถึงชีวิต ความตาย และจิตวิญญาณอย่างไร นอกจากนี้ บทความชิ้นนี้ยังพิจารณาความชื่นชมของคีตส์ต่อเชกสเปียร์

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โดยเฉพาะในเรื่องของการถ่วงดุลระหว่างความดีและความชั่ว ซึ่งมีอิทธิพลต่อมุมมองของผู้บรรยายว่าด้วยประสบการณ์ของมนุษย์ อีกทั้งในบทความนี้ยังมีการเปรียบเทียบความเชื่อทางจิตวิญญาณในกวีนิพนธ์เรื่อง “แฮมเล็ต” และ “แม็คเบธ” ของเชกสเปียร์กับบทกวีของคีตส์เข้าด้วยกัน โดยเน้นให้เห็นถึงการทำความเข้าใจเกี่ยวกับความทุกข์และความสุขของผู้บรรยาย ซึ่งมีการเปลี่ยนแปลงอยู่ตลอด โดยเฉพาะในบทกวีเอกเช่น *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream* และ *Ode on a Grecian Urn* ที่มีการชื่นชมความงามและปรัชญาที่สะท้อนถึงคุณลักษณะของพระเจ้า ผลจากการวิเคราะห์บทกวีสำคัญ เอกเช่น *When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be* ไล่ไปจนถึง *Bright Star* รวมทั้ง *To Autumn* และ *Ode on Melancholy* แสดงให้เห็นว่าความคิดทางจิตวิญญาณของผู้บรรยายในบทกวีของคีตส์ ได้รับอิทธิพลจากประสบการณ์ส่วนตัวและวรรณกรรมคลาสสิกอย่างเชกสเปียร์ ผลของการศึกษาในครั้งนี้เน้นย้ำว่า การเดินทางทางจิตวิญญาณของผู้บรรยายกวีนิพนธ์ของคีตส์ ได้ก้าวข้ามกรอบคิดของคริสต์ศาสนาแบบดั้งเดิม เป็นการสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงการแสวงหาความหมายชีวิตที่ลึกซึ้ง ผ่านความงามและความจริง ถึงแม้ว่าการตีความจากสิ่งที่ผู้บรรยายกวีนิพนธ์ของคีตส์ได้ให้ไว้ในมุมมองของผู้อ่านจากเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ในครั้งนี้จะเป็นเรื่องท้าทาย แต่บทความนี้ได้นำเสนอแนวคิดใหม่ตามเป้าประสงค์ซึ่งแสดงให้เห็นว่าประเด็นทางจิตวิญญาณในงานของคีตส์ อาจสามารถนำไปสะท้อนผู้คนจากหลากหลายวัฒนธรรมและศาสนาได้

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## Introduction

In literary studies, John Keats is recognized as an important poet, who is known for his beautiful and emotionally profound works. Although his life was tragically short, his poems matured to such an extent that they continue to inspire readers today with their rich themes and deep meanings. Keats really admired Shakespeare, and this admiration not only influenced his writing style but also helped him explore complex themes such as beauty, life and death, and love. This connection to Shakespeare is essential for understanding Keats's artistic goals and the depth of his poetic themes.

A significant challenge in interpreting Keats's works lies in understanding the narrator's personal struggles, such as the loss of parents, unfulfilled love, and a strong desire to understand human life. These difficulties shaped the poetic voice and the themes explored in his poetry. Much of his works often shows a conflict between opposites, such as faith and doubt, good and evil, and love and sorrow, which adds depth and complexity. For example, in *Ode to a Nightingale*, the speaker compares the beautiful song of the nightingale with harsh realities of life, showing the tension between permanence and transience (Pigg, 2000). The concept of “Negative Capability,” which means the ability to embrace uncertainty without seeking clear answers, shows the poetic way of thinking about writing and life's challenges (Hirsch, von Bülow, & Simpson, 2023; Hasan & Nazir, 2012).

Another critical aspect of Keats's works is the narrator's complex beliefs about spirituality. While some argue that the narrator in Keats's poetry did not believe in God, others think that his works reveal a strong spiritual side. In addition, Keats himself was raised in the

Anglican Church and initially seemed to adhere to traditional Christian beliefs. For instance, the narrator uses both Christian and pagan images influenced by his life experiences, especially the grief following his mother's death (Yost, 1962). This mix of images suggests that Keats was exploring spirituality in a unique way, going beyond traditional beliefs, perhaps as a means of grappling with his own losses and questions about faith.

In the context of Southeast Asia, and Thailand in particular, the spirituality reflected in Keats's works is often interpreted through a framework influenced by traditional Christian thought. While some readers in the region are shaped by predominantly non-theistic ideologies, such as Buddhism, there is a tendency to align Keats's spirituality with Christian beliefs for easy reference, especially in relation to the concept of God as represented in Trinitarianism. For readers in this context, approaching the narrator's spirituality in Keats's works with openness to various interpretive possibilities can enrich their understanding of these themes.

