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The Sanctuary of Acceptance: Love and Identity Through the Letters and Poetry of John Keats

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE SANCTUARY OF ACCEPTANCE:
LOVE AND IDENTITY THROUGH THE LETTERS AND POETRY OF JOHN
KEATS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH

by

Amanda C. Estevez

2019

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Amanda C. Estevez, and entitled The Sanctuary of Acceptance: Love and Identity Through the Letters and Poetry of John Keats, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved

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The thesis of Amanda C. Estevez is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
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Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2019

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mom, who always encouraged my passion for literature. Had it not been for the many books she read to me as a child, I don't know where I would be today. To my siblings, Genny, Anthony, and Zasha, for letting me bounce my ideas off them, and for listening to me read everything I've ever written. To my many guides for their encouragement and support. To the love that has inspired and moved me. And to my late professors, Robert Ratner and Dr. Phillip Marcus, who both said that I would find my way back to this career. They were right.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

THE SANCTUARY OF ACCEPTANCE: LOVE AND IDENTITY THROUGH THE
LETTERS AND POETRY OF JOHN KEATS

by

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Florida International University, 2019

Miami, Florida

Professor Maneck Daruwala, Major Professor

In this thesis, I propose to explain how it is that the life and work of John Keats assists us in answering the question of how we create ourselves through the presence of others. I aim to do this through an analysis of the work that his relationship with Fanny Brawne inspired. In doing so, I hope to prove that romantic love creates a sort of metaphysical sanctuary for us to inhabit as we shift through the various incarnations of our identity throughout our lives. By synthesizing the theories of phenomenology and transgression, I hope to demonstrate how Keats' rapid development as a poet was made possible through the sanctuary of acceptance that his love for Fanny Brawne afforded him. These concepts are divided into four sections. The first is a general overview of relevant definitions/terms as I understand and incorporate them. The second discusses how I perceive identity and its construction through influence. The third discusses Keats' concept of Beauty as a philosophy of truth-making, and how that plays into identity formations. The last section explains how I see love as being necessary in perpetuating these new incarnations of self to occur due to the sanctuary of acceptance that it affords us.

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PREFACE

When I think of romance, I think of John Keats. I hear his name and it floors me almost as immediately as his work does, because his words have forever altered the way I perceive love. The written words of John Keats possess the immeasurable power to move the mired soul, to stir from icy sleep sentiments which have long since forgotten the incendiary warmth of words. These words touch a hidden chord of raw emotion, and are capable of making us reach great understandings of ourselves and of the world around us. They not only transform the way we think and feel, but also throw us into recollections of our past, or project us into our future as we imagine the possibilities of what it would be like to feel even a fragment of the love and passion that he so eloquently describes.

In a search of his name online, the results always yield similar portraits of a very young man lost in thought, eyes swimming through daydreams or peering pensively into the wilds of his imagination as his chin rests peacefully in the palm of his hand. He is depicted as a dreamer then, young, and always looking away from his portrait maker as if to say, “I should not be the focus of your attention.” But how could he not be? The letters and poetry that Keats left behind are of paramount importance to all who cannot help but wonder why love possesses the tremendous power to move and shape us. If we survey his works, especially his later poems, and the love letters he wrote to Fanny Brawne, we not only see a man deeply taken by the object of his heart’s affections. We see a man unapologetically transformed by the influence of the great love of his life.

To the casual observer, Keats’ work is a fanciful whirlwind of dreams and love unaffected by the turbulent times in which they were written. To the researcher, his work is a testament to abstract concepts—philosophies half developed in a life cut tragically

short—and they serve as the key to understanding such eternal questions as, how do we become who we are while sharing our lives with others? In a number of his letters, Keats describes “the poetical character” as something which the poet is not born with. In fact, he argues that the poet has no self, that their identity is “everything and nothing” due to the chameleon nature of their character (*Selected Letters* 262). For Keats then, identity is something that would have been continually shaped and worked upon by the influences that surrounded him. It would not have been static or essential, but would have required an openness to influence in order to continually reshape it. This chameleon nature to identity seeks to undo the idea of static definitions of self then, because it speaks to the need for adaptability of one’s identity without having to start over from nothing.

When two people are in love, they are actively composing new versions of themselves as their current identity fades, is muted even, to make way for the newer composition of self that they make after being influenced by an other. In this process of partial mutability and creation of one’s identity, our identities allow us to discover and create new truths that we embody in the next incarnation/definition of ourselves. Keats describes a similar form of arriving at these new truths when he contemplates the nature of Beauty, and concludes that a balance of oppositions is necessary for creating new truths about the world around us (*Selected Letters* 71).

Love, and more specifically romantic love, has been the influence behind many breathtaking works of art and literature; it is almost as if the muses of most, if not all, artists seem to have sprung from the bow of Cupid himself. We need only survey Keats’ works to catch a glimpse of this immense, transformative power at work upon a human soul and consciousness. Since my first encounter with his poetry, my perception of

romantic love has become far more nuanced and profound. Love is no longer only love to me; it has exceeded its capacities as an emotion. Through the works of John Keats¹, I have come to understand that love does not ask us to remain still. It asks us, encourages us rather, to pursue higher realities both great and small so that we do not remain trapped in the inaction of our own insecurities, hesitations, or comforts. Love is a haven in which we learn to both challenge and accept the many changes that shape us. Love then, as I have come to understand it, is the fire that burns you slowly, creating a heat to warm the stillness from your soul and inspire a life that moves.

¹ After considerable thought, I made the decision to refer to John Keats using only his surname throughout my thesis, as it adheres to the common practice of referring to an author by their surname when analyzing their works. I then made the decision to refer to the great love of his life, Fanny Brawne, by her first name because it is how she appears throughout Keats' works. As such, it is how I have come to think of her as well.

I - DEFINITION OF TERMS

It is my belief that identity, as I understand and use it, is a spectral intertextual palimpsest. It is spectral because "...it repeats itself, as itself, and is every time other" (Derrida, "Language is Never Owned, 104). It is intertextual because "intertextuality suggest that meaning [...] can only ever be understood in relation to other [things]; no work stands alone but is interlinked with the tradition that came before it and the context in which it is produced" (Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, 2nd Ed, back cover). And it is a palimpsest because it is something that is continually altered, but still bears traces of its early forms. It has many stages or levels or iterations of meaning, development, history, style, etc. that all build on each other. Things overlap to the point where they cannot be separated. As such, identity is not static or essential in any way.

Identity is how we choose to define ourselves, according to these factors, in the interstices of our continual transformations. It changes, building upon previous versions of ourselves to arrive at what we currently are, even if we no longer identify with something from our past and choose to mute its ability to define us at present. Identity is something that is continually shaped and worked upon by the influences that surround us. Whether we are open to those influences or not remains irrelevant, because identity is always already being reshaped by everything that touches our lives. How then do we describe this constantly shifting sense of self?

According to the OED, incarnation is defined as "The action of incarnating or fact of being incarnated or 'made flesh'; *a becoming incarnate*; investiture or *embodiment* in flesh; *assumption of, or existence in, a bodily* (esp. human) *form*." (OED Online; emphasis added). According to Google, it is "a person who *embodies* in the flesh a deity,

spirit, or *abstract quality*” (*Google Search*; emphasis added). For the purposes of my analysis then, the term incarnation as I understand and apply it will mean a combination of these definitions. Incarnation, as I define it here, means how beings choose to enact their own identities throughout the course of their lives via the abstract qualities that influence and comprise them; a continual process of becoming. It is a taking in of these influences and using them to create various embodied definitions of self that are not static or essential in any way. That is to say, identity moves and is constantly shifting. Thus each new definition of ourselves is not one drawn up from scratch, nor is it one that comprises absolutely every influence we have ever taken in. Certain aspects of identity do become mutable, but they can never be fully eradicated because they form a sort of foundation for who we currently are.

The reason I seek a term to describe identity as it is constantly shifted and redefined is because we do not wake each morning and say to ourselves, “Today I will be myself, thus altered...” and proceed to define—for ourselves or others—how exactly we will identify ourselves that day: what we choose to adopt or reject, what we select or accept as influences and what we do not. If we did, how would we account for the thousands upon thousands of redefinitions that occur as we live through the course of a single day? The reason embodiment itself as a term does not work to represent this constant redefinition is because it implies that the physical body is the source of meaning because of how it can make a situation meaningful to its agent (Kiverstein 741). But that is not how identity works. We do not rely solely on physical stimuli as we re-construct our identities. Thus, incarnation as I ascribe it here can help mediate this absence of a term to define our continual shift in definitions of identity. *Embodiment*, then, serves only

the purpose of describing how we acknowledge and carry out these new incarnations of ourselves. For the purposes of my analysis then, *embodiment* will not refer to the current theoretical use of the term, where the physical body and its relation to the process of encountering signifiers shapes our understanding of the signified. It will represent how we execute a new incarnation of self.

The term *performance* may occasionally be used throughout this work. When used, it implies that a particular *embodiment* is an act, a façade, a falsity, that it is “mere artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion” (Butler xxiii). *Performance* in the sense of *embodiment* implies that we merely act out different versions of ourselves according to the roles we fill, but that those roles do not touch or affect our innermost sense of self. They are separate, thus we do not actively accept them as contributing to who we are or how we choose to define ourselves, because we are only acting in this way to fulfill a role that is expected of us. However, though we do not actively adopt the *performance* of some role that does not mean it does not passively become a part of who we are. Any role we *perform* remains a part of us even in our rejection of it, because to say we are not that thing means that we are some diametrically opposed version in relation to it. In other words, that opposition helps create understanding and informs new meaning in terms of any incarnation of identity. For instance, we will see this most in my analysis of Keats’ poem “Lamia,” when she transforms from her serpent-like image into that of a beautiful woman. While Lamia does not identify as the serpent creature of her past, it *was* a role she was forced to take on and *perform* in, thus it becomes a muted part of her incarnation as a woman when she chooses to no longer identify her present incarnation of self in that way.

As Walt Whitman states, we contain multitudes, and what we choose to represent our sense of selfhood is as varied and multifaceted as the universe is wide. Thus, identity is who we see ourselves as, it is how we define ourselves at any given moment of time while muting or affirming past iterations of ourselves into our present incarnation. *Embodiment*, then, is the action of carrying out a new incarnation of ourselves. And incarnation describes the continual shifting of identity as we actively or passively adopt the influences that create our senses of self.

II - THE ANATOMY OF IDENTITY

The Anxiety of Essentiality: Identity as a Spectral Intertextual Palimpsest

We often experience trouble when attempting to define ourselves. In our effort to answer the question of who we are for ourselves or others, we often fall on one of two extremes: we either forget ourselves entirely for a moment, going blank on all the experiences that comprise us, or we attempt to boil ourselves down, as if at our center some neatly wrapped package contained an organized list of words to label or describe us. We often overcome the shock of the first extreme rather quickly and move on to the second, trying out each word or phrase to see how it measures up against us. And for a time we are satisfied, but the list is never the same list twice, and for some that is unnerving. We seek essentiality and concreteness because we have some inexplicable hesitation of change. And yet, being essential in any way is not possible with identity. We try to establish this staticness via time, memory, language, and relationships with others (meaning through relation), but these means are not essential either because they shift with us as we reconstitute each incarnation of ourselves.

How then do we identify ourselves if we are never fully present in time?

According to Martin Heidegger's idea of temporality, we can never be fully present in any given moment of time because "we can only understand ourselves in the present by referring to the temporal horizons of our existence, that is, by recollecting our past and projecting our future" (Kearney 32). In other words, we exist in a simultaneous forward-backward movement through time, constituting our present self from past memories and future possibilities. Thus, we are always a no-longer-being *and* a not-yet-being as we exist in every moment that is "now".

