John Keats’ Poetic Vision Of Mortality And Immortality

John Keats’ poetic vision, derived from his notion of negative capability, encourages an alternative vision of the individual as capable of perceiving and operating beyond any presupposed capacity through the immortal literature, thereby preserving his emotional sensations and intellectual thoughts on beauty and knowledge. Influenced by her postmodern context, Campion’s vision broadens the scope of Keats’ poetry to reimagine Fanny as greater than her Romantic literary manifestation and validate her as an artist in her own right. While Campion resonates with Keats’ poem “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” in her exploration of momentary beauty through imagination, she extends this idea to urge the individual to consider the mortal constraints that hinder perfection and ideal experience. Campion also reimagines Keats’ poem “To Autumn”, to represent the bucolic environs that progressively allow him to accept transition and ambiguity as inherent to life, connecting this to her postmodern anxieties about achieving certainty within a fragmented and uncertain sociopolitical milieu.

Contextual personal instability leads Keats to imaginatively transcend the mutable realities of mortality through an urge to preserve momentary beauty before it’s inevitable decline. In La Belle Dame Sans Merci, the bleak wintery setting of the ballad reflects the ambiguous illness of the Knight, subverting the traditional medieval myth of the health and chivalrous machismo of the male protagonist. The line, 'The sedge has wither'd from the lake / And no birds sing!', symbolises Keats’ awareness of impending finitude, adding uncertainty to the archetypal tale of the Knight with a clearly defined quest, thus creating an elegiac atmosphere which mourns the instability inherent in life. Contextually the poet, still shadowed in mourning for his brother Tom and was reckoning with the symptoms of his own fatal illness which served to highlight the intrinsic nature of suffering within human life, rendered meaningless by the inevitability of death. The Knight characterises his lover as a “faery’s child” the diction of which heightens her unreality and reflects his escapist desire to use an idealised, passionate romance as a mechanism to disengage from mortal concerns. However, life with the “lady” is associated with the vitality of spring: the visual imagery of meadows containing flowers from which to make a ‘garland’ and bracelets, and the embrace of earthy sexuality connoted by the reference to the female “fragrant zone.” The tension within the poem stems from the inherent conflict between Keats’s yearning to embrace the mortal experience of beauty and love yet also retain poetic immortality through preserving aesthetic value. Paradoxically, despite the illusory status of his lover, the Knight becomes grounded within the human experience through his commemoration of the vision of artistic beauty contained within her female form, the parallelism, “Her hair was long, her foot was light, /And her eyes were wild”, capturing the state of negative capability that occurs when the individual focuses upon the world of sensation. The regular rise and fall of the iambic tetrameter reflects a steady heartbeat, exemplifying the poem’s comprehensive theme of remaining connected to the physical body whilst being inspired to capture the immortal passion for the beauty of femininity. Keats’s conflicted context was the provocation for a reflection on his poetic vision as explored in the poem’s examination of mortality and immortality and the latter’s achievement through a focus on capturing aesthetic value.

Through cinematographic art, Campion similarly aims to construct an imaginative rendition of reality that also seeks to preserve beauty in immortal art but also functions as a tool to urge the individual to process their reality and its societal constraints. By utilising her signature auteur

style, Campion connects to Keats' immortalisation and value of beauty through filmic allusion to Impressionist painters during the scene where Keats and Fanny stroll through the pastoral landscape, playfully posing as Tuts turns to gaze at them. Visually, Bright Star as a period film offers a lushly textured evocation of natural settings in which the pictorial conventions of art cinema and of the heritage film are brought together. The text intertextually features 'Dutch' styled interiors which are contrasted with gardens and landscapes inspired by Monet; there are also Vermeer-like contrasts between light and shade, an emphasis on the passages between indoor and outdoor spaces, bright shafts of light, dappled textures and images of air entering rooms through lightly billowing curtains. Rather than attempting to dramatise the process of writing, Campion crafts sensuous scenes that visualise Keats' desire to immortalise beauty through her depiction of nature. The close up shot of Keats climbing a blossoming tree barefoot in search of a nightingale's nest, an allusion to his Ode to a Nightingale, and transition to a bird's eye view of him lying across the green leafed upper branches is mirrored by the vibrant blue palette of Fanny lying down in a woodland carpet of bluebells. These tranquil settings act as a dreamlike space where Fanny and Keats' ethereal yet deeply human relationship can blossom, and the transcendental nature of poetry can be visualised. However, Campion distinguishes herself by challenging Keats' assumption that beauty alone should be immortalised, instead insisting that it must be contextualised by reality and its societal limits. As an auteur filmmaker, Campion privileges this perspective through her editorial choices. Wide shots and deep-focus cinematography display an austere beauty in the homes – plain walls, plain floors and little furniture, this minimalism portraying the limitations of women's daily lives within the Regency era. There is a sense of stillness, of seasons slowly passing and women having to occupy their time with quiet domestic work, evidenced by the film's opening with tight close-ups of a needle and thread pushing through fabric. This introduces Campion's feminist perspective but further emphasises needlework as one of few creative outlets for women during the Regency era. This domestic scene, which realises Fanny's existence, is in contrast to the "faery's child" portrayed in Keats' La Belle Dame Sans Merci, displaying Campion's intension to humanise their Keats/Fanny relationship, yet apprehend it in terms of the gendered roles that constrained the expression of their love. The scene wherein Keats and Fanny stroll through a pastoral landscape and jarringly pose by progressively leaning further apart mimics the petrified lovers of his poem "Ode to a Grecian Urn". However, where the lovers on the urn are divided by the motionless nature of the clay, Campion instead implies through the manifestation of a game that Keats and Fanny are separated by the judgements of a society invested the hierarchies of class and privilege. Juxtaposed by moments of melancholic beauty, Campion ultimately invokes a 'Cold Pastoral' wherein ideals of Romantic passion and natural landscapes become a space to apprehend static, hostile realities. Through her postmodern film, Campion extends Keats' struggle to locate a sense of eternity and aesthetic within his imaginative, natural context through portraying this landscape as a catalyst for reflection upon reality.

