

A Thematic Interpretation of John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

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Abstract

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" was written in May of 1819 when Keats was 23 years old and his life was in emotional turmoil. Keats's odes are a form of meditative poetry.... During a time when ancient Greece was being rediscovered through archeological excavations and travel, as well as in books and exhibitions of Greek cultural artifacts, Keats projected his concerns about living fully, love, art, religion, death, and eternity upon a Grecian urn. "Theme is [...] more usefully applied to a general concept or doctrine, whether implicit or asserted, which an imaginative work is designed to involve and make persuasive to the reader." (*Abrams*, 230) This poem is a fine example of an Ekphrasis: "an ekphrastic poem is a vivid description of a scene or, more commonly, a work of art." (*Poetry Foundation*) Generally, an ekphrastic poem is a poem inspired or stimulated by a work of art. During the Italian Renaissance, the rhetorical form became an important literary genre and, artists made visual works based on written descriptions of art that had never existed. Thus, this paper aims to assess Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" through the lens of vibrant themes inherent throughout the poem.

Keywords: Truth, Art, Love, Beauty, Imagination, Time

Introduction

John Keats was born in 1795. He was one of the most pioneer personalities of 19th century. He was a romantic poet and sensuous poet, owing to his usage of audio-visual images in his poetry. His "Ode on a Grecian Urn" was composed in May 1819 and published anonymously in the January 1820, Number 15, issue of the magazine *Annals of the Fine Arts*. Keats beautifully blended descriptions of objects that could have been visible on a Greek vase with imaginative ones. Keats made himself and his own experience an important part of the poem. This shift in emphasis reflects a transformation in the genre of ekphrasis, which further included the reaction of a particular observer as part of the description of an object.

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" cannot accurately be defined as a description of a picture, however, for as the poet makes us aware, the urn has "shape" and occupies a three-dimensional space." (Harold Bloom, 152). Therefore, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a synthesis, in formal terms, of an ekphrasis concerned with three dimensional sculptures and one devoted

to a frieze or picture, signifying the dichotomy between Beauty and Nature, the very basis of romantic age.

Transcience Vs. Eternity

The main thing that captures the speaker's attention about this urn is that the figures on it are frozen in time in the middle of what they were doing and they will remain there, unchanged, for eternity. The "*bold lover*" will never kiss the girl he is pursuing, but then, she will never age either. The boughs will never lose their leaves. The piper will be "*For ever piping songs for ever new,*" and the ceremonial procession will always be on its way to the sacrifice. The members of the procession, however, have never really existed anywhere except right where the poet sees them:

“Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.”

The beautiful procession is made permanent by the artist's skill, so the people cannot return to a town now made eternally desolate by their absence. The actual people who inspired the image are now dead in the remote past. Because Art fixes things and makes them eternal, it also reminds us that we must live in a world of inevitable decay. By imagining another place in their world, he is imagining a change of time in their world, while also saying that everyone in their world is frozen in place. The scenes on the urn evoke stories of romantic pursuit and religious ceremony. The urn provides a space where such stories can be frozen and made essential. Thus the poem itself is a kind of urn - pulls images, figures, and ideas from the ceaseless flow of life and distills them for study and reflection.

Innocence And Wisdom

The theme of innocence is suggested first when the urn is depicted as a “bride of quietness” (l. 1). As a bride, the urn seems pure and innocent. However, linked with “quietness”, it suggests a hidden wisdom which is further indicated by the metaphor:

“Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme” (lines 3-4)

The speaker thinks highly of the urn's skills as a historian and storyteller and compares them favorably with his own. But we lack any basis on which to judge, because we only hear about the urn through the poem. Wisdom never seems to come directly from the source. The wisdom of the Ancient Greeks is filtered through a piece of marble and then through the poet's verses.

Love and Passion:

The second stanza sees the introduction and examination of a new painting: two lovers sitting beneath a tree. Again, Keats emphasizes that those in the painting are transcendent and unaffected by time, and he writes '*nor ever can those trees be bare*'. Keats is then confronted with a rather strange paradox, in that the lovers are free from time, but are also frozen in time, so that they cannot experience things, and Keats emphasizes this by writing: 'never, never canst thou kiss.'

However, on further consideration Keats concludes that this is a good thing ('yet, do not grieve;'), and that because they are unaffected by time the girl 'cannot fade' and he adds that both she and their love will forever be fair. Again, Keats is focusing on the bitter transience of humanity, and this is possibly a reference to his lover, Fanny Brawne, whom he was forced to leave when he contracted Tuberculosis. In 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' Keats is expressing his distress that human life and love cannot be eternal, like the images on the urn. Yet, he appreciates the beauty of the urn's eternal life, suggested by his repeated use of the word 'happy': "*More happy love! more happy, happy love!*" Nonetheless, this is particularly overshadowed by Keats' experience of unfulfilled desire.

Art and Experience:

Throughout the poem—from the very first word—the speaker is talking to the urn. This form of poetry is known as an *Apostrophe*. There is no reason to believe that the "ye" of the last line is any different. The crucial phrase is even introduced with "*to whom thou sayest*" and is put in quotation marks, indicating that this is all that the urn knows or needs to know:

*'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*

only applies in the place where all activity is frozen. We can perceive the beauty: the lovers are in love, the music of the pipe is sweet, the trees are always full, and the people attending the sacrifice have the joy of anticipation. Finally, Keats contemplates what he has seen and what he has learnt from it. The exclamation 'Cold Pastoral!' intends to show the reader Keats's turbulent thoughts by employing this oxymoron as the pictures on the urn are comforting and warm ('Pastoral') but is also envious ('Cold') and feels 'teased' – as he says before – by its distance from reality and its perfection. It's better to have experienced and then to have lost, rather than not to have experienced at all. The urn is described by Keats as 'a friend to man' that would be a guiding star for new generations. Perhaps the final line is Keats' way of saying that we do not need to know the truth, but that beauty is the only necessary idea.

Conclusion

John Keats' rhetorical choice, particularly regarding both his Classical ('legend' and 'Attic') and pastoral ('flowery' and 'mountain-built') language, is representative of the Romantic style. Also, Keats' use of superannuated diction (such as 'adieu' and 'lead'st') is very common amongst the other Romantic poets because of its timelessness. In conclusion, the main theme of the poem is '*transience*', and Keats also contemplates on the idea of

‘eternity’ and ‘immortality’. Keats, particularly displayed by his last two lines, was the most radical of the Romantics’, yet ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ is not merely Romantic, but is perhaps the sum of all the Romantic concepts and contemplations, and therefore the apogee of Romanticism.

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