How does this present a problem in terms of identifying ourselves in order to construct our identities? When we remember, it is always in terms of our “now” moments, thus changing the way in which that memory gets interpreted and perceived at the moment when it is recalled. So, if we are constituted by our forward-backward movement in time—by our temporality, if you will—and our no-longer-being is constantly changing according to how our present being is perceiving the memory, how do we identify ourselves in any given moment of time? What is more, Derrida writes that language can never be owned; yet we can only ever identify ourselves through and within the language(s) that we speak. How then do we identify ourselves, ever, if we can only do so through language that is spectral (there but not there all at once)?

As our no-longer-being and not-yet-being fight to frame our present encounters, it causes us to sometimes feel displaced by our own temporality. This brings about the realization that memory, as well as our own future anticipations, have always framed our “now” moments. This sudden awareness of temporality causes us to realize that we are never truly finished products. We are not an essential, unchanging being; there is no single truth about us that can be pinned upon a wall and memorized (Menéndez 201)². We are constantly changing and shifting according to our temporal movement through time. We are always reinterpreting ourselves. This realization of how inconstant identity can be, of how quickly it can be reshaped and changed, is reflected in Keats’ ruminations on the chameleon nature of a poet’s identity (*Selected Letters* 262). In his letter to Richard Woodhouse on the 27 October 1818 he writes that he, as a poet, can have no

² This is a reference to a line from Ana Menéndez’s short story “The Party,” which is part of her collection of short stories titled *In Cuba I Was A German Shepherd* (2001).

identity because “he is continually in for—and filling some other Body” (*Selected Letters* 263). Though here he is referring to the manner in which poets are inspired by their influences, imagining themselves metaphorically inhabiting the vessel that is their muse in an attempt to further imbue their words with the flood of inspiration they feel, these thoughts also lend themselves to the interpretation that identity is inconstant. If we are continually imagining ourselves as being inspired by people, places, or objects that are outside of ourselves, we are in essence always shifting in accordance to the influences of our inspirations. It does not matter if we are being inspired by the same object or person over a set number of years. The fact of the matter is that we are drastically different people each time we arrive at the encounter of the source of inspiration or influence. Therefore, we are different people with each new experience of our influences. For instance, Keats was an avid reader of William Shakespeare’s works and was very inspired by his genius. If Keats had read *King Lear* twenty times in his life, for example, he would have been a very different reader during each reading of the play because certain experiences would have affected him and reshaped his sense of self repeatedly between encounters with this one source of influence. Thus, he would have been influenced by it very differently each time, even when recollecting past emotions or thoughts associated with the play. In that way, both time and memory continue to prove their inability to root us in a single static definition of ourselves.

Just as the poet can have no identity that is stable, non-poets cannot escape the lure of redefinition. We yearn, however hesitantly, to embrace other things which can help us redefine ourselves, and as we do we must combat the idea of time rooting us in a place where we can only ever be one thing. In an effort to place some ground beneath us

though, I offer Keats' idea of Negative Capability, which he described in his letter to his brothers, George and Tom the 27 December 1817. In it, Keats defines Negative Capability as "when [one] is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (*Selected Letters* 79). It is my belief that this philosophy makes the idea of being without a single definitive definition of self much less terrifying. While we may lack a ground on which to set a solid foundation, we have a sort of floating structure of ourselves as we live and breathe that continues to change and grow with us. Negative Capability, then, allows us to be more at ease with the continuous shifts in redefinition that occur to us. It is the cure for this anxiety of essentiality that we all strive to arrive at. Rather than asking us to find a solid or immovable definition of ourselves, Negative Capability calms us and allows us to have uncertainties about ourselves because it does not ask for concreteness. There is no way to identify ourselves in any one unchanging way, and Keats understood this most because of his need to always be influenced by various muses for his poetry. We are always being reshaped by our temporality, as well as by the various experiences/influences that surround us. We are always being changed by our renewed perception of the present, and it makes us a different person. By altering the way we think, perceive, or feel, we are revising our very existence. A shift in our way of perceiving the world also changes who we are (in relation to that shift, or because of it).

Memory too is an unpredictable way to measure or define identity. When we relive a memory it is always "other". When we remember, it is always in terms of our "now" moment, and each "now" is made different by our temporality, by our simultaneous forward-backward reaching through time. Moreover, when we remember—

a person, place, object, event, etc.—it is always in terms of us. In this way, our memories, even those we have of others, reveal more about who we are as people than they do about the thing we are remembering. Memory is constantly reinterpreted, reinvented. If our initial framing of memories about others is always in terms of ourselves—and this is inescapable, as we can only ever remember anything in terms of how it affected or touched our own life experiences—our recalling of those memories will also be framed in terms of ourselves. And since we are constantly changing and reshaping our “now” identities in terms of our temporality, each time we recall a memory it is always in terms of a different version of ourselves. Take for instance the line in “To—What can I do to drive away” which states, ‘Touch has a memory. O say, love, say / What can I do to kill it and be free / In my old liberty?’” (*Complete Poems* 374). But there can be no access to this old liberty. It is not possible to return to a previous definition of ourselves in any absolute sense because we are not the same person we were before. The speaker of the poem—which I interpret as being Keats himself—seems to realize this when he says “Where shall I *learn* to get my peace again?” (*Complete Poems* 375; emphasis added), recognizing that it is not possible to return to this old sense of self. Therefore, he must learn to find some new sense of liberty that will give him some sensation of the freedom of his bachelorhood. He does not want to fall prey to the binds of love as his friends have, yet he cannot find a way to escape the influence of love on him either. As a result, he must weigh his options and attempt to find a solution so that he can experience the freedom of his own thoughts again, thoughts not entrammelled by the “brilliant queen” that he feels himself slowly falling in love with.

If a solid identity cannot be determined by our being fully present in time—because we are continually altered by our own temporality—and memory too becomes an unreliable way of identifying ourselves and others—because we always remember in terms of our “now”—how then can we ever identify anyone? Perhaps language holds the key? In his interview with Évelyne Grossman in “Language Is Never Owned,” Jacques Derrida states that language, like a date, is spectral—“it repeats itself, as itself, and is every time other” (Derrida 104). In other words, as we speak, language reconstitutes itself according to our “now” moments. If we were to utter the exact same words or phrase on multiple occasions, those words would take on an entirely new meaning according to the context of where we find ourselves within our own temporality and physical moment in time. And our multiple incarnations of identity, as I understand them, are much the same.

Language—like a date, like a memory even—as Derrida explains, is always other, even when it repeats itself as itself. Though these are words we have heard many times before, they do not always signify the same thing each time they are spoken. And what is more, they will always carry a different meaning to whoever hears them/speaks them. My meaning is not your meaning, and the same can be said the other way around. All the layers in a sentence can make us weary.³ Those layers are innumerable, in scope and in meaning, and to attempt to decipher them all would be as impossible as attempting to uncover every version of ourselves that we have ever been from the moment that we came into being. Furthermore, sometimes those phrases only serve to conceal the truth of

³ This allusion was inspired by Ana Menéndez’s short story “The Party,” which is part of her collection of short stories titled *In Cuba I Was A German Shepherd* (2001). This short story also lends itself to the idea of time, language, and memory being ineffectual methods of arriving at static definitions of incarnations of identity.

ourselves, muddling an outsider's understanding of who we truly are. And those phrases and pieces of words, those snatches of breath⁴, are all just fragments of an understanding. The whole of "To—(What can I do to drive away)" is an attempt by Keats to recapture his old sense of self before he felt love and it altered him. He then turned to his favorite muse, Poesy, to explore in language what he was becoming via the love that was transforming him. And even then, he was not free of this change but instead more enveloped in it. The words did not liberate him in the way he had hoped, but they did lead to something far greater in that they allowed him to redefine himself.

Our struggle to attempt to define absolutely who we are does not end here. Though the frames of time, language, and memory yield no absolute or finite possibilities for definition, perhaps we can attempt to define ourselves through our relationships and interactions with others. That is to say, perhaps we can attempt to define who we are by constructing a definition of ourselves in terms of our Meaning in relation to others. And here, the use of the word Meaning is quite different. Whereas meaning traditionally means signification, a Meaning derived from relation is imbued with our understanding or "reading" of each other. In other words, this version of Meaning is not signification; rather it is a gauging of our value, of our importance, of the power and impression of our presence in the lives of others. Capital 'M' Meaning then is how we read/interpret others, and how they read/interpret us. Meaning is the weight of influence that we both give and receive in our interactions with others. However, this method of attempting to fully define ourselves is also mutable. We cannot project our readings of ourselves into the minds of others. We can only partly define ourselves, to ourselves, according to how we

⁴ See previous note.

read/interpret our own construction of this Meaning as our presence touches the presence of other beings. Furthermore, Meaning as influence is also mutable in the sense that we do not always have to actively adopt the influences of others into our various incarnations. I will explore this idea further in a later section of this work.

Additionally, the act of attempting to impress Meaning onto our romantic other will always be unsuccessful, because it is impossible to transpose all the many layers of signification, the sprawling web of interpretation, the multiplicitous nuances that comprise any single reading or incarnation of a being.⁵

In our struggle to gauge the power and impression of our presence in the life of our lover, we realize that it is not possible to impress our readings/interpretations of ourselves onto others. Though we can wonder how it is that our presence creates Meaning to the presence of another being, we can never actually know what that Meaning is. Thus, we cannot rely on a Meaning of relation to fully define ourselves either. Consider, for instance, Keats' poem "To Fanny," where he writes that she is the home for his love, and that even when they are apart his love for her envelopes him entirely, and he hopes she will not entertain the advances of other suitors for the simple joy of being admired when he is not there to swoon over her. Further into the poem, Keats writes, "Must not a woman be / A feather on the sea, / Swayed to and fro by every wind and tide?" (*Complete Poems* 377), signifying that he recognizes the need to move, to be moved, to derive some Meaning from these behaviors. But he begs her to remember

⁵ I reworked this sentence so much. I tried to get it to express exactly what I wanted it to say so that you, reader, could understand it exactly as I understand it. I wanted the meaning you take away from it to be as clear as the understanding of it I have in my own mind. And then I realized that that is exactly what I am arguing against in my explanation. I find it funny that, even though I am aware of how impossible it is to have someone understand exactly what it is that I mean, I could not escape the need to try.

him, to recall his devotion to her so that she will not need to redefine her Meaning in relation to another man simply because she feels alone and Keats cannot be there with her.

If we cannot own language and can never truly be defined (by ourselves or others), it means that we can never truly be known. While this may feel unsettling for some, there is some ground on which we can stand, because we can own our own experiences of things—of language, of emotions, of thoughts and feelings, or even of other people. What do I mean by own? I mean that we can have our own understanding of the many meanings of all those things, as no one else can. Instead, the inability to Mean exactly how we would like others to read/interpret us is freeing, because it also suggests that we have our own power to construct our own readings/interpretations of others. Thus, we *can* own (create) our *experience* (readings/interpretations) of others—as we live them and are constituted by them, as we impress our identities upon those others who impress their identities upon us. We can own our own *understanding* (again, the reading/interpretation) of those others, even if that understanding is incomplete, spectral, apocryphal—because, just as we cannot fully know ourselves, we cannot fully know or define anyone else. There is no one else whose experiences have been lived exactly as ours have been lived when we arrive at any given point of acquisition or creation of new meanings (incarnations of identity).