## **Literature Review**

### **1. Southeast Asia's View of Divinity in Western Literature**

When European countries colonized Southeast Asia, they introduced Christianity through missionaries who had two main goals: to spread Christianity and to improve local communities by providing education and healthcare (Watson Andaya, 2018). In addition, these missionaries believed that Western religion and culture were better than local practices (Oosterheld, 2015). Religious texts and writings from missionaries played a crucial role in conveying Christian ideas to local people (Watson Andaya, 2018). While Christianity brought positive changes, such as better schools and healthcare, it also propagated belief that could lead to complex issues, particularly opening the door for indigenous people to question traditional views of Jesus's divinity (Machado, 2019). Indeed, the questioning of Jesus's divinity in colonized regions such as Southeast Asia follows a pattern similar to that in Europe, where colonialism introduced traditional belief, and later, modern ideas prompted people to reconsider who Jesus really is (Watson Andaya, 2018). This historical shift not only highlights the complex interplay between colonial influence and indigenous questioning but also shapes the way divinity and religious beliefs are viewed in the context of Southeast Asia.

### **2. Themes of Solace and Transcendence in Keats's Poetry**

The narrator in Keats's poetry often reflects a thematic quest for solace in the past, using an idealized perspective of beauty and imagination to figure out the complexities of the present (Hasan & Nazir, 2012). This thematic pursuit bears a resemblance to the relationship between Romanticism and Sufism, as Ezzeldin (2018) highlights. Both schools of thought have emphasized the journey of the soul toward unity with the divine. From Ezzeldin's (2018) views, the poetic voice in Keats's works can be interpreted as mirroring a Sufi's inner quest, which reflects the narrator's search for transcendence beyond the physical world.

### **3. Spiritual and Mystical Themes in Keats's Poetry**

There is a complex interchange between the voice that emerges in the works of John Keats and spiritual themes, particularly those connected to Christian mystical traditions. Some studies

argue that the narrator in these works often reflects strong spiritual elements rooted in a Christian context, although these are frequently perceived as diverging from traditional Christian views, especially in the portrayal of the “vale of soul-making” concept (Walker, 2014). Scholars sometimes find it convenient to interpret this narrative voice as presenting ideas akin to a certain Buddhist perspective. Furthermore, Keats’s relationship with Christianity, shaped by his upbringing in the Anglican Church and a religious environment, has been explored to understand the appearances of these influences in Keatsian odes and other forms of writing (Hough, 2024). According to Crespi de Valldaura (2016), this interpretation is common because Keatsian poetic works mix religious and romantic ideas. This phenomenon shows how Christian imagery is transformed into experiences of love, connecting themes of passion with ideas of resurrection and a sense of closeness to the divine.

#### **4. Philosophical Themes in *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream***

Fermanis (2009) identifies themes of change and progress in the narrative of the Titans’ fall and concludes that the poem *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream* (hereafter referred to as *Hyperion*) was influenced by the Enlightenment intellectual movement, especially the ideas of prominent thinkers like Voltaire and Hume. Previously, Motion (1999) states that within the text, there is an obvious struggle with its ambitious scope, which reflects a tension between its grand philosophical themes and narrative structure. In addition, the text addresses complex ideas, such as the balance of good and evil and the intricacies of human experience, suggesting an exploration of universal human struggles (Smith, 2000).

#### **5. Negative Capability and Embracing Uncertainty**

Keatsian works are often associated with the concept of “Negative Capability,” which refers to the matter of accepting uncertainty and ambiguity without needing definitive answers to unresolved issues. For instance, in Keats’s poems and letters, the speaker frequently embodies Stoicism influences and a willingness to engage with the unknown (Hirsch, von Bülow, & Simpson, 2023). The relationship of these two ideals lies in Stoicism’s emphasis on what is within an individual’s control, including thoughts, actions, and attitudes, freeing one from the need to find definitive answers to every problem. In Keats’s works, this view allows the poetic voice to navigate life’s uncertainties without resorting to immediate solutions. Additionally, Chen (2018) discusses how the portrayal of the “sublime”—a blend of beauty and fear—is present in Keats’s depictions of nature, human suffering, and relationships, revealing the link between intense emotions and artistic expression.

#### **6. Spirituality Dissimilar to Traditional Christianity**

Themes of spirituality in Keats’s poetry often extend beyond the boundaries of traditional Christianity. In this regard, Roché (2017) notes that the works of Keats reflect an interest in a more mystical and textualized spirituality, engaging with broader existential questions that differ significantly from conventional Christian narratives. This thematic shift often prompts Christianity to be re-examined and challenged (McGinn, 2015; Harding, 2003).

#### **7. Legacy of Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Human Experience**

Much of Keats’s poetry is mingled with philosophical thought, including spiritual exploration, and profound emotional expressions, such as those found in Enlightenment and

Stoicism, as mentioned earlier. In this context, Al-Jumaili (2020) points out that Keats's use of medical metaphors offers an approach to understanding human experiences. These metaphors encourage readers to reflect deeply through reading closely on beauty, suffering, and the complexities of good and evil.

## **8. Intertextuality in the study of Keatsian works**

Intertextuality refers to the practice of incorporating ideas or styles from other works in one's own writing. In this sense, John Keats himself can be considered its practitioner in *When I Have Fears*, where he borrows elements from Shakespeare's sonnets (Canani, 2014). According to Kaźmierczak (2019), intertextuality as a literary research method, is a concept that was developed by a philosopher named Julia Kristeva in the 1960s. Kristeva explored how texts connect within a culture. Instead of seeing texts as isolated entities, intertextuality shows that they are all linked as part of a larger conversation. This methodological tool allows researchers to examine how texts influence one another. This idea shows that when we read something, it often has fragments of other texts, like references or themes. These connections help us see deeper meanings and understand a text's background better, making our reading experience richer.