The catalyst of conflict against his own mortality in To Autumn leads the persona to a greater understanding of uncertainty as inherent to life, thus causing a surrender to his ambiguous context to re-attain certainty in the perennially abundant, seasonal nature of fall. On the surface, the poem offers a static portrait of Autumn ?a serene and joyous contemplation of Romantic aesthetics, the visual imagery of the "summer o'erbrimmed their clammy cells" and "swell[ing] the gourd" reflecting images of contended fulfilment wherein beauty, too, is fulfilled and complete. However despite this bucolic imagery, the poem stresses movement as the temporal process of seasons changing is evinced in the second stanza, the diction "half reap'd" and images of a "cyder press" giving its "last oozings" alluding to the conclusion of the harvest

season. Moreover, there is a parallel movement occuring during the same day. The onset of dusk is explicitly referenced in the pathetic fallacy of the “soft-dying day” and “rosy hues” of the sky, indicating through the harvesting activities drawing to their conclusion and the lazily exhausted figures, that it is late afternoon. Another type of movement present in the poem is that from the predominance of tactile sensations such as “swell” and “plump” in the first stanza to the visual aspect in the second stanza and to the aural dimension in the final stanza. Keats transitions the poetic imagery from the heaviness and relative immobility of ripe fruit that dominates the first stanza: “apples”, “hazelnuts”, “the gourd”, the grapes of vine to the vegetal world of the second stanza, which is more mobile, due to the “winnowing wind” and the final stanza’s restless, rootless “small gnats” and “full-grown lambs..bleat[ing].” The progressive nature of the poem in its shift from man to nature’s music and sounds of non-human life is symbolic of the poet’s gradual reflection on the rise and fall of generations and greatest certainty, found in the departure of Autumn to inevitable Winter. The “gathering swallows” of the final image, preparing for migration has links with both the decay of autumn and the dead generations of mankind. Thus, the process of reflection upon the seasonal shifts of the Autumnal landscape allows Keats to emotionally reconcile with the human experience of progression and change, accepting the future winter, symbolic of death, as necessary to the eternal cycle of seasons.

Confronted by the mutability of social and cultural beliefs, Campion also explores tensions between a series of conflicting binaries; mortality and immortality, time and eternity, change and stability, ultimately finding reconciliation in a similar acceptance to Keats. Influenced by Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra, she represents the Keatsian poetry as integrations of life and emotion, where she visually reframes “To Autumn” allowing the audience to re-experience Keats’ sensations in the Romantic period. The panoramic shot of the misty fields parallels the first line of the poem, “Seasons of mist and mellow fruitfulness”, in which both authors are similar in utilising their realist tools of cinematography and poetry, not as highbrow literary creations for analysis, but rather as both an emotion and sensory experience that leads the individual to an awareness of mortality as part of the eternal beauty of nature. The cut to a static nature shot after Fanny and Keats’ unwilling separation, wherein both are physically divided by a wall, yet mirror each other’s revenant positions, reveals Keats’ desire of constancy and immortality in their love despite contextual limitations. The colour palette of this shot from the dark green trees to the gradients of the blue sky captures the tone of early morning symbolising the promise of a new day. The muted peace of this scene is then suspended by the entrance of two twittering birds, their movement displaying the vitality of life. This aligns with Keats’ stanza: “And still more, later flowers for the bees, /Until they think warm days will never cease”, juxtaposing the vital movements of the insects against the tone of finality indicated by the term “cease.” In this way, Campion captures individual viewers’ desire to experience the sublime and the possibilities the environment contains for inspiring negative capability, but subtly leads them to an awareness of their own morality when set against the eternality of nature. Influenced by her own post modern conception of morality, Campion thus reframes “To Autumn” to broaden the audience’s awareness of Keats’ poetic preoccupations around spiritual fulfillment through the sublimity of nature.

Through textual conversations, Keats’ poems “---” and Campion’s postmodern film Bright Star are able to explore common and disparate values through their investigation of truth, beauty and immortality of art.