The Transgression of Influence: Unfreedom and a Sense of Becoming

We as beings cannot ever truly be known. We are too multifaceted, too intertextual, too layered and complex to ever fully be read in one single way. We each

bring with ourselves “a texture of events, environments, other people” (Calvino 153) which have formed, and will continue to form, our meanings in the world. In this way, everything exists in relation to something else. Rather, everything that has gone into making up our identities derives its Meaning from something else (and here, meaning does not mean its signification, but its Meaning in terms of how we prescribe a reading to our experience of it). We understand things—people, places, emotions, objects, etc.—through the simultaneous understanding of what they are and what they are not; through their individual identity, as well as their identity (no longer individual) in relation to an other, as well as their identity as it is impressed upon/constituted by an other. In other words, we exist and experience meaning through “the unique event whose uniqueness and unity consist in multiplicity” (Nancy 5). In other words, we are comprised of intertextual moments that give us Meaning. Thus, the many layers, or incarnations, of our identity can never be fully known or completely read by anyone.

If we cannot be known—even to ourselves—in all of our complexity, how might we still Mean something to those who read us? In “Of Being Singular Plural,” Jean Luc Nancy talks about the concept of “our being-with-one-another” in which “...we are meaning in the sense that we are the element in which significations can be produced and circulate” (Nancy 1-2). In other words,

There is no meaning if meaning is not shared [...] Meaning
begins where presence is not pure presence but where
presence comes apart in order to be itself as such [...]
Being cannot *be* anything but being-with-one-another,

circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly
plural coexistence (Nancy 2-3).

In other words, opposition helps to create a greater understanding of ourselves because we must create that circulation of meaning, we must open ourselves up to a balance by weighing these similarities and differences against ourselves. We see this reflected in the letter that Keats wrote to George and Georgiana Keats, dated 2 January 1819. In it, he writes about learning to understand and enjoy Raphael's cartoons "By seeing something done in quite an opposite spirit" (*Selected Letters* 286). This ends up helping him develop his philosophy of Beauty, which I will discuss in a later chapter.

If we all exist in relation to one another, then we cannot ever truly have a single unchanging reading of ourselves. Just as we cannot control the way in which people choose to remember us, it is equally impossible to control the way in which they read/perceive us. How does this pose a problem to those with a romantic other who seek to define themselves? If they cannot identify a single discernible Meaning of one another, then they can only ever rely on their interpretations of one another to create some sort of understanding in their readings of one another. Those readings, then, might help them capture one another in the interstices of their constantly varying identities. However, in order to read each other they must first understand that it is *with* each other that their new readings of one another can be realized. As Derrida explains, it is only through our ability to "other" ourselves that we come to understand these readings/perceptions. We can only understand ourselves because we are not one with ourselves—through the othering, as well as through understanding that our own meaning is also constituted by our relation to the other. The identities of others impress on us, and we on them. It is through this

“movement” then, that we come to understand each other (*Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 13).

Though we may learn to find Meaning in our relation with those around us, there is no guarantee that they are reading, or seeing us, in the manner in which we want to be read or seen. There is no guarantee that the meaning others have of us is exactly the same meaning we have constructed of ourselves. Our reconciliation of this fact comes in the form of understanding that, at the very least, our every experience *is* our own. Nancy explores this idea when speaking of language. He states that “it is a question of losing oneself in order to be a part of it, with it, to be its meaning” (Nancy 3). In other words, we must let go of the idea that those who read us will see exactly what we want them to see. Once we have done that, we can better become a part of the experience of being-with-one-another, and it is in *that experience* that we can finally have something that truly is our own.

What does all of this mean then for us, the readers? It means that we, as beings unable to define ourselves through the methods in which we have become accustomed, must become comfortable with the idea that the borders of our own identities are not solid. Endless meanings can be derived from each iteration of ourselves. We should not seek to essentialize ourselves, to become a single truth which can be memorized. We should seek, rather, to be read and reread, to have our many meanings seen and celebrated. We are always already changing and unstatic by nature. We are always an Other to ourselves. We may find then, a certain sense of comfort in a constantly shifting sense of self, in a feeling of being in uncertainty, of being always Other, always redefined, always new. We should never stop asking who or why we are. Yet as we do, it

would us well to remember that perhaps the Self and the Other are not as separate or concrete as we may have once believed. We should instead revel in the multiplicitous glory of each incarnation of ourselves that we create, especially through the influence of each other.

Transgression, by nature, cannot be fully defined in any single definitive sense. Just as one of its many uses describes (or characterizes) the ways in which we as beings are shaped by the beings/world around us, so too do we reshape its characterizations to fit a myriad of circumstances. That is to say, we reconstitute its meaning in order to have that particular nuanced usage of it assist us in explaining some set of events or conditions. In a very general overarching sense though, transgression can be described as the violation of a norm, or even more generally as a sort of boundary pushing (both literally and figuratively). We transgress in the literal sense when we push the socially acceptable norms set by society (i.e. smoking in a No Smoking area). And we transgress figuratively, or metaphysically, when we consider the boundary pushing that occurs when our influence over others affects them irrevocably. This metaphysical transgression of influence is what I will be exploring in this section.

In an effort to explain my own conceptualization on the nature of transgression as I apply it here, I will attempt to elucidate the intersectionality of Kym Maclaren's ideas of Intimacy, Freedom/Unfreedom, and the idea of Becoming in her work "Intimacy as Transgression and the Problem of Freedom." In this way, I hope to demonstrate that transgression—as I understand it—is always already occurring in the metaphysical sense, making it an action which is inherently unfree as it causes the identity of beings to become influenced by one another via their intimacy, alterity, and understanding of each

other's subjectivity. Our ability to either actively adopt these influences, or do our best to reject them (even though we can never truly be free of them) is demonstrated through our grappling with the idea of how we differ from an other (alterity).

According to Kym Maclaren in her article "Intimacy as Transgression and the Problem of Freedom," critical phenomenology should work to free us from the systematic forces of oppression (i.e. racial, political, sexist, economic, legal institutions, etc.) that shape us. It should make us question their purpose and effect on our lives and identities. She makes a point of differentiating critical phenomenology from phenomenology itself—which typically seeks to answer questions about why we have a consciousness, and how it is that it is affected by our experiences in the world—because, according to her use of the term, critical phenomenology diverts from the theory itself in that it asks us to question how and why institutions shape us in an effort to free ourselves from their influence. In other words, if phenomenology, in a broad sense, seeks to question the nature of our consciousness and its experiences in our world as we live, then a critical phenomenology asks us to question how it is that larger institutions affect the manner in which we come to shape our identities. That is to say, critical phenomenology should free us from the institutions that inevitably shape us, because they are always already working on us, influencing us through the various aspects that form our way of being. To analyze each of these aspects of our identity critically as we wonder over their influence on our consciousness is to understand their influence and consciously reject or adopt said influence. For instance, we are always already shaped by the culture, language, geography, class etc. that we are born in to. In terms of Keats, this would account for why he was criticized by *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1817 as a poet of the Cockney School.

The critics believed him to be of a low class, too low to be composing poetry good enough for public consumption. They felt that he was inherently shaped by his class and upbringing, and was therefore incapable of escaping the baseness they accused him of belonging to. To them, no good poet would be one so poorly or informally educated. To Keats and his contemporaries, however, the matter of their education, class, upbringing, and use of language did not interfere with their ability to produce art or poetry. Though they undoubtedly accepted their roots in these influences, they chose to not be defined or limited by them. Thus, Keats did not allow for the fact that he was of the working class to identify him as anything other than a poet, of the “Cockney School” or otherwise.

But I digress. Maclaren characterizes critical phenomenology as something that does not only have to apply to the institutions that we are thrown into upon our birth. Instead, she seeks to explain that we can also use phenomenology to analyze the emotional institution of intimacy, and other such conventions that we enter into at times, because these too also shape our identity in major ways. Thus, an institution does not always have to be one that we are thrown into, but can also be one that we seek out ourselves in order to form a more “complete” sense of self.

In terms of her assumptions on the nature of transgression, Maclaren appears to use the term to describe how it is that our intersubjectivity functions on our formations of self. To her, transgression is less like boundary pushing and more like an invasion, assimilation, or colonization⁶ of one being by another—“...one’s experience is inevitably infiltrated and informed by other people’s behaviors and attitudes” (Maclaren 20). In

⁶ Maclaren uses the term colonization in her example of the child presenting its mother with a worm. “...in the particular example that we have given, we can see what could be called a ‘colonization’ of the child’s experience by his mother’s way of perceiving...” (Maclaren 23).

other words, our very presence in the life of another being, even if they are strangers to us initially, can and will alter them, just as they can and will alter us. Transgression then, is inescapable. It is always already occurring. Our own attitudes, perceptions, experiences, etc. all transgress the perception of self that another person has, and vice versa. This becomes complicated even further when we begin to think of the other that transgresses us as we exist. We recognize a difference between ourselves and the other, stemming from our understanding of alterity—the realization that we at times share commonalities with others but remain fundamentally and inherently different from them. This understanding of how we are the same yet different frames our interactions with them. That is to say, in knowing that we are different from the other, yet can also share some similarities with them, it allows us to be more open to the idea of their transgression on us because we understand that we are no longer isolate flecks in the infinitude of history. It is as Maclaren states: “...we do transgress into and transfigure others’ experiences, never leaving them entirely ‘free’ to make their own sense of the world. There is an inevitable violation by us of others’ perspectives: a determining and transforming of the meaning of their experiences...” (Maclaren 23-24). We share in each other, whether we accept that exchange of influence actively or not. This then leads to the idea of intimacy as integral to understanding transgression.

Intimacy, as an institution, is also inherently “unfree” in its nature. It is a sharing/impressing of influence and experience from one being to another—“But in fact we do learn from others [...] to be taken beyond our current sense-making capacities, and drawn into new relations to the world and to ourselves” (Maclaren 24). Thus, to Maclaren, intimacy is always transgressive because it constantly allows us different ways

of looking at the world through others and their experiences. The alterity of these experiences provide us with “new ways of finding the world configured and correspondingly into a recognition of new dimensions of reality heretofore unknown to us” (Maclaren 24). In other words, the transgression of an other into our sense of self is always already occurring via our intimacy with them, even when we do not actively adopt their influence. Our differences with these others allow us to perceive the world, as well as ourselves, with new layers of signification because other beings and their lived experiences—their lifeworlds, if you will—serve as lenses through which we alter our perceptions of the world and of ourselves.

According to Julian Wolfreys in the introduction to his book *Transgression*, we understand transgression as something that already exists and occurs, as something that “goes without saying.” In a way, you could say that Wolfreys is implying an “always already” nature to transgression. Like Maclaren, Wolfreys seems to believe that there is an inherent unfreedom that occurs when we think about transgression. In the opening of his introduction, he states that “[transgression] is the very pulse that constitutes our identities, and we would have no sense of our own subjectivity were it not for a constant, if discontinuous negotiation with the transgressive otherness by which we are formed and informed” (Wolfreys 1). In other words, it is through this act of influencing each other via our transgressions that we disrupt our sense of self and other, and in that exchange of influences, in that negotiation, we become different versions of ourselves that are informed by the subjecthood of an other. This is why transgression, as Wolfreys and Maclaren have noted, is such an integral part of how we construct and *embody* our

identity. And intimacy only amplifies this when we are transgressing influence with a romantic other to create new iterations/incarnations of identity.