Elkad-Lehman and Greensfeld (2011) offer insights into conducting literary research using intertextuality. They emphasize the importance of close reading, which involves examining linguistic, stylistic, and rhetorical elements, such as repetitions, metaphorical language, rhyme, rhythm, and shifts in language or narrative style. These elements can reveal underlying meanings within the text. Another technique is reader-response theory. The reader's interpretation plays a vital role in constructing meaning. This approach recognizes that different readers (or researchers) may bring their own experiences and knowledge to a text, thus influencing its interpretation. However, it is suggested that readers should pay attention on identifying literary elements like allusions, references, and associations with other texts, to enrich their understanding.

An example of applying intertextuality to the study of Keatsian works is found in Jang (2023), who applies the intertextuality approach to examine the interconnection between Kim Yōngnang's *The Cuckoo* and John Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*. In this study, Jang (2023) identifies the surface-level similarities between the two poems, prior to setting the stage for deeper analysis. This involves a direct comparison to reveal an explicit intertextual connection between the third stanza of *The Cuckoo* and the seventh stanza of *Ode to a Nightingale*.

### **Objectives**

The main goal of this paper is to explore how the narrator's ideas about spirituality change in John Keats's works, especially in poems from his last days, where themes of faith and life take center stage. Specifically, this study addresses the following objectives:

1. Examine how Keats's poem's universal themes like love, life, and death, and their relevance to people beyond the Western world.
2. Analyze how Keats's admiration for Shakespeare shaped the narrator's dreams and moral perspectives.

3. Investigate the narrator's interest in mysticism, showing a shift from traditional religious beliefs towards a more textualized spirituality.
4. Explore how the narrator turned away from traditional Christian beliefs and developed new spiritual ideas.

### **Research Methodology**

In this research, I started by reading some of John Keats's famous poems and other works from books and websites like <http://keats-poems.com/>. Using close reading, I carefully examined Keats's language, style, metaphors, rhythm, and rhymes, focusing on themes like loss, death, and God. My aim was to explore how the narrator's thoughts on spirituality evolve throughout Keatsian works.

To clarify the role of intertextuality in this study, I employed it as a methodological approach to identify and analyze the connections between Keats's works and the works of others, such as Shakespeare, as shown in the example of *When I have Fears*. For example, I investigated how Shakespeare's influence informs Keats's themes and stylistic choices. This intertextual perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the layers of meaning embedded within Keats's poetic form.

Additionally, I compared how Keats's portrayal of God shifts over time, especially due to personal losses and health problems. Through the intertextual approach, I also explored how these shifts reflect broader literary influences, showing how the narrator's ideas about life, death, God, and morality resonate with or diverge from other works he was exposed to. Throughout my interpretation, I was aware of the potential for varied perspectives among scholars and I refrained from inferring Keats's personal intentions. Instead, I focused on how his poems' themes, imagery, and stylistic elements impact readers. By examining metaphors, allusions, and religious imagery, this study highlights how Keats's works evoke meaning through their interaction with the reader. Close reading and intertextuality were keys in providing a rich understanding of his texts.

### **Findings and Discussions**

The findings of this study are organized under the following subheadings:

1. **Mortality and Life's Temporariness:** This section discusses how Keats's poetry addresses universal concerns, including the fear of dying young, unfulfilled dreams, and struggles with love and mortality. Rather than focusing on Keats's personal experiences, the analysis highlights how these themes resonant with readers today, particularly those outside Western or Christian contexts.

2. **Affinity for Shakespearean Playwriting:** This section examines how the narrator in Keats's works was inspired by Shakespeare's way of viewing good and bad sides of life in his plays and poems. It highlights the admiration of Shakespeare's characters, like Macbeth and Claudius, particularly with their feeling of guilt and ambition, and the connection between beauty and truth.

3. **Fascination with Mysticism:** This section delves into Keats's exploration of mysticism and spirituality through his narrator, demonstrating a departure from traditional

Christian views. It also examines skepticism and hints at concepts of good, evil, and the search for meaning in life.

4. Challenge to Conventional Christianity: This section explores how the narrator connects suffering with beauty and redemption, which presents ideas that challenge traditional Christian views. It also discusses the shift in focus toward acceptance of peaceful nature, as portrayed in *To Autumn*.

5. Final Reflections on Divine Testimony: In this section, I discuss *Ode on a Grecian Urn* to show the narrator's reflections on beauty, permanence, and the spiritual connection with the Divine, as well as Keats's religious reverence as influenced by its texts.

### **1. Mortality and Life's Temporariness**

In *When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be*, the narrator expresses his fear of dying before achieving his dreams, as seen in the opening lines: "When I have fears that I may cease to be / Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain". This fear of time running out is central to the poem. The references to "high-piled books" and "full ripened grain" symbolize the narrator's big dreams of producing many great literary works. The imagery of harvest suggests a typical human concern of unfulfilled potential, which readers today can relate to, especially in the context of life's uncertainties. This theme vibrates across human cultures, especially when life's temporariness and the fleeting nature of success are understood.

