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**NARRATIVE IN SOUND: “ON THE SEA” BY JOHN KEATS**

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**ABSTRACT:** *With the springing of the postclassical narratology, lyric poetry, which has been long excluded from traditional narratological studies, has aroused increasing attention in recent years. As sound effect is one of the unique stylistic features of lyric poetry, it can be regarded as unique narrative “discourse” of it to tell the “story”. By probing into the acoustic effect of John Keats’ “On the Sea”, this article aims to uncover the narrative represented from the dimension of sound.*

**KEYWORDS:** narrative, sound, sea, John Keats

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**INTRODUCTION**

Lyric poetry has long been excluded from traditional narratological studies for its lack of narrativity, for “sequentiality”, or temporal succession, traditionally considered as an indispensable element of narrativity, has been seen absent from Lyrics. Rimmon-Kenan also indicates the atemporality of lyrics in her *Narrative Fiction*, “narrative fiction differs from other literary texts, such as lyrical poetry or expository prose. Unlike the latter, narrative fiction represents a succession of events”. (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002: 2) While with the springing of the postclassical narratology in the recent two decades, many definitions of the traditional narrative theories are being expanded and redefined, and more attention has been paid to narrative studies on lyric poetry. On such basis, this article aims to conduct a narrative study in John Keats’ “On the Sea” from the dimension of “sound”, which is a relative new perspective that differs from traditional narrative studies.

The specialty of the sound in lyric poetry lies in its “rhyme” and “meter”: rhyme is the correspondence of sound between words or the endings of words to create harmonious sound effects; meter is the rhythm of a piece of poetry, determined by the number and length of feet in a line. According to Western classical narrative theorists, narrative texts are comprised of two levels: “story” and “discourse”, with the former referring to “what to tell”, including events, character, background, etc., and the latter referring to “how to tell”, including narrative forms and techniques. (Shen, 2010: 13) This article deems that, as “discourse” indicates the narrative mode and technique to present the “story”, the “sound” of poetry can be regarded as its unique narrative “discourse”. With elaborate arrangement of the rhyme and meter, the poet represents the “story” from the dimension of “sound”, or makes the “sound” correspond to the “story” to certain extent. Keats in his poem of “On the Sea” skillfully illustrates the relation between “sound” and “narrative”.

It keeps | eter|nal whis|perings | around

Deso|late shores, |and with | its migh|ty swell \_  
 Gluts twice | ten thou|sand Ca|verns, till | the spell  
 Of He|cate leaves | them their | old sha|dowy sound.  
 Often | 'tis in | such gen|tle tem|per found, 5  
 That scarce|ly will | the ve|ry sma|llest shell \_  
 Be moved | for days | from where | it some|time fell,  
 When last | the winds | of Hea|ven were | unbound.  
 Oh, ye! | who have | your eye|balls vexed | and tired,  
 Feast them | upon | the wide|ness of | the Sea; 10  
 Oh ye! | whose ears | are dinned | with up|roar rude,  
 Or fed | too much | with cloy|ing me|lody—  
 Sit ye | near some | old Ca|vern's Mouth | and brood,  
 Until | ye start, |as if | the sea | nymphs quired! 15

(Keats, 1982: 59)

In “On the Sea”, Keats eulogizes the sea of its mighty power as well as its soft temper. This poem is a typical Petrarchan sonnet, which consists of an octave formed by eight poetic lines, and a sestet with the last six lines, and Keats makes its narration well conform to the two-part structure.