In continuing to describe the ways in which he characterizes transgression, Wolfreys states that “Thinking the transgressive in mundane or quotidian ways involves the invocation of a static need to separate, to include and exclude, and so to draw limits or borders. And because we misapprehend in this fashion, transgression can happen again and again, in countless, surprising eruptions from within the very places that we seek to define as safe, controlled and patrolled” (Wolfreys 3). What this quote demonstrates to us is the nature of transgression that is “beyond the law.” In order to understand the unfreedom that Macalren addresses, Wolfreys speaks of transgression as a disruption that occurs to us, and from us, even from within the “safe places” that we construct. Even when we believe that we have created a sort of metaphysical border to separate ourselves from an other, that border is continually crossed by the people who influence us with their own subjecthood, just as we transgress them with our own influence. It is the nature of transgression, therefore, to never have a safe place to retreat to. But here is where my own thinking departs from the reasoning of Wolfreys. While I do agree with him that influence is always already occurring and that we cannot escape it by retreating to some safe space where it can no longer find us, I also believe that we can access a sort of metaphysical safety, a sense of sanctuary in the form of acceptance, when we experience intimacy in the form of love (and more specifically, romantic love, which is what I explore most through this thesis) with an other. That is to say, that when we are in love we find a metaphysical sanctuary in our romantic other. Though their intimacy with us inevitably causes transgressions of influence, we do not feel the need to place boundaries

or borders around ourselves. Love asks of us that we share our innermost selves with our partners, and that they return that sharing of themselves with us. If we do not need these borders then, then there is no need to find safety from the transgression of their influence, because it is that selfsame influence that gives us the courage and safety of absolute acceptance. A romantic other does not, or rather should not, make us feel as if we need to escape their influence, because their influence should ideally be what helps us become a different incarnation of ourselves.

Through these theoretical readings, I take transgression to mean a sort of invasion of influence over another being; a willing, reluctant, or even unconscious transmission of influence, if you will. And that influence is what assists or shapes our many incarnations/iterations of self. Additionally, hospitality, as it will be used henceforth, means the way in which we either accept or reject the influences of others as we compose new incarnations of ourselves.

According to Judith Still in her introduction to her book *Derrida and Hospitality: Theory and Practice*, she states that Derrida characterized hospitality by its transgressive nature. In this way, the act of trying to understand who we are and who the other is—through various methods of naming/categorizing/defining—complicates our understanding and performance of hospitality, because it asks us to question how we would treat a stranger (and their influence) that we may not necessarily feel comfortable being a “host” to. This in turn lends itself back to the idea of transgression in the sense that it is always already occurring, even when we think that we have prevented the other from shaping us in some way.

If hospitality is characterized by its transgressive nature, then it is all about crossing boundaries/thresholds as we come to different understandings of ourselves and others, especially when we question whether or not the other we are welcoming is one of our own (a lover, a friend, family, etc.), or if they are truly a stranger to us. Ultimately, this action of actively allowing others to transgress in our personal spaces is what relates Derrida's conceptualization of hospitality to Maclaren's ideas of transgression, intimacy, and freedom. While Maclaren's idea of transgression speaks to an invasion, assimilation, or colonization of one being by another, and the transgression that Still refers to when speaking of Derrida's hospitality is more a sense of boundary pushing or threshold crossing, the two still mesh together. If hospitality is always an act of transgression because it pushes boundaries/crosses thresholds (literally), then that act of admitting a stranger into our private spaces is akin to Maclaren's transgression in that we are actively allowing the other to alter our perceptions of self, other, and the world that we inhabit, through their presence. It is as Still states: "Hospitality in theory and practice relates to crossing boundaries [...] or thresholds [...] including those between self and other, private and public, inside and outside, individual and collective, personal and political, emotional and rational, generous and economic—these couples that overlap each other's territory without any one exactly mapping another." Additionally, when mentioning the various factors that can shape our performance of hospitality, Still writes that "...each needs to inform the other" (Still 7). Thus, this opposition—of factors, as well as of beings—creates our understandings of self, other, and the world.

Hospitality, intimacy, and transgression continue to form links throughout Still's book. In speaking about Derrida's understanding of hospitality, she writes, "...it is the

other within the self which interrupts the self. [Derrida] says of the self welcoming the other, and thus interrupting the self: ‘This division is the condition of hospitality.’” (Still 11) What this means is that hospitality, like Maclaren’s idea of transgression, is an interruption of the self because the other “invades” us and shapes us with their presence. It is through this structure of exchange between the self and other that we ultimately find our sense of intimacy and freedom challenged as we play host to the other. In allowing the other to enter our personal spaces, they transgress on our physical spaces, making us reshape our perceptions via the intimacy we experience when we come into contact with them. They also transgress on our psychological spaces as well, as their presence in our lives causes us to be influenced by their own perceptions and experiences that their lifeworld has given them. Whether we choose to accept this fact or not, we are always the host to the influence of an other.

Thus, hospitality of the influence of an other to our sense of self never closes, much like transgression never comes to a close. But how does the abject affect conditions of hospitality? If we can never close ourselves off to influences of others, how do we become shaped by the abject forces that demand to be hosted within us? In her book, *The Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva explores the idea of abjection, which helps us understand how it relates to transgression. She begins by stating that “There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (Kristeva 1). If abjection can be considered that which we find uncanny—something familiar yet strange—then there is no hope for acceptance because according to Kristeva, abjection is something that “cannot be

assimilated" (Kristeva 1). Due to the tension inherent in its nature then—the familiar that clashes with the strange—this means that abjection does not allow for transgression because it is constituted only by absolute rejection. How does this affect issues of transgressive hospitality though—the hospitality of influence on constructions of self?

Abjection, at least as Kristeva describes it, is a sense of the uncanny. She writes: "[abjection] does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects" (Kristeva 1). And it is here that we see how abjection plays a role in the transgressive hospitality of influence. It quickly becomes evident then that abjection, like transgression, is ambiguous and difficult to characterize. Or, as Kristeva puts it, "abjection is above all ambiguity" (Kristeva 9). In the case of abjection within hospitality though, we see that it *is* possible to reject the influence of an other that we absolutely do not accept. We *can* reject an influence we do not identify with, yet the fact that the object has touched our lives makes it a part of us already in our rejection of it. Abjection, therefore, is as ambiguous and unfree as transgression because it is the rejection of influences we do not want to play a host to, but inevitably encounter and become shaped by anyway in our rejection of it.

Returning to Judith Still, we note in the conclusion of her book the following line that she quotes from Flaubert⁷: "The obsession with coming to a conclusion is one of the direst manias" (Still 255). Through this quote, she explains that hospitality "assumes an opening *that can be closed*" (Still 255), and here is where I sense a departure from transgressive hospitality and how it informs the nature of transgression. Since acts of

⁷ In the conclusion of her book, Still cites the quote as coming from the French dictionary, *Le Petit Robert*, in its entry for the word *conclure*.

transgression are always already occurring, this implies that they will always already continue to occur. Therefore, there is no opening that can be closed. Once we are born, we continue to be transgressed via the unfreedom of our intimacy with others until we die, and even in death we are not done with transgression. As Flaubert so rightly notes, we have a mania for endings. Yet transgression challenges us in that it too has its own mania. It demands that we always remain open. Even in death we can never close.

The Atom-Like Structure of Identity

In an effort to aid my readers in understanding how I see and understand identity as being constructed, this section will take the work of my previous two sections and make it more visual by using an image that I created to explain it; I call it the Atom-Like Structure of Identity. It is how I conceive of identity as being constructed by influence, and how those influences shape us through their transgressions, even those influences that we do not wish to adopt but still form a part of our identity.

The reason I conceived of identity's "structure" in the form of an atom is because the most basic structure of all things is that of an atom. The human body is composed of approximately seven octillion, or "seven billion billion billion" (Jefferson Labs) atoms, and these molecules are constantly regenerating to make up our being. This reminds me of the Ship of Theseus—"a thought experiment that raises the question of whether an object that has had all of its components replaced remains fundamentally the same object" ("Ship of Theseus")—and how identity is similarly always in a constant state of change, being recomposed during our many incarnations of definition yet leaving us to remain ourselves, albeit a bit different. Much like the atoms that compose us, or the

thoughts behind the Ship of Theseus, identity's structure, as I conceive of it, must be a sort of "changing same"⁸. And the only way that I can picture that is in the most fundamental aspect of our being that quite literally composes us even though they are constantly regenerating to maintain us. Thus, I picture identity as an atom because it is the changing same of every incarnation of ourselves.

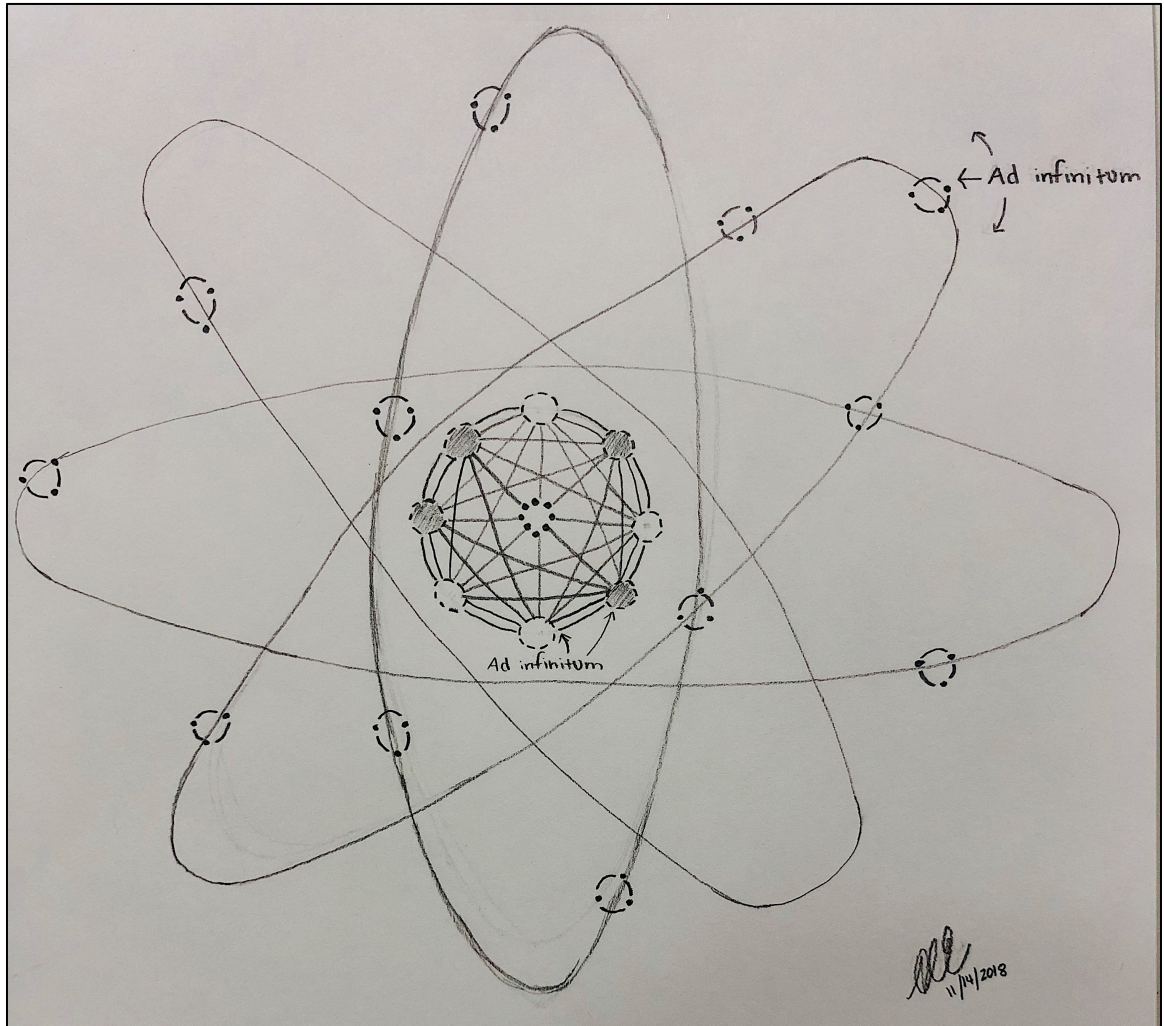


Figure 1. The Atom-Like Structure of Identity

⁸ I first heard the term "changing same" from my friend and fellow colleague, Ismael Santos during a conversation we were having with a group of our friends/fellow cohort members.