The narrator also reflects on love and separation in the lines: "And when I feel, fair creature of an hour, / That I shall never look upon thee more", expressing a sense of fragility in relationships. His fear of losing loved ones surpasses cultural boundaries, making the poem relevant to readers from diverse backgrounds, including those whose experiences of love and loss differ from Western or Christian perspectives. The closing lines—"love and fame to nothingness do sink"—suggest that life's greatest desires ultimately fade in the face of mortality. In addition, this perspective aligns with various philosophical lenses, including Eastern beliefs about the temporariness of life.

In *Bright Star*, the narrator yearns for a constancy in love, desiring to be "stedfast as thou art", reflecting a desire for stability amidst life's changes. The comparison between the steadfast star and the narrator's longing for lasting love resonates with readers beyond the Christian tradition, as it reflects broader human desires for stability in love. While the narrator admires nature and the star's isolation, he ultimately desires intimacy with his lover: "Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast". This intimacy contrasts with the star's solitude, focusing that human connection is more fulfilling than eternal isolation. This is the idea that matches with non-Western concepts of love and relational harmony.

*To Autumn* uses rich imagery to portray a season of abundance and reflection. The narrator personifies autumn as the "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness," which evokes a sense of transition and maturity. The poem can be interpreted as a reflection of life's natural cycles, which are often central to many non-Western spiritual traditions, such as Buddhism's teachings on temporariness. In the line "Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep," the unfinished harvest symbolizes unfulfilled goals, while the "poppies" suggest both sleep and death. The poem's contemplation of mortality and change resonates with readers today, who might understand autumn's beauty as a metaphor for accepting life's transitions, particularly

those from cultures that emphasize the cyclical nature of existence. The narrator's acceptance of autumn's music instead of longing for spring— "Think not of them, thou hast thy music too"—underscores a philosophical acceptance of aging and change, which is in line with Eastern notions of finding peace in the present moment.

In these poems, Keats's narrator depicts how the universal themes of life such as love and mortality operates, offering interpretations that go beyond his personal biography. These themes invite readers from diverse cultural backgrounds to engage with the poetry through their own lenses. For Southeast Asian readers, in particular, the emphasis on temporariness and the fleeting nature of beauty aligns with broader cultural and philosophical understandings of life's temporary nature. As such, these works remain relevant and impactful beyond a Western or Christian context.

## **2. Affinity for Shakespearean Plays**

John Keats admired how Shakespeare portrayed both the good and bad sides of life in his plays. According to Smith (2000:45), Keats wanted to do the same in his own poems with hope of revealing "the balance of Good and Evil" and "the love of Good and Ill." This does not suggest that the narrator of Keats's simply imitated Shakespeare; Rather, he adapted these ideas in his own unique way, especially with regards to personal feelings and beauty, typically labelled in Romantic poetry. Shakespeare's plays often depict the complexity of good and evil coexisting. For example, in *Macbeth*, the main characters, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, wrestle with the consequences of their actions. At the beginning of the play, Lady Macbeth is very determined to make sure Macbeth kills King Duncan. In Act 1, Scene 5, she worries that Macbeth is too kind to do it himself, so she takes control by pushing him toward the murder (Shakespeare, 1994). Later, in Act 1, Scene 7, when Macbeth starts to doubt their plan, Lady Macbeth convinces him to go through with it by dismissing his fears. She manipulates him by showcasing her strength and persuasion (Shakespeare, 1994). In Act 2, Scene 2, after Duncan's death, Lady Macbeth admits that she could not kill Duncan herself because he reminded her of her father. This shows that, despite her outward resolve, she is deeply conflicted about the act (Shakespeare, 1994). As time goes on, Lady Macbeth's guilt overwhelms her. In Act 5, Scene 1, she starts sleepwalking and tries to wash away the imaginary blood from her hands. This scene symbolizes the destruction caused by her guilt, which erodes her sanity (Shakespeare, 1994).

In *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 3 (Shakespeare, 1994), there are similar complexities in the character of Claudius, who, despite being a villain, is tormented by guilt for his actions. In his soliloquy, Claudius acknowledges the weight of his crime, saying, "Oh, my offense is rank! It smells to heaven. It has the primal eldest curse upon't - A brother's murder." This line shows Claudius deep discomfort with his crime. Admitting his faults, he compares it to the murder of Abel by Cain. Both are Adam's children, mentioned in the Bible. Claudius expresses a desire to pray and seek forgiveness but finds himself unable to do so. His guilt overpowers his will, illustrated when he confesses, "Pray can I not. Though inclination be as sharp as will, my stronger guilt defeats my strong intent." His internal conflict is further illustrated when he described his soul trapped by his own evil deeds: "Oh wretched state, / Oh bosom black as death, / Oh limed soul, that struggling to be free, / Art more engaged!" Finally, Claudius prays for divine (angel) intervention, hoping that angels can help soften his heart to soften and allow

him to genuinely repent: “Help, angels! / Make assay. / Bow, stubborn knees, and heart with strings of steel, / Be soft as sinews of the newborn babe!” According to Pigg (2000), Keats’s view of the phenomenon of good and bad within a single character, inspired by Shakespeare, is a form of beauty that invites deeper appreciation of the world (Pigg, 2000).