In the octave, from the first to the third lines, the poet personifies the sea and vividly contrasts two divergent states of it: on one hand “it keeps eternal whisperings”, while on the other “its mighty swell gluts twice ten thousand caverns”. With its states alternating from peaceful to forceful, the sound effect changes from light to heavy accordingly. In the first poetic sentence, in order to imitate the peaceful state of the sea, most words the poet chooses are formed by monophthongs, and the vowels are basically close or mid vowels which are to be pronounced with half open mouth, like keep (/i:/), eternal(/i:ɜ:/), whisperings (/i/ə/i/), desolate (/e/ə/ə/), shore (/ɔ:/). With the pronunciation featuring “calm” and “gentle”, these vowels perfectly mimic the unceasing whispering of the sea. While in the second sentence, the poet uses the words of mighty (/ai/), Gluts (/ʌ/), twice (/ai/), thousand (/aʊ/ə/), caverns (/æ/ə/). In contrast to the calm acoustic effect of the first sentence, these words are primarily formed by diphthongs which sound “rounded” and “full” like /ai/ and /aʊ/, or by open vowels which are pronounced “loud” and “powerful” like /ʌ/ and /æ/. When articulating these vowels, one must make the lips wide open to give way to the air inside flowing out freely, which just exactly impersonates the roaring and turbulent state of the sea.

The rhyme scheme of the octave is regular ABBAABBA, and the rhyming words are “around”, “swell”, “spell”, “sound”, “found”, “shell”, “fell” and “unbound”, which strictly rhyme with /aʊd/ and /el/. /aʊd/ starts with a rounded diphthong /aʊ/, and ends with a dreary consonant /d/, which forms a sound effect of lifting upward and then falling downward; while /el/ is constituted with a leveled /e/ followed by a rising /l/, creating an effect of rising from the flat ground. Then we may draw the acoustic graph with arrows: ↘ ↗ ↗ ↘ ↘ ↗ ↗ ↘. Thus, we can easily recognize that the end rhymes of the eight lines graphically represent the up-and-down state of the sea. In addition, the metrical pattern of the poem also reinforces such effect. The proceeding metrical form of the poem is iambic pentameter, which consists of five metrical iambic feet per line, with a foot made up of one unstressed syllable and one stressed syllable (as marked above). This metrical rhythm is especially rigorously applied in the octave, with only one exception at the start of the second line. With one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, this regular monotonic “da-DUM-da-DUM...” rhythm not only mimics the beating waves in sound, but also imitates the waving form the sea. From the above analysis, we may reasonably deem that the poet is telling the “story” with rhymes and meters.

As in the octave it is the direct description of the sea, in the sestet, the poet turns to portrait the sea from human perspective, and the focalization and narrative voice have altered correspondingly. In the octave, the third-person narration is employed, while from the sestet the voice has changed to the second-person narration. In the lines of the ninth and the eleventh, the poet twice starts the line with “Oh, ye!” The double apostrophes with exclamation mark successfully invite the “reader” into the narrative context. And from the ninth line on, the narrative voice switches to the second-person narration, thus the poet begins to conduct a direct conversation with his readers. The second-person narration is rarely seen in fiction. Even if being employed occasionally, it is only the author’s temporary attempts to interfere with the text to communicate with the reader forcibly. We may hardly see second-person narration throughout the fictional text, but it is prevalent in lyric poetry. The reason lies in the essence of lyrics which aims to vent emotions and express aspirations, and second-person narration which can draw the reader close to the narrator to the maximum extent is just in the right place to fulfill the purpose. In this poem, with the apostrophes to create a brief pause, the poet tries to pull the poetic emotion up to the highest point, so as to arouse the attention of “you”, cry for “your” sympathy, and invite “you” to feel the mighty power and magnet melody of the sea. In this part, the metrical pattern also makes adjustments accordingly. In the first foot of the alternate odd lines of the sestet, the original iambic foot has been altered to spondee, from an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable to double stressed syllables. With the spondaic foot to start a line, it strengthens the rhythm of the narration, and the double emphasized sounds also help to arouse the attention of the readers.

From the above discussions, we may conclude that, “sound”, as an idiosyncratic trait of poetry, can be considered as the unique “discourse” of the poetry to present the “story”, which has long been neglected by the previous studies. With the careful design of meter, rhyme, and the pronunciation of vowels and consonants, the poet can

create corresponding acoustic effects that “narrate” the “story” from the dimension of sound, and Keats’ “One the Sea” has just well exemplified.

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