Key



Dots, Not Shaded

Your identity as a spectral, intertextual, palimpsest; your identity at any moment of redefinition; any incarnation of yourself; it is the constantly shifting sense of self.



Lines, Not Shaded

The parts of our lives (the influences) which once formed an incarnation, but which we no longer identify with.



Lines, Shaded In

The parts of our lives (the influences) which we identify with at any given moment in time; these grow/shift with us during each new moment of redefinition (incarnation).



Dots and Lines, Not Shaded

The way that people perceive/read us (Meaning); aspects which we may or may not choose to adopt/identify with.



Dots, Shaded In

It is the final definition/incarnation we had of ourselves, known only by ourself, which we leave behind to be constantly reinterpreted/read/perceived; it is the posthumous identity.

all
11/14/2018

Figure 2. Key to The Atom-Like Structure of Identity

In Figure 2, I included an image of “Dots, Shaded In” to represent what I call the posthumous identity. In the atom-like structure that appears in Figure 1, it would only appear at the center of the figure when a person has died. In Figure 1, the center of “Dots, Not Shaded” appears as such because I wanted to show how identity is constructed when we are alive.

Additionally, the reason I use open circles to represent each aspect of the atom-like figure is because to me they represent movement, and they are drawn open to show further movement within themselves. Just as we are reshaped and redefined by the aspects which we identify/don’t identify with, those selfsame aspects are also open to change. With time, all things are redefined, moved. It is as Nancy said, “there is no meaning other than the meaning of circulation ... this circulation goes in all directions of all the space-times opened by presence to presence” (Nancy 3).

III - BEAUTY AS A PHILOSOPHY OF TRUTH-MAKING

Keats Philosophizing About Incarnations of Identity

In order to begin to understand how it is that Beauty was Keats' way of philosophizing about identity as a process of truth-making, we must first start by defining, or rather, understanding what Keats' conceptualization of Beauty was. In order to do this, we must look to a variety of Keats' letters where he explores and develops this "mighty abstract Idea of Beauty."⁹ Though he is known primarily for his poetry, Keats actually left behind quite an impressive collection of letters, the most studied of which he began to write a few months before turning twenty-one.¹⁰ As John Barnard states in his Introduction to *John Keats: Selected Letters*, these letters "[move] like quicksilver from recording his everyday life to profound reflections on the nature of poetry or the imagination and back again to quotidian reality" (xvi). It is because of these profound reflections that his letters, more so than his poetry, are the best way to understand how Keats conceived of Beauty in a way that elevated it from a strictly aesthetic nature.

Before continuing any further, I will note that any capitalization of the word Beauty used throughout this thesis is done for consistency's sake to keep it in accordance to how Keats often wrote it in his own letters. Furthermore, I kept the capitalization of the word this way because I believe that Beauty as Keats conceived of it is quite different from beauty in a strictly aesthetic sense. That is to say, beauty spelled with a lowercase 'b' is beauty as itself, the aesthetic. However, Beauty spelled with a capital 'B' is this abstract idea that Keats had. As I will explain later on, this version of Beauty does not do

⁹ See Keats' letter to George and Georgiana Keats, dated 24 October 1818.

¹⁰ See the Introduction to *John Keats: Selected Letters*.

away with aestheticism entirely. Rather, it is the culmination of quite a few things. But I digress.

The first time we see Keats begin to think about this version of Beauty is in a letter to Benjamin Bailey dated 22 November 1817. In it he writes:

I am certain of nothing but of 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—for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of *essential Beauty* [...] The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream¹¹—he awoke and *found it truth*. I am the more zealous in this affair, because I have never yet been able to perceive how any thing can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning—and yet it must be.” (*Selected Letters* 70; emphasis added)

In this excerpt from the letter, we see how Keats began to think of Beauty beyond its aesthetic nature. In equating the Imagination to Adam's dream, and then stating that whatever the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth, it allows us to see a clear connection between Beauty and truth. In other words, if the Imagination is a form of truth, then whatever it perceives as Beauty—whether it existed before or not—must also be true to the person experiencing it. Thus, we find ourselves with the essential Beauty of

¹¹ A reference to John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, VIII, 309-11, 452-90.

which Keats speaks in his letter; an essential understanding of something derived from our perception of its Beauty.

In another book of his,¹² Barnard appears to argue that when Keats refers to Beauty it is in a sort of universal, all-encompassing version of truth, going on to state “Beauty is, perhaps, not even a sufficient truth, let alone the whole truth” (Barnard 2). However, in closely analyzing this letter, I believe that here Beauty is meant to mean a form of truth-making, not a finite Truth in and of itself. In other words, the experience of beauty is different for every individual experiencing it, and as such each interpretation, each experience creates in that person a certain sense of understanding, thinking, and/or feeling. In coming away from that experience, that person now has their own perception of what Beauty (as a method of understanding/creating new truths) is. This in turn allows for many truths to exist in a very objective sense, especially since everyone perceives both beauty (as aesthetic) and Beauty (as truth-making) differently.

Consider, for instance, the ending to “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” where Keats writes “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” (*Complete Poems* 283) Though there are various interpretations concerning who speaks these last lines, and to whom they are spoken,¹³ it can be argued that the real importance of these lines lies in the message that the speaker seeks to communicate to their audience, the idea that Keats had already developed in his letter two years prior to the publication of this poem—that Beauty is partially an exercise of truth-making according to the

¹² *John Keats* by John Barnard, published in 1987.

¹³ The four most frequently mentioned possibilities are: (1) poet to reader, (2) poet to urn, (3) poet to figures on the urn, and (4) urn to reader. See “Commentary for Pages 282-283” on page 470 of *John Keats: Complete Poems* by Jack Stillinger for more information.

experiences which shape our lives. And the fact that that is all we need to know signifies that our own personal truths/understandings are the only thing we need concern ourselves with deciphering.

Yet Beauty, as Keats saw it, is more than just truth-making. It is the culmination of truth-making and a balance of oppositions, all multiplied by the appreciation of aesthetic beauty. In other words, Keats' Beauty = (Truth-Making + a Balance of Oppositions) Aesthetic beauty. Consider the following two letters that Keats wrote to his brothers (dated the 21st and 27th of December 1817), in which he describes seeing Benjamin West's painting *Death on the Pale Horse*. In this letter, Keats describes how the painting itself is impressive, but its lack of intensity, its lack of opposition—in the form of balance between beauty and “disagreeables”—makes it lack a certain ability to help create an understanding of Beauty in the observer.

It is a wonderful picture, when West's age is considered;
but there is nothing to be intense upon, no women one feels
mad to kiss, no face swelling into reality. The excellence of
every art is its *intensity*, *capable of making all*
disagreeables evaporate from their being in close
relationship with Beauty and Truth—Examine King Lear,
and you will find this exemplified throughout; but in this
picture we have unpleasantness *without* any momentous
depth of speculation excited, in which to bury its
repulsiveness [...]

...

[S]everal things *dove-tailed* in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of *being in uncertainties*, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrarium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, *that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.* (*Selected Letters* 79-80; emphasis added)

In looking at West's painting, we can see what it is that Keats is referring to. While the painting itself does possess a decent balance of color, there is little to oppose the terrifying aspects of the art. What would this mean for an observer? The subject of the piece itself depicts the four horsemen of the apocalypse—Death, War, Famine, and Pestilence—and shows them wreaking havoc on the world. As Keats so rightly notes, there is nothing to oppose this horrifying imagery, nothing beautiful—like a face one feels mad to kiss—to remind the observer that even in horror there may be a reprieve. In other words, the juxtaposition is missing. For Keats, both the beautiful and the repulsive must exist as one—complementing and opposing each other—in order to make the piece

more intense, and a truly excellent artistic experience. It is when this piece shows that balance that an observer may formulate their own understanding of Beauty. Without opposition then, the observer only sees one side of the spectrum of possibilities for creating meaning. In only seeing horror, a mind may stop contemplating what it is observing because it cannot fathom finding beauty anywhere in its folds. However, with a hint of opposition to serve as a counterbalance for the harshness seen in this painting, an observer might then continue to ruminate on the many intertextual implications of the work of art, and fashion for themselves a sense or understanding of Beauty that only they can associate with the painting.

In other words, the sense of understanding our own truths through a balance of opposition—all while appreciating the aesthetics present in whatever we are observing—overcomes all other thinking. We only need to understand our own form of Beauty, and be satisfied in possessing that understanding while being aware of the existence of others, of which we must comfortably remain in uncertainties. The “dovetailing” of all these things then comprises Keats’ conceptualization of Beauty.

Keats understood the importance of creating juxtapositions throughout his many works in order to show how it is that a balance of oppositions could lend itself to explaining his philosophy of Beauty. Jack Stillinger also notes this consistent use of juxtapositions in his introduction to the book *John Keats: Complete Poems*. In it he writes about how Keats was often considered by those in his circle to be humble and wise (xv), yet he focused primarily on the poetic metaphor of flight to another realm by focusing heavily on dreams (xvi). In doing so, Stillinger states that Keats’ work exemplifies how it is that this opposition in and of itself—a wise and serious Keats who

was also fascinated by the idea of higher realities present in dreams—is a “paradox [and] chief component of the rich complexity of Keats’ best poetry” (xvi). He continues by stating that this “[literal] spatial conception of two realms in opposition [...] appears in a great many of the poems and can usefully serve as a device for relating poems, passages, and situations to one another in a view of what Keats’ work as a whole is preponderantly ‘about’” (xvi). Though Stillinger is speaking of Keats’ use of dreams to form higher realities (or new truths, if you will), his observations on the poet’s work also speak well towards the idea of opposition on its own. If a balance between dreams and reality can cause Keats, the subjects of his poetry, and his readers to achieve new higher realities because they are transitioning between two opposing spaces, then juxtaposition itself can also achieve such a feat. What I mean is that it is not the dreaming/awake paradigm that causes the realization of a higher understanding, but the actual opposition of two things which seem to contradict themselves.

Turning to the letters once more for example, we note in a letter to B.R. Haydon dated 8 April 1818, how it is that Keats continued to speak of, or at the very least hint at, this need for juxtaposition in order to generate new meanings. In this letter, Keats writes to Haydon about his own painting, “Christ’s Entry Into Jerusalem.” In it he writes:

Believe me Haydon, *your picture is a part of myself*—I
 have ever been too sensible of the *labyrinthian* path to
 eminence in Art (judging from Poetry) ever to think I
 understood the *emphasis* of Painting. The *innumerable*
compositions and decompositions which take place
 between the intellect and its thousands materials before it

arrives at that trembling delicate and snail-horned
perception of Beauty—*I know not your many havens of
intenseness*—nor ever can know them—but for this I hope
nought you atchieve is lost upon me...” (*Selected Letters*
138; emphasis added)

What we note in this letter is how Keats observes a certain type of balance present in the works that Haydon composes, and will most likely achieve once more in this painting. When he remarks on how each work contains innumerable compositions and decompositions, it shows that each layer of the painting—both literal and metaphorical—lends to the work’s overall balance, which will then lead to its “snail horned perception of Beauty.” The fact that Keats uses Beauty as the truth-making balance of oppositions here, amplified by aesthetic appreciation, signifies to us that he understood that even a juxtaposition of personal truths is necessary in achieving our own version or understanding of Beauty. This could be why he states that Haydon’s own havens of intenseness are lost to him, that he can never know them rather, and yet he hopes that this inability to understand Haydon’s own meanings (or truths) will not diminish the truths which he himself might decipher in his appreciation of Haydon’s work. Moreover, in saying that Haydon’s picture is a part of himself, Keats reifies his interpretation of Beauty by stating that the Haydon’s paintings are crucial to his understanding of a certain personal truth that is a part of him. The labyrinthian path to eminence in Art is then the constant weighing of opposing forces/ideas which shape the emphasis/understanding of whatever is being observed. In this letter, that means Haydon’s own art. However, the idea also applies to Keats’ own work.