In addition, Shakespeare has also shown this kind of beauty in *Sonnet 18*, where he talks about the lasting beauty of a person saying: “But thy eternal summer shall not fade.” The narrator directly contrasts the fleeting nature of physical beauty with the eternal beauty of his beloved, which will gradually remain untarnished and unaffected by time (Shakespeare, 1994). Furthermore, Keats also loved Shakespeare’s theater, as we can see that he admired actors like Edmund Kean (Mulrooney, 2003). Perhaps, this inspired Keats in a letter to his brothers on December 21, 1817, to express admiration for *King Lear* as an example of great art. We can grasp this view when the narrator mentions, “The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeable evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth.” He is explaining an important idea in his view of art. For Keats, great art has the power to transform unpleasant realities into something beautiful by connecting deeply with beauty and truth. This thought helps him praise *King Lear*. He then mentions the term *King Lear* by name: “Examine ‘King Lear’, and you will find this exemplified throughout,” as the perfect example of the power of art (Keats, 1958:184). Keats even wrote a poem titled *On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again* (1818), where the narrator shares his feelings about the power and emotion of Shakespeare’s play. In this poem, he describes “the bitter-sweet of this Shakespearian fruit” (Keats, 1973:324). This line captures how the play evokes both pain and pleasure.

### **3. Fascination with Mysticism**

In a letter to Keats’s brother and sister-in-law, George and Georgiana, on January 23, 1819, the narrator shared his struggles with traditional religious beliefs. He wrote, “I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart’s affections and the truth of Imagination—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not” (Keats, 1817). Additionally, in *Hyperion*, the narrator talks about spirituality in ways that do not fully align with Christian teachings. As we can notice from one part of the poem that says, “But those to whom the miseries of the world / Are misery, and will not let them rest” (Keats, 1819). Here, the narrator suggests that only those who feel deeply the suffering of others can reach true spiritual greatness. This perspective is in contrast with Christian teachings, which often salvation through faith and God’s grace rather than through the feeling of others’ pain. The narrator of Keats in this poem suggests that in order for someone to truly understand life deeply, he must have a lot of empathy towards others. The reason being is that assumption of viewing life itself is surrounded by suffering. This idea on the other hand aligns with the philosophy of Nihilism, which says that life has no inherent meaning and often involves suffering. Nihilism faces the harsh truths of life without pretending that everything has a happy ending (Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011:13-15). It rejects the comforting illusions that religion and society often provide and instead embraces the emptiness of life (Santoni, 2016:42-45). This confrontation with life challenges individuals think deeply about their own values and purpose (Weller, 2011:121-123).

We can observe traces of Keatsian nihilism in *Hyperion*, in which the narrator explores the mysteries of human suffering and the role of the poet beyond traditional religious explanations, particularly in the lines: “None can usurp this height, ‘return’d that shade’, / But those to whom the miseries of the world / Are misery, and will not let them rest.” The line suggests that achieving a higher state of understanding is not easily accessible to just anyone, except for those who deeply feel and are affected by the suffering of the world and cannot ignore the pain of others. He then contrasts this with the life of comfort enjoyed by religious people, who detached from worldly suffering, fail to reach such spiritual or philosophical height: “All else who find a haven in the world, / Where they may thoughtless sleep away their days, / If by a chance into this fane they come, / Rot on the pavement where thou rottedst half.” This metaphorical attempt of the narrator, assuming to reach more universal understanding of what it means to be human, aligns with Sperry’s views (1973:209), who sees that Keats’s reluctance to fully accept religious traditions (and leanings towards Nihilism), may have been influenced by how people viewed Christianity in his time. During Keats’s era, traditional Christian beliefs were losing their influence, and many began to view religion as flawed, which supports the idea that the dominance of Christianity was weakening during this period (Harding, 2003). In addition, for nearly 200 years, Protestant Christianity had distanced itself from mysticism (McGinn, 2015). Given the declining domination of Christian beliefs and the lack of mysticism within the Christian community, it is likely that these factors contributed to Keats’s narrator’s spiritual divergence, distancing himself from the rigid dogma of his time.

Up to this point, we have compared Keatsian theological view with those of Shakespeare and revealed the key differences. This divergence may be due to Keats’s engagement with Shakespeare’s works, even though his understanding of theology was likely not as developed as Shakespeare’s (Rajan, 1980:152-158). We can revisit the situation where the narrator of Shakespeare shows a clearer belief in divine guidance and a moral order in life.

A line from an excerpt taken from Keats’ *Lamia* (Keats, 2008) reveals that the narrator questions how philosophy (i.e., the science of logic and reason), removes the magic and beauty from life’s mysteries. This is evident in the lines: “Do not all charms fly / At the mere touch of cold philosophy?”, and “Philosophy will clip an Angel’s wings.” He backs his example by showing that the beauty of rainbows, once seen as magical and mysterious, have become mundane and demystified due to science. This is shown in the line, “We know her woof, her texture; she is given / In the dull catalogue of common things.” The narrator further expresses his dissatisfaction with this shift, stating, “Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,” which means that science and reason break everything down into rules, thereby eliminating the mystery of life. When he mentions, “Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine—” and “Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made / The tender-person’d Lamia melt into a shade,” the narrator feels that science is leaving nothing special or spiritual. This shows his sadness about the loss of beauty and mystery. He analogues with that as if the magical creature Lamia fades away because of this logical view of the world, leaving him unsure about what is truly good or evil.