What is more, this snail horned perception of Beauty is strikingly similar to that which the Golden ratio attempts to explain. The Golden Ratio “is found in the design and beauty of nature, [and] it can also be used to achieve beauty, balance and harmony in art and design.” (Meisner) As such, it coincides with Keats’ idea of Beauty in that it speaks of balance and harmony, such as the one present in a necessary use of juxtaposition to create a balance of oppositions. In Haydon’s painting, Keats most likely noted this juxtaposition being achieved through the use of the Golden Ratio, a combination of colors, and through the various expressions of those present as subjects observing Christ’s arrival in the Jerusalem depicted.

In terms of Keats’ poetry though, juxtaposition—necessary as a function of understanding his conceptualizations of Beauty—is most evident in his poem *Lamia*. Throughout the poem, we note many juxtapositions which appear throughout the story being told. Some of these include (but are not limited to): life and death; love and despair/loneliness; truth and deception/falsehoods; beauty and ugliness; & knowledge and inexperience. I, however, will be focusing primarily on the beginning of the poem, as well as on Lamia’s various transformations throughout the piece.

We first see the opposing use of love and despair when Hermes appears in the first stanza of the poem. As he searches for a nymph who is rumored to be of extreme beauty, he wanders about the forest “Breathing upon the flowers his passion new” (line 28) until he realizes that he cannot find her “And so he rested, on the lonely ground, / Pensive, and full of painful jealousies” (lines 32-33). Though Hermes and his nymph are not the central figures of the poem, Keats utilizes this couple at the start—not only as framing device for the story of Lamia and Lycius which will follow—but also to begin to

demonstrate to his readers how it is that juxtaposition will help create meaning throughout the rest of the poem. Here, the opposition is found in the fact that Hermes, full of love and desire, has poured all his energy into finding this nymph. However, when he cannot find her he stops and feels lonely, pensive, and jealous. In not having obtained his heart's desire immediately upon his search, Hermes is forced to realize that even he, a god, can be powerless in some respect. Unlike his rumored nymph, Hermes is not able to choose from Fancy's unlocked casket (line 20) the object of his affection. Rather than have what he wants immediately, he must wait, as mortals would, to obtain in. And in that wait—in that realization of love, which grows to cold jealousy when it is not immediately met by the warm love it seeks—Hermes comes to appreciate what his prize will be once Lamia grants it to him. That is to say, in having to wait for his nymph's love, Hermes learns the feeling of loneliness and despair at not finding her, and this in turn causes him to truly admire his nymph once he is able to see her.¹⁴ Thus, her absence causes him to appreciate her presence all the more.

Our next major instance of opposition occurs when we first encounter Lamia in her serpent form. Her description, and later transformation, is one which falls directly under the category of beauty and ugliness, though her complex and intricate description also hints at the juxtaposition of truth and deception/falsehoods.

She was a gordian shape of dazzling hue,
Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue;
Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard,

¹⁴ See lines 123-133 for context. In these lines, Hermes is so pleased at finally seeing his beloved nymph that he appears to burn with ardor for her, and it seems as if he cannot tell if his encounter with her is a dream or reality.

capable of being understood in contradiction. In other words, we only come to know Lamia and understand her because we have seen her in this form. She has already told Hermes that she used to be a woman, and when we first see her she is in this serpent form. When she is later transformed back into a woman and we watch her interact with Lycius, we gain a greater understanding of what may and may not be true about her. And by the end of the poem we are no longer certain which Lamia is in fact the truest form of herself, leading us to interpret her as best as we can through a balance of the oppositions present in her character throughout the poem.

Furthermore, Lamia appears, to me at least, to resemble something much closer to beautiful when she is in a serpent's form. As a snake, she is comprised of exotic animal patterns, vivid gemlike colors, and iridescent moons and stars. If aesthetic beauty could be truth on its own, then Lamia in her serpent form appears to me to be the truest and most beautiful form she takes in the poem. I say this because if we note her transformation into a woman a few stanzas later, we see her move from something beautiful (albeit strange) to something horrific.

Left to herself, the serpent now began
To change; her elfin blood in madness ran,
Her mouth foam'd, and the grass, therewith besprent,
Wither'd at dew so sweet and virulent;
Her eyes in torture fix'd, and anguish drear, 150
Hot, glaz'd, and wide, with lid-lashes all sear,
Flash'd phosphor and sharp sparks, without one cooling tear.

The colours all inflam'd throughout her train,
 She writh'd about, convuls'd with scarlet pain:
 A deep volcanian yellow took the place 155
 Of all her milder-mooned body's grace;
 And, as the lava ravishes the mead,
 Spoilt all her silver mail, and golden brede;
 Made gloom of all her frecklings, streaks and bars,
 Eclips'd her crescents, and lick'd up her stars: 160
 So that, in moments few, she was undrest
 Of all her sapphires, greens, and amethyst,
 And rubious-argent: of all these bereft,
 Nothing but pain and ugliness were left.
 Still shone her crown; that vanish'd, also she 165
 Melted and disappear'd as suddenly;
 And in the air, her new voice luting soft,
 Cried, "Lycius! gentle Lycius!"—Borne aloft
 With the bright mists about the mountains hoar
 These words dissolv'd: Crete's forests heard no more. 170

(Complete Poems 345-346)

Though Lamia becomes a beautiful woman after this horribly painful transformation, it is the transformation itself describing its effects on her form that show us what ugliness may actually lie beneath her beautiful woman's form later on in the poem. We are uncertain if the vision of the nymph that she allowed Hermes to see was

real or merely a dream, and I find myself uncertain of her beauty as a woman. Nowhere in the poem does it say how Lamia became beautiful after this disfiguring transformation; it only says that she “Melted and disappear’d” (line 166) at the end of the transformation, and in the next stanza she is then “a lady bright” (line 171). How then, does a marred body become beautiful without any intervention? My guess is through deception, and in this balance of oppositions—beauty and ugliness, as well as pity (when she is a serpent) and suspicion (when she suddenly becomes beautiful after her terrifying transformation)—we become aware of a higher reality, we fashion for ourselves a truth about Lamia that only we may see. And in this way, Lamia’s juxtapositions of character inform our various interpretations of her throughout the poem.

These juxtapositions then (as well as others present in Keats’ works) help us conceive of Beauty as more than purely aesthetic. This constant weighing of opposing forces transforms/reshapes our understanding of the world. It helps us achieve—or always move towards—a higher reality; a higher reality through which the possibilities for constructing meaning become endless.

The Chameleon Nature of Identity: The Formula Revised

If Beauty serves as the philosophy for arriving at new truths about ourselves or the world around us, how do we account for the uncertainties that make up our various truths? How do we account for love as it shapes and moves us? While Keats’ philosophy of Beauty sets a strong foundation, or “formula,” for how we construct our various definitions of self, it lacks some of the elements of identity building in this form. Keats philosophized of Beauty in such a way as to account for how we create ourselves through

the influence of people and experiences, but this formula that he sets out to explain in his letters lacks the inclusion of uncertainties in our various compositions of incarnations. And to that degree, I also feel that there is an absence of love in the formulation, especially since I see love as an integral aspect of identity and the various ways in which we arrive at our multiple definitions of it.

It is my belief that this original conceptualization of Beauty that Keats explained as a philosophy for truth-making (which the previous section lays out) needs to be revised then, in order to more completely explain how I understand love as being pivotal in the formation of new incarnations of self. The original formula that I surmised from the philosophy that Keats' letters sought to create is not completely done away with in this revised formula though. In my own reimagining of his philosophy, Beauty remains as the culmination of truth-making and a balance of oppositions, all multiplied by the appreciation of aesthetic beauty in order to create higher realities or greater understanding for ourselves. However, I now add to this by accounting for the idea of Negative Capabilities (being in uncertainties, about ourselves or the world around us), as well as the idea of love as a sanctuary of acceptance, where we can evolve through our various incarnations without the apprehension of not being accepted in our newest definition to hinder us. Thus, the "formula" for identity as I conceive of it, would look a little more like this:

$$\text{Incarnations of Identity} = (\text{Negative Capability} + \text{Truth-Making} + \text{Influence}) \text{ Love}$$

What this new formula stands for is that every new incarnation of identity requires a certain degree of being in uncertainties as we make new truths about ourselves that we *embody* as a result of the transgression of various influences upon us. We then find a

greater capacity for, and more willing acceptance of, the many changes that occur to our senses of self through love because we both anticipate and find the sanctuary of acceptance from our romantic other. This allows us to comfortably shift through our various incarnations without the anxiety of non-acceptance.

IV - THE SANCTUARY OF LOVE

Keats Before Fanny

“I hope I shall never marry.”

– John Keats in a letter to his brother and sister-in-law, George and Georgiana Keats. 17

September 1918 (*Selected Letters* 417)

The Romantic poet who inspired love in me before I ever even knew its power for myself did not always believe in love quite so fondly. In fact, he rather enjoyed mocking it, as well as those who found themselves deeply enveloped in it. Before he met and fell in love with Fanny Brawne some time in the fall of 1818 (between August and December), Keats believed firmly that the only love of his life should be his mistress Poesy. In a letter to his brother and sister-in-law, George and Georgiana Keats, written 24 October 1818, Keats expressed his desire to never marry, and instead take the many muses of nature as substitutes for his wife and children.

Notwithstanding your Happiness and your recommendation

I hope I shall never marry. Though the most beautiful

Creature were waiting for me at the end of a Journey or a

Walk; though the Carpet were of Silk, the Curtains of the

morning Clouds; the chairs and Sofa stuffed with Cygnet's

down; the food Manna, the Wine beyond Claret, the

Window opening on Winander mere, I should not feel—or

rather my Happiness would not be so fine, as *my Solitude is*

sublime. [...] I melt into the air with a voluptuousness so

delicate that *I am content to be alone*. These things,

combined with the opinion I have of the generality of women—who *appear to me as children to whom I would rather give a Sugar Plum than my time, form a barrier against Matrimony which I rejoice in.*

I have written this that you might see I have my share of the highest pleasures, and that though I may choose to pass my days alone I shall be no Solitary. You see there is nothing spleenical¹⁵ in all this. The only thing that can ever affect me personally for more than one short passing day, is any doubt about my powers for poetry—I seldom have any, and I look with hope to the nighing time when I shall have none. I am as happy as a Man can be—that is, in myself I should be happy if Tom was well, and I knew you were passing pleasant days. Then I should be most enviable—with the yearning Passion I have for the beautiful, *connected and made one with the ambition of my intellect.*

(*Selected Letters* 258-259; emphasis added)

In this passage we see a very different man from the one who later wrote that he was miserable without his love and could only “breathe in that dull sort of patience that cannot be called Life” whenever they were apart (*Selected Letters* 381). In his early

¹⁵ “*spleenical*: OED’s sole ‘rare example: Keats’s nonce word returns ‘splenetical’ to its physiological roots.” Text quoted directly from footnote one for spleenical in John Barnard’s *Selected Letters* on page 259.

manhood then, Keats felt more inclined to focus on his art, setting aside the business of falling in love with women for as long as he could. As he stated in his letter, he would have preferred to give women a sugar plum over his time because he felt they were too childish for him. He was happy in his solitude, content to have only his friends, family, and work as the companions of his life. Before Fanny Brawne changed the compositions of his thoughts on love, Keats seemed to be a tremendous cynic about it. Take for instance the letter he wrote to George and Georgiana Keats the 17 September 1819, where he comments on his friend William Haslam, who at the time was in love with the woman who would later become his first wife:

I saw Haslam. He is very much occupied with love and business, being one of Mr. Saunders' executors and lover to a young woman. He showed me her picture by Severn. I think she is, though not very cunning, too cunning for him.

Nothing strikes me so forcibly with a sense of the ridiculous as love. A man in love I do think cuts the sorriest figure in the world; queer, when I know a poor fool to be really in pain about it, I could burst out laughing in his face. His pathetic visage becomes irresistible. Not that I take Haslam as a pattern for lovers; he is a very worthy man and a good friend. His love is very amusing.

Somewhere in the Spectator is related an account of a man inviting a party of stutterers and squinters to his table. It would please me more to scrape together a party of

lovers—not to dinner, but to tea. There would be no
fighting as among knights of old. (*Selected Letters* 417;
emphasis added)

Though he does not direct the language at his friend, Keats describes love as ridiculous, as something which only poor fools would allow themselves to be a part of due to how absurdly men in love behave. Just months before the letter's composition, Keats had written a poem titled "And what is Love—It is a doll dress'd up" in which he also expressed his general dislike of love. Though no exact month of composition is given for this poem, the Stillinger text of *Complete Poems*—which lists the poems in approximate chronological order¹⁶—has it after "Nature withheld Cassandra in the skies" (written in in September 1818) and right before "'Tis the 'witching time of night'" (written 14 October 1818). This places this poem right in the center of the timeline for him meeting Fanny Brawne. And as evidence from the letters show, Keats was not immediately taken by her. In fact, he seemed to express some dislike of her, at least at first.¹⁷ This accounts for why,

¹⁶ See the Introduction to *John Keats: Complete Poems* on page xiii.

¹⁷ See *John Keats: Complete Poems* page 273. In a letter to George and Georgiana Keats dated 16 December 1818 he writes "[Fanny] is I think beautiful and elegant, graceful, silly, fashionable and strange. We have a little tiff now and then—and she behaves a little better, or I must have sheered off." This demonstrates to us that he was quite vexed by her at times despite finding her charming as well. In another letter to them dated 25 December 1818, he writes of his continued fascination with, and annoyance at, her: "Shall I give you Miss Brawne? She is about my height—with a fine style of countenance of the lengthened sort—she wants sentiment in every feature [...] She is not seventeen—but she is ignorant—monstrous in her behaviour, flying out in all directions—calling people such names that I was forced lately to make use of the term *Minx*—this is I think not from any innate vice, but from a penchant she has for acting stylishly—I am however tired of such style and shall decline any more of it. She had a friend to visit her lately—you have known plenty such—her face is raw as if she was standing out in a frost; her lips raw and seem always ready for a Pullet—she plays the Music without one sensation but the feel of the ivory at her fingers. She is a downright Miss without one set off—We hated her and smoked her and baited her and I think drove her away" (*Complete Poems* 278-279).

even a year later, he was still writing letters and poems that reflected his dislike of love, as well as being in love. In “And what is Love?—It is a doll dress’d up” he writes:

And what is love? It is *a doll dress’d up*
For idleness to cosset, nurse, and dandle;
A thing of soft misnomers, so divine
That *silly youth doth think to make itself*
Divine by loving, and so goes on
Yawning and doting a whole summer long
(*Complete Poems* 220-221; emphasis added)

As we can tell from the language of the first six lines in the poem, Keats felt as if love was a thing for people who were too idle and in need of something to do to make themselves feel important. It was a distraction, something to keep people occupied in some way when, in reality, they were wasting their time. As the rest of the poem expresses, Keats initially viewed love as a thing to play at, like children imagining themselves as heroes or queens when playing games of make-believe. Before he felt the warm glow of love in his own breast for Fanny, Keats seemed to believe that it did not transform us for the better. Instead, it made people seem silly, childish even, as they allowed themselves to be swept up in it (noted by the repetition of the exclamation “Fools!” in lines 11 and 15; see *Complete Poems* 221). Unsurprisingly, Keats notes his own shift in thinking when he composes the poem “What can I do to drive away” for Fanny in 1819.

Where shall I learn to get my peace again?
To banish thoughts of that most *hateful* land,

Dungeoner of my friends, that *wicked* strand
Where they were *wreck'd* and live a *wrecked* life;
That *monstrous* region, whose *dull* rivers pour
Ever from their *sordid* urns unto the shore,
Unown'd of any *weedy-haired* gods;
Whose winds, all *zephyrless*, hold *scourging* rods,
Iced in the great lakes, to *afflict* mankind;
Whose *rank-grown* forests, frosted, black, and blind,
Would fright a Dryad; whose *harsh* herbag'd meads
Make lean and lank the starv'd ox while he feeds;
There flowers have no scent, birds no sweet song,
And great unerring Nature once seems wrong.

(*Complete Poems* 375; emphasis added)

The beginning of the poem sings praises of his love, Fanny, as a “brilliant queen” that has ensnared him. Though he loves her, he is tormented by the fact that he is becoming the very thing he once despised: a man in love. In these lines from the poem, Keats utilizes harsh and cruel words to describe a life of being in love. It is a wretched island that is bereft of all good things, plagued by heinous imagery and unforgiving landscapes. It is not a beautiful, lush, paradise. It is a nightmarish place that one should never want to find themselves stranded in. And yet, he is its sole inhabitant. But the island is not hell, nor does he regret stumbling upon it. These lines exist within the poem, rather, to demonstrate to us that he recognized his old patterns of thought—was perhaps still trying to cling to them as he felt his old beliefs slipping away from him. Where once Keats

might have believed that love was abysmal—a prison of the heart, mind, and soul—he soon changed his beliefs when he began to feel Fanny’s influence pressing upon him.

O, for some sunny spell
To dissipate the shadows of this hell!
Say they are gone, — with the new dawning light
Steps forth my lady bright!

[...]

And let me feel that warm breath here and there
To spread a rapture in my very hair, —
O, the sweetness of the pain!
Give me those lips again!

(Complete Poems 375-376)

It is almost as if her mere presence in his life was enough to melt away all thoughts of negativity. In these lines above we note how the reappearance of Fanny is enough to chase away the hellish thoughts that made him dislike love before he met her. Here, hell is no longer being in love; hell is existing in a world without it after having known its pleasure. In the final lines of the poem we begin to see Keats slowly give way to his transformation, allowing himself to fully accept the influence of his darling over him. Love altered John Keats, allowing him to see that it could be an inspiration, and not a hindrance.

Keats In Love

“Ah! dearest love, sweet home of all my fears / And hopes and joys and panting
miseries...”

—John Keats in his poem “To Fanny” (*Complete Poems* 376)

No matter how often we select it as the theme of any given poem, novel, or work of art, an exact definition of love cannot be achieved no matter how often we attempt to describe it. In Plato’s *Symposium*, Aristophanes describes love the process of finding your other half. In Sonnet 116 by William Shakespeare, love is described as being steadfast, ever present no matter the circumstances that lovers might find themselves in. And in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s essay, “On Love,” he writes that:

“[Love] is that powerful attraction towards all that we conceive, or fear, or hope beyond ourselves, when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void, and seek to awaken in all things that are, a community with what we experience within ourselves. If we reason, we would be understood; if we imagine, we would that the airy children of our brain were born anew within another’s; if we feel, we would that another’s nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own; that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips quivering and burning with the heart’s best blood. This is Love. This is the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with

every thing which exists. We are born into the world, and there is something within us which, from the instant that we live, more and more thirsts after its likeness.” (*Shelley’s Poetry and Prose* 503-504).

It is my personal belief that Shelley spoke his definition of love best. It is the search for an other who will be the response to what we sense we are missing. If we lack reason, our lover will help us grow to the point of being understood. If we lack sentiment, our lover will thaw the deep frozen recesses of our soul and help us bring forth the warmth of expression. It is what we long for; understanding and acceptance returned in full. Love, as Shelley describes it, is the process of becoming. It is the ability to encounter the world and its many influences through the eyes of another consciousness. Despite these changes that we encounter with our romantic other when we are in love, Shelley also recognizes that love is a haven of acceptance. As he so rightly notes:

We dimly see within our intellectual nature a miniature as it were of our entire self, *yet deprived of all that we condemn or despise*, the ideal prototype of every thing excellent and lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man. Not only the portrait of our external being, but an assemblage of the minutest particles of which our nature is composed; *a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness; a soul within our own soul that describes a circle around its proper Paradise, which pain and sorrow and evil dare not*

overleap. To this we eagerly refer all sensations, thirsting that they should resemble or correspond with it. The discovery of its antitype; *the meeting with an understanding capable of clearly estimating our own; an imagination which should enter into and seize upon the subtle and delicate peculiarities which we have delighted to cherish and unfold in secret; with a frame whose nerves, like the chords of two exquisite lyres, strung to the accompaniment of one delightful voice, vibrate with the vibrations of our own*; and of a combination of all these in such proportion as the type within demands; this is the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends; and to attain which, it urges forth the powers of man to arrest the faintest shadow of that, *without the possession of which there is no rest nor respite to the heart over which it rules*.
(*Shelley's Poetry and Prose* 504; emphasis added).

Love allows us to dream of achieving an ideal form of ourselves. True, we may never arrive at it, but being in love allows us to dream of this ideal form all the more because we suddenly sense that no matter how many times we change how we define ourselves, we will always be accepted. Our romantic other, in being like the mirror of our soul—reflecting back at us a shining acceptance of all that we once secretly shifted through as we fought to conceal our redefinitions of self for fear of rejection—then becomes the selfsame feeling of acceptance that we crave when we change how we define who we are.

Without this haven of acceptance, there is no rest. The incarnations will keep coming, but they will come with the price of hesitation and doubt. Love, as I see it then, is a metaphysical sanctuary that we turn to when we shift through our many incarnations of identity. It is the haven of acceptance that Shelley alludes to. And when we feel, at long last, our weary consciousness rest in the security of being accepted, we may even go through our shifts more readily as we open up to and become more receptive of the many influences that shape us. Love, then, is a sanctuary in which we feel comfortable shifting through our many incarnations as we attempt to grow, or become, towards that ideal vision of ourselves.

It is impossible to know exactly when John Keats decided that he wanted to become a poet. First apprenticed to an apothecary-surgeon when he was only sixteen years old, Keats studied medicine in the early years of his life until he reached the age of twenty-one. After passing his medical exams in July of 1816, Keats abandoned his medical training to pursue the lifeblood of his passion: poetry. As Jack Stillinger notes in both his introduction and chronology of Keats' life in his book, *John Keats: Complete Poems*, Keats produced an unprecedented amount of written work between his setting out to become a poet in 1816, and his early death from the family disease of tuberculosis in 1821. In those four short years of his life that he was able to spend pursuing his art, Keats' maturity as a writer skyrocketed, most especially in the year of 1819 when he produced the greatest volume of his works (numbering at least thirty-four poems) as well as his most enduring, "constituting an astonishing outpouring that includes some of the most famous poems in the language" (*Complete Poems* xiv). It is no coincidence that this

Great Year¹⁸ is also when he happened to meet the love of his life, Fanny Brawne. If my idea of love and how it serves as a metaphysical sanctuary of acceptance is true, then Keats' rapid ascension to poetic maturity is proof that he found more than just a muse in Fanny. Through their love, he also found the haven of acceptance that he craved, the sense of security that was necessary for him to shift through various incarnations of his identity as he composed his great works and grappled with the many philosophies that he ruminated over in his letters to family and friends. Evidence of this continual shift in perception/thought during this time of his life exists in the way that he changed his mind about love,¹⁹ believing at first that it was a pastime for idle fools until he felt its greatness for himself and suddenly believed that he could not live without it. We even see this change reflected in his poetry. In his earlier works, Keats often wrote about subjects that would have been considered more masculine. Consider for instance his poem "Give me women, wine, and snuff", completed in 1815 (*Complete Poems* 18). As he struggled to emerge on a scene where such extraordinary writers like Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge had been writing about politics, war, and women²⁰ for a long time, it makes sense that Keats felt the need to identify himself in a hyper masculine way in an attempt to capture the attention and respect of his poetic predecessors. He even wrote to male

¹⁸ "Although Keats was increasingly troubled by sore throats, September 1818 marked the beginning of what has come to be called the Great Year; he wrote, consecutively, "The Eve of St Agnes", "The Eve of St Mark", "Ode to Psyche", "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", "Ode to a Nightingale" and also "Ode on a Grecian Urn", "Ode on Melancholy", "Ode on Indolence", "Lamia", "The Fall of Hyperion", and "To Autumn". This outpouring of major poetry is unmatched in English." (*The Keats-Shelley House* online "John Keats 1795-1821")

¹⁹ See previous section titled "Keats Before Fanny."