On the other hand, an excerpt from *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (Act V, Scene 2) demonstrates Shakespearean clear moral standards and his belief in the ultimate triumph of goodness over evil. The narrator is depicting the scene that Hamlet is having inner

conflict. He is troubled by his emotions and expresses inner turmoil when he says, “Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting / That would not let me sleep.” He (Hamlet) compares his inner turmoil to prisoners chained on a ship, feeling trapped and restless, as shown by the lines: “Methought, I lay / Worse than the mutinies in the bilboes.” Despite this inner struggle, Hamlet admits that sometimes acting impulsively can be beneficial, stating “Rashly—And prais’d be rashness for it; let us know”. This suggests that Hamlet believes even mistakes can serve a purpose. He further explains, “Our indiscretion sometime serves us well / When our deep plots do pall,” indicating that, at times, the mistakes or impulsive actions can help him when his careful plans fail. From this, we can infer that Hamlet recognizes a force beyond human control who guides human. He further elaborates, “and that should learn us / There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will.” This reflects Hamlet’s theological concern. The Shakespeare’s narrator of this work wants to show that such characters like Hamlet clearly believes in a divine power. Even when things seem out of control, he trusts that there is a higher power that shapes the outcomes. This line also affirms that despite our effort to control things, there is a higher power that ultimately shapes our destinies.

In conclusion, while Keats’ narrator in *Lamia* feels lost and skeptical about the nature of good and evil, this skepticism is expressed through his criticism of logic and reason, which he believes destroy life of its magic. For him, everything loses its meaning when seen only through the lens of science and philosophy, an experience he associates with intellectual maturity. On the other hand, Hamlet in Shakespeare’s play finds comfort in the belief that a divine force guides our lives. Even when things go wrong, Hamlet is comforted by the idea that a higher power is guiding everything. This key difference suggests that Keats’s narrator is struggling with confusion and the loss of theological wonder, whereas Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* finds faith in a higher power and moral order.

Keats’s narrator’s concerns about the distinction between good and bad resonate with moral philosophy, in which some philosophers believe that good comes from something perfect and positive called the Absolute. For instance, Plotinus, a famous philosopher, referred to this as “the One,” and described it as the highest reality that represents pure goodness. He explained that the further something moves away from the One, the less good it becomes, and this distance creates evil (McLean, 2002). Thomas Aquinas, another great thinker, said that good is like a light that naturally spreads out and reveals itself. He also believed all goodness comes from God (the Absolute Good), and that evil is simply the lack of good (Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920). Mechanically, when this goodness spreads away from the Absolute, it becomes less perfect. This imperfection gives rise to evil. Evil is not something on its own; it is what happens when good is missing or when there’s a distance from the Absolute. Proclus, another philosopher, said that as things move further from the One, they become more flawed, and this creates the chance for evil (Proclus, 1909, note 15). Furthermore, Boethius added that evil also arises when people misuse their free-will, making choices that lead them further away from the divine source (Donato, 2013). In other words, these moral philosophers suggest that goodness originates from the Absolute and spreads outward like light, while evil happens when there is a gap or distance from this source of perfection.

The comparison of Keats's narrator and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* based on these philosophical ideas shows that Hamlet sees good as guided by a divine power, similar to the Absolute's perfect source. Meanwhile, Keats's narrator feels lost and confused. However, this struggle seemed fascinating the audience of his time.

#### **4. Challenge to Conventional Christianity**

The narrator of Keats's *Ode on Melancholy* talks about the idea of how suffering is connected to God through thoughts on redemption and salvation. He uses some Christian ideas about suffering, seeing it as something that might be needed to reach something good. In the lines, "Ay, in the very temple of Delight / Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine" and "His soul shall taste the sadness of her might, / And be among her cloudy trophies hung," joy ("the temple of Delight") is mentioned with an inherent connection to sorrow ("Veil'd Melancholy"). This helps us see suffering as intertwined with beauty and pleasure. The idea that melancholy has a sovereign place in the "temple" reflects the narrator's belief that suffering, like in Christian redemption, is necessary for spiritual depth and understanding. The soul that experiences this profound sadness is, in a sense, elevated ("among her cloudy trophies"). This, to me, tries to expose that suffering has a transformative power, similar to how suffering is viewed in Christian theology as redemption.

However, his views on redemption and salvation (beauty and joy) are quite different from traditional Christian beliefs. In Christianity, suffering is part of God's plan, with Jesus's suffering and sacrifice seen as a way to save people from their sins and give them the chance for eternal life. Meanwhile, the narrator of Keats shows us that beauty and joy are fleeting, not eternal, through this line, "She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die; / And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips / Bidding adieu." In addition, the line in which the term "melancholy" is mentioned indicates that sorrow and joy are intertwined, thus contrasting with Christianity's view. This reflects the view of Walker (2014), who proposes that this Keatsian idea of divine suffering moves away from traditional Christianity.