²⁰ It is my personal opinion that, of all the Romantic writers I have read, none have written so freely, passionately, and unabashedly about being in swooning love with a woman as Keats did. I always detect some form of masculine restraint in the love poems of other male Romantics—like Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley—that I have never been able to detect in Keats' later works.

muses as first, such as in “Ode to Apollo” which he completed in 1815 as well (*Complete Poems* 8). After he encountered and fell in love with Fanny Brawne though, Keats began to undergo some serious changes to his person, as well as to his poetry. Where first he was masculine for the sake of machismo, a young Keats in love became more gallant, expressing his love and tenderness freely in his letters to Fanny, as well as in the poems that were inevitably and undoubtedly inspired by her. His poetry even became more dominated by female muses as we note in his later compositions, such as in “Ode to Psyche” (*Complete Poems* 275).

In analyzing Keats’ poem “Ode to Psyche” closely, we see how love—quite literally in this case, as Cupid is Psyche’s lover—creates a sense of metaphysical sanctuary through acceptance, and that this acceptance is what makes us feel comfortable enough to become/shift through various incarnations of identity. For Psyche this is doubly true, as being Cupid’s lover allows her to transform (according to the myth, and in the eyes of the speaker as well) into a goddess herself, thus representing a new incarnation/definition for herself. When the poem begins, the speaker addresses Psyche as a goddess upon seeing her, and later states that she is the loveliest of “all Olympus’ faded hierarchy” (*Complete Poems* 275, line 25) even if she was the “latest born” (line 24) and “too late for antique vows” (line 36). Since she was not deemed a goddess early enough to be worshiped in the old ways, the speaker states that he will be her priest, that he will provide the temple (within his own mind) for her to be worshipped in, allowing her to experience the adoration that a true goddess deserves.

Since Psyche is Cupid’s lover, I interpret that to mean that love (incarnate in her case) influences us to the point of redefinition. According to the popular Greek myth,

Psyche began her life as a mere mortal woman, and it was only after many trials and tribulations that she was permitted to marry Cupid and join the gods of Olympus. Thus, it is only after Psyche falls in love with Cupid, and becomes a different version of herself through her love of him, that she can be referred to as a goddess.

In returning our observations back to Keats' life, we see evidence of how his love with Fanny allowed him to redefine himself in many ways due to their love giving him the ability to shift through his various incarnations until, like Psyche, he was transformed into something different and far greater than if he had never known the love of his romantic other at all. In a letter to Richard Woodhouse that is dated 27 October 1818, Keats writes about how it is that his identity is shaped by the influence of others. He states: "When I am in a room with people, if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then, not myself goes home to myself, but the identity of every one in the room begins to press upon me, so that I am in a very little time annihilated" (*Selected Letters* 263). What this demonstrates to us is that incarnations of identity are affected greatly by those who surround us, and this is especially the case with a romantic other. We see this in the way that Keats writes to Fanny in his many letters to her. Take for instance his letter to her, dated 25 July 1819, where he writes: "You absorb me in spite of myself—you alone" (*Selected Letters* 387). Or one he penned the 16 August 1819 where he writes that "a few more moments thought of [her] would uncrystalize and dissolve [him]" (*Selected Letters* 396). What these works show is that love, in all its power, possesses the ability to make us redefine ourselves continually, as well as provides us with the sanctuary of acceptance that allows us to go through these many shifts in our incarnations. As the quote at the beginning of this sections states, "Ah! dearest love,

sweet *home* of all my fears / And hopes and joys and panting miseries...” (*Complete Poems* 376; emphasis added), Keats felt that Fanny was the home, the sanctuary in which all his various incarnations could find acceptance.

Another of Keats’ poems, which speaks to the idea of love as a metaphysical sanctuary, is “Lamia.” When Lamia finds acceptance from her lover Lycius, it reifies the fact that she no longer identifies with the serpentine form that she originally had at the beginning of the poem. Through Lycius, Lamia further *embodies* her belief that she is a beautiful woman. However, when the sanctuary of acceptance is gone towards the end of the poem, both lovers suffer the consequences of not being able to reconcile their current incarnation of identity without the other. During the banquet for their marriage, Apollonius, Lycius’s friend, dissolves Lamia’s elaborate illusions so that Lycius can see her for what Apollonius believes she really is, a deceiver. This then causes the lovers to end their romance. In the poem both lovers perish (Lamia by dissolving and Lycius by dying) and this serves as a symbolic representation of how the end of love as a metaphysical sanctuary challenges us to redefine ourselves once more, sometimes at the risk of completely muting and refusing to accept our previous incarnation of identity in order to begin anew again. This is why Lycius dies, because he cannot imagine himself without the woman who had fallen “into a swooning love of him” (*Complete Poems* 347). He even states so himself in the poem, telling Lamia that he would perish if she ever left him (*Complete Poems* 348, lines 259-260). The reason that Lamia dissolves then is because she also cannot accept returning to her previous definition of self as a serpent. Rather than move forward and find another love that will accept her, she can only return

to the form of the serpent (presumably), and therefore dissolves instead. It is as if she would rather cease existing than reclaim her previous incarnation.

What do we do when we can no longer be ourselves? What happens to our sense of self when the sanctuary of love comes to an end, is disrupted by jealousy or by a separation of lovers? In a letter to Fanny that Keats wrote 25 July 1819, Keats writes passionately to her about how much he loves her. In this one letter, we see Keats in various lights, both as the ardent admiring lover, and as a man who still harbored many insecurities that even love could not erase or mute from his perceptions of himself. This is evident in the way that he writes “My dear love, I cannot believe there ever was or ever could be any thing to admire in me especially as far as sight goes—I cannot be admired, I am not a thing to be admired” (*Selected Letters* 387). Even though he found acceptance and love in Fanny, love could not completely eradicate how he viewed himself. This could be why in later letters Keats showed signs of great jealousy whenever he was apart from Fanny.²¹ In another letter written towards the end of his life in May 1820, we see Keats’ jealousy get the best of him again. In this letter he writes: “Do not live as if I was not existing—Do not forget me [...] you must think of no one but me” (*Selected Letters* 528). At this point in time Keats and Fanny would have been spending vast amounts of time apart due to his illness. In this absence of security in her love then, in not being able to frequently affirm it, his identity as her lover began to dissolve and complicate his current incarnation. He knew that he loved her, ardently, fully, more completely than

²¹ At this point in his life, Keats was probably self-medicating with mercury for symptoms of tuberculosis, or some other such unspecified ailment. It is also very possible that the treatment he was giving himself could have caused the adverse reactions that made him very jealous toward the end of his life. See the “Chronology of Keats’s Life” in the *Selected Letters* for more regarding the timeline of his illness. See also “Mercury sent John Keats to an early grave” by Nicholas Roe on *The Telegraph* online.

even the word complete could describe, and yet he felt his current incarnation slip from him just a little. Without Fanny, Keats would undoubtedly still have been a poet, but even Keats seemed to recognize that Fanny gave him a greater purpose—"I see life in nothing but the certainty of your Love" (*Selected Letters* 528).

V - CONCLUSION

“You see what a many words it requires to give any identity to a thing I could have told you in half a minute.” –John Keats in a letter to his brother and sister-in-law, George and

Georgiana Keats. 18 September 1819 (*Selected Letters* 421)

In this thesis, I proposed to explain how it is that the life and work of John Keats assist us in answering the question of how we create ourselves through the presence of others. I aimed to do this through analysis of the work that his relationship with Fanny Brawne, the greatest and only love of his life, inspired. In doing so, I hoped to prove that romantic love creates a sort of metaphysical sanctuary for us to “inhabit” as we shift through the various incarnations of our identity throughout our lives. By working primarily with the theories of phenomenology and transgression, I wanted to demonstrate how Keats’ rapid development as a poet was made possible through the sanctuary of acceptance that his love for Fanny Brawne afforded him. In closely analyzing his works, as well as the works of various theorists, I aimed to illustrate how I conceive of identity as a continual rewriting of the self, exemplifying how new incarnations of identity are achieved through a more accelerated process of redefinition when we are in love, and are thus able to create new truths about ourselves that become part of each new incarnation/definition of self.

What I hope this research has yielded is that love serves as a haven, a sort of catalyst even, for rapid redefinitions of our own sense of self due to the fact that we find both strength and the safety of acceptance in our romantic other. Furthermore, the act of two beings falling in love is a process of creating new truths—about ourselves as well as about the world around us—and this truth-making process makes us more open and

receptive to change (be it of other things, or of ourselves) because the anxiety of not being accepted for who we are after a new redefinition of self is no longer as high a threat when we anticipate automatic acceptance from our partner.

Identity, the manner in which we come to understand it, and the manner in which we manage to construct it can become complex matters. We are so deeply entwined in our world and influences that we truly cannot form definitions of ourselves without deriving our meaning through multiple relations, and yet we somehow try to remain static even though we understand that we as beings cannot be. There are so many connections, so many changes that occur within us—especially in the interstices of our conscious moments of definition—that we are always already shifting towards the next incarnation. It is no wonder that we crave essentiality. But that is not the nature of identity. In our many exchanges we come to find that in place of essentiality we can achieve a sense of peace in the form of acceptance through love, allowing us to more readily shift through the various definitions of ourselves that we encounter as we live and breathe through our very existence.

I was a very different person when I first encountered the works of John Keats. At the time, I was sold on the idea of love as a fairytale. I believed, with every ounce of my girlish youth, that love transformed us, transcended us even, and made us feel whole. Life and its experiences have long since taught me that love is so much more than that. I am never the same person twice when I reread Keats. In fact, I was a very different person at the start of this research than the person I am at present, writing this conclusion. I am not the same, ever, and have somehow managed to always redefine myself in ways I cannot even begin to name. I too have felt the anxiety of essentiality. I too have forced myself

onto the neat list of words that were meant to describe me, only to become frustrated when I came back to myself and saw that the list had changed. I no longer need that concreteness. In fact, I feel as if I might even fear it. What I crave now is the love that moves me, that inspires me to grow as I shift through the many different iterations of myself that will inevitably alter and shape me for the rest of my life. That selfsame love watched me as I wrote this thesis. It was a witness to the many iterations of myself that I have long since given way to since my research first began. I have changed and shifted and redefined myself in an infinite number of ways since then, and each new definition of self has been more assured, more calm, more at ease. Like Keats with Fanny, I have found a home in which I can lay down all my fears and anxieties as I become the next incarnation of myself. I have found a great love. And it has moved me.

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