Moreover, there is a notion of Keats' exploration of divine suffering and his departure from traditional religious interpretations, mentioned in his *Hyperion* (Keats, 2012:220). The narrator mentions that, in "Still sat, still snuff'd the incense, teeming up / From man to the sun's God; yet unsecure", Hyperion, despite being offered worship and reverence from human, feels "unsecure". This God is still vulnerable. God Hyperion possesses human characteristics, such as being frightened of bad omens, as mentioned in "Fright and perplex, so also shuddered he—". The narrator continues, proposing that in "Or prophesyings of the midnight lamp; / But horrors, portion'd to a giant nerve", the things that terrify Hyperion are not ordinary fears but ones that match his divine nature, or his godly status. This suffering brings to Hyperion an "ache", which is not only meant for just physical pain but a deep emotional or spiritual pain. This portrayal of "feeling-lost-and-afraid-of-humans God" is unlike that of the Christian God, who has a clear purpose for suffering (redemption and salvation), a benevolent God who uses suffering for a greater purpose.

The narrator of Keats does not continue talking about his idea of a "suffering God" for long. Perchance he realized that this view was not quite right. We can see this change in his poem *To Autumn* (Keats, 2012:338), which was published in 1820. In this poem, instead of

focusing on complicated religious ideas, the narrator shows a peaceful acceptance of nature and life's cycles, such as the changing seasons. He no longer focuses on suffering or God but on the beauty of the world around him. This is evident in a literal analysis of the lines: "Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?" Here, the narrator invites us to recognize autumn in its abundance and peacefulness. He has shifted the focus away from human concerns of suffering. Autumn, to the narrator, is personified as resting gently, with the wind lifting its hair, as seen in "Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find / Thee sitting careless on a granary floor, / Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind". This infers a peaceful image that emphasizes the season is relaxed, not stressed or focused on hardship. In addition, in the line "Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?" the narrator is wondering where spring's songs have gone. Nevertheless, this is a calm reflection, and not a complaint. He shifts away from yearning or suffering. He then speaks of autumn's own music: "Think not of them, thou hast thy music too", indicating its unique beauty. It suggests that as every season has its own beauty, so does autumn. This encourages us not to dwell on the past (spring) but to appreciate the present (autumn) and the future. Lastly, he mentions other several elements that can symbolize for natural cycles, such as clouds creating dying light, the fields touched with a rosy color (imagery of the end of day and the end of the harvest season), and creatures like gnats, lambs, crickets, and robins. All of these elements add their sounds to the music of autumn, everyday moments of life, meant for a full acceptance of the world as it is. The narrator observes, "And gathering swallows twitter in the skies", depicting another sign of the changing seasons or life's natural cycles, without any concerns for suffering.

##### **5. Final Reflections on Divine Testimony**

That the narrator of Keats's thought on living a peaceful life is evident in another Keatsian last poems, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (Keats, 2012:329), which believed to have been written in May 1819. This poem shows how the narrator believes in the beauty of the world and the harmony of all things.

The narrator writes, "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness, / Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time" and "Sylvan historian, who canst thus express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme." In this stanza, he personifies the urn as a "bride of quietness" and a "foster-child of Silence and slow Time," referring to the stillness, permanence, and harmony of the urn compared to the changing world around it. The narrator appreciates the eternal beauty preserved on the urn, which is untouched by time and noise, with his understanding that true beauty lies in calm and quiet moments. The term "Sylvan historian," used to describe the urn, is not a term typically used by humans. This is meant to show that beauty can communicate more profoundly than human language. The term "flowery tales" refers to tales of nature, powerful beings, and humans in perfect balance. In addition, the description of the urn as an "Attic shape" serves to show that it is a perfect work of art from ancient Greece.

In stanza two, the beauty of the urn, experienced through imagination, is considered higher in value than any other form, such as actual sound. When the narrator states, "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on; / Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd, / Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone," he contrasts heard and unheard melodies. This highlights the idea that beauty transcends the physical; the

harmony of the unseen world, experienced through imagination, is more perfect and eternal than any real experience.

The scene of the young lover and the maiden, preserved with eternal youth and beauty “beneath the trees,” captures a moment frozen in time. It reflects a world untouched by decay or sorrow, symbolizing how art captures the harmony and ideal of life, preserving it from the imperfections of reality. The love and beauty on the urn will never fade, as expressed in “Forever wilt thou love,” suggesting that everlasting beauty always outshines transient experiences.

The term “happy boughs” in “Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed / Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu” can be interpreted as a symbol of eternal spring, a season that never ends on the urn. This shows that the narrator admires the unchanging beauty of the world. He also repeats the term “happy” in “More happy love! more happy, happy love! / Forever warm and still to be enjoy’d, / Forever panting, and forever young” to highlight the joy and eternal youth captured in beauty.

In the line, “Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!” the narrator perceives the urn as a symbol that prompts contemplation beyond ordinary life, as it represents eternity, something timeless and beautiful, yet distant and unchanging. The phrase “Cold Pastoral” acknowledges that while the urn’s beauty is perfect, it is also detached from the warmth and change inherent in human life, preserving harmony in a way that life itself cannot.

The line “Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” encapsulates the narrator’s belief in the unity and harmony of the world. He suggests that the ultimate understanding lies in recognizing the interconnectedness of beauty and truth. For the narrator, this harmony encompasses both the known and the unknown (potentially the divine) as core elements of existence. This idea differs from the themes of Keats’s *Hyperion*.

In summary, if we are to draw core elements of Keatsian ideas presented in this poem, we may observe themes such as the appreciation of beauty as a reflection of the Divine, the representation of timelessness and eternity, the communication of spirituality through silence and imagination, and an escape from human suffering. It seems that the narrator is proposing that he has glimpsed the Divine, i.e., God, the most powerful. This shift could be interpreted as the narrator leaning toward religious themes. He invites the reader to consider how such a revelation might influence an individual’s understanding of the Divine, as well as the role of beauty and truth in life.

The assertion that the narrator was deeply influenced by divine conundrums, and that this could be inferred about Keats, is supported by the fact that Keats had close interactions with Joseph Severn, who was not only knowledgeable about art but also a devout Christian. According to Blank (2018), Severn stayed with Keats during his final days, offering both physical and spiritual support. He also read religious texts to Keats, such as the Psalms and *Holy Living* by Jeremy Taylor.

The situation where Keats lying in bed, weak and near death, listening to Severn read these texts, might have profoundly impacted Keats, especially statements that could prompt deep reflection on life, God, and his own suffering. My study of *Holy Living* reveals that the

author does not focus on traditional Christian beliefs, such as Jesus Christ's divinity, his role as the Son of God, or his resurrection. Instead, he emphasizes following Christ's teachings and remembering him through inward acts or devotion, without specifically focusing on revering him as God of the Christians. For instance, the author states, "He that, in obedience to Christ, worships God diligently, frequently, and constantly, with natural religion; that is, of prayer, praises, and thanksgiving." This suggests that worship is centered on inward devotion rather than institutionalized practices. Furthermore, the author emphasizes remembering Christ through "inward acts of understanding, will, and memory (which is the spiritual communion)," rather than emphasizing traditional religious rituals. This is evident in the claim: "The man that hath these twelve signs of grace and predestination, does as certainly belong to God, and is his son, as surely as he is his creature," which broadens the idea of belonging to God beyond specific Christian doctrines. Additionally, the passage asserts, "These are the marks of the Lord Jesus, and the characters of a Christian: this is a good religion; and these things God's grace hath put into our powers, and God's laws have made to be our duty." This shows a focus on ethical and spiritual qualities than traditional beliefs about Jesus's divinity. Lastly, the author remarks, "The other accidents and pomps of a church are things without our power... yet they are not of its constitutions, as it is Christian and hopes to be saved" (Taylor, n.d.: 30).

In addition, the Psalms, another text Severn read to Keats, describe God as divine, eternal, and beyond human characteristics. For example, Psalm 90:2 (King James Version) states: "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God." This verse highlights God's eternal nature and portrays Him as existing beyond the physical world with a divine and unchanging essence. This description of God, devoid of human characteristics, contrasts with the Christian idea of Jesus as both man and God.

It becomes evident that the narrator in Keats's works is not a conventional Christian believer. Instead, the spirituality he embodies transcends traditional Christian doctrines, which indicates a distinct engagement with the divine. While Keats himself was influenced by Joseph Severn's readings of religious texts, the narrator's voice reflects a unique, monotheistic vision that diverges from the divinity of Jesus. This spiritual journey, articulated through the narrator, offers a unique approach to underrating the divine, one that diverges from orthodox Christianity.

## **Conclusion**

The narrator's journey in Keats's poems shows a clear evolution in beliefs about life, death, and spirituality. Initially, in *When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be*, the narrator expresses a deep fear of dying before achieving greatness. It can reflect Keats's own fear of an early death due to illness and personal loss. Subsequently, in poems like *Bright Star* and *To Autumn*, this fear gradually transitions into acceptance. Influenced by Shakespeare's works, Keats's narrator begins to embrace the idea that human experiences are inherently a mix of joy and sorrow, moving away from Christianity's promise of eternal joy.

In *Ode on Melancholy*, the narrator highlights the connection between happiness and suffering, offering a different view from Christianity's idea of eternal joy. The fleeting nature of beauty and life becomes central, with the narrator emphasizing that life's value lies in

appreciating its temporary moments, rather than striving for eternal happiness. By the time of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, the narrator reaches a philosophical conclusion that beauty and truth are intertwined. These fleeting experiences, he suggests, hold a lasting significance beyond Christianity's religious doctrine. Rather than adopting Christianity's vision of salvation, the narrator finds spiritual meaning in the beauty and truth present in the world.

Keats's relationship with Christianity, while marked by uncertainty, never fully embraced its dogma. The narrator's journey reflects a departure from traditional Christian beliefs, exploring instead the philosophical meanings of truth and beauty. This exploration points toward a monotheistic sense of divinity, likely influenced by Keats's religious friend Joseph Severn and the spiritual texts he encountered.

For readers in Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand, where Keatsian spiritual works are often interpreted through a Christian lens, it becomes evident that the narrator in Keats's poetry is not a conventional Christian believer. Instead, he embodies a spirituality that transcends traditional boundaries, offering a distinct, monotheistic vision of the divine. This interpretation challenges traditional readings and highlights the narrator's unique theological approach.

Keats's spiritual reflections, marked by ambiguity, allows his poetic works to be interpreted beyond the traditional framework of Christianity. His thoughts on life, death, and the divine resonate with readers from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, making his poetry more accessible to a broader audience. This openness invites connections across various perspectives, especially for those seeking a divine presence beyond conventional Christian beliefs.

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