



Nature of Art and Earth in John Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'

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ABSTRACT

John Keats is a formidable second generation romantic poet who is known to the reading public for his imaginative fecundity, sensuousness, his unique concept of beauty, his concept of negative capability and his economy of expression. His odes are a creation apart. His 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' presents a compelling encounter between the permanence of art and temporality of life. Here, the urn, made by a Greek artist, makes him realise the permanence of art and the transitory nature of human life, sensuous beauty and ideal beauty. In the highly imaginative poetic world of John Keats, art sermonises human knowledge and insights better than anything else. Earth embodies the real life full of ups and downs, enjoyments and sufferings. When Keats views the Grecian Urn, it has sojourned for centuries but it has not been aged. It means that it is alien to the concepts of age and decay. The men and women, the pipers and the people taking part in the procession carved on the urn are no more but the power of art has made them durable and immortal. Hence, in this research paper, the researcher wants to showcase how Keats brings the contrasting nature of art and earth i. e. permanence of art and temporariness of life with the help of his rich imagination sensuous expression and Hellenism.

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Introduction:

Born to Thomas Keats, an oastler and Frances Jennings on 31 October, 1795 in Moorgate, London, John Keats, the super singer of beauty, was the youngest among all the Romantic poets. Happiness was a



rare chapter in the entire drama of his short life. He was the eldest of five siblings and witnessed a number of tragic incidents in his family. His brother Edward, aged only one year, died in 1802. When Keats was only nine years old, his father died after falling from horseback in April, 1804. After two months of his father's death, he saw his mother remarrying William Rowlings, a clerk in a bank and staying with him for one year. Keats lost his grandfather John Jennings in 1805. When Keats was only eight, he was admitted to Enfield Academy, a boarding school in London where he became intimate with Charles Cowden Clarke, the son of John Clarke, the headmaster of the school. This intimacy was a turning point in Keats' life as a poet as Cowden provided Keats with a copy of Chapman's Homer. In 1810, when Keats was only fourteen, his mother died of pulmonary tuberculosis. Due to financial crisis, Keats was brought back from school when he was fifteen. He then became an apprentice under Dr Hammond to become a surgeon and apothecary and earned a license in 1816 to practice medicine at Guy's Hospital in London. But, by that time, he felt that he was possessed with the 'demon' of poetry. This forced him to give up practising medicine and to devote his entire time to writing poetry. His acquaintance with Leigh Hunt and P. B. Shelley in 1816 influenced him a lot in writing poems. When his first volume of poetry entitled 'Poems' was published in 1817, it was severely criticised for its sensuousness, lack of intelligence and its association with Cockney school of poetry. John Wilson Crocker in 'Quarterly Review' and John Gibson Lockhart in Blackwood's 'Edinburgh Magazine' criticised Keats as a poet of the Cockney School, with the latter advising him to abandon poetry and to get back to his work as an apothecary. These harsh criticisms affected Keats' career and reputation as poet, impacted sales of his books and resulted in economic struggles but at the face of all these, he maintained a high degree of resilience and a strong sense of self-esteem to prove that life is more livable and beautiful when it is lived amidst sufferings and criticisms. His another brother Tom Keats also succumbed to tuberculosis in 1818. In 1819, Keats got engaged with Fanny Brawne but could not marry her as he discovered that he too was suffering from tuberculosis, a family disease. In 1820, he left for Rome, Italy to better his health condition in the warmer climate but unfortunately he died there on 23 February, 1821 at the age of 25 years and 112 days and was buried at the Non-Catholic Cemetery, Rome.

Along with Lord Byron and P. B. Shelley, Keats constituted the second generation of romantic poets. He enriched English Literature to a great extent with a titanic body of excellent literary creations before his premature death. It is important to note that he had no moral, spiritual, political and philosophical purpose behind writing poetry. His poetry is characterised with the pastoral flavour of Edmund Spenser and the supernatural aspects of Coleridge. It is really unfortunate that as a poet he was



not given due recognition during his lifetime which made Keats painfully declare, “I Think I’ll be one of the English poets after my death.” This became a reality when critics like Matthew Arnold and other reviewers compared his genius to that of Shakespeare. This is really amazing that beauty was his only religion and as a poet of sensations rather than of thought, he was solely a worshipper of beauty and the only purpose of his life was to reveal beauty in all things- beauty in human life, beauty in nature and beauty in art. He is known for his anaphoric and alliterative statement ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’. He talked about the eternal beauty of life and death, smoothness and struggles and had the discovery that beauty is the only reality that can only be realised through the sufferings and obstacles of life.

Of all the Romantic poets, Keats was the most sensuous one. In the words of Matthew Arnold, “Keats as a poet is abundantly and enchantingly sensuous”. His sensuousness is not only confined to eye or ear but embraces all the five sense organs. He craved for “a life of sensations rather than of thought” and this is evident in his poetical compositions. It was his sense impressions that sparked his fertile imagination to realise the great principles “A thing of Beauty is a joy forever”(Endymion: A Poetic Romance), “The first in Beauty should be first in might” (Hyperion), “What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be Truth” (Letter to Benjamin Bailey, November 22, 1817) and “Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty”(Ode on a Grecian Urn).

Objectives and significance of study:

This paper attempts to study the nature of art and life in John Keats’ famous ode ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ and to highlight how the permanence of art can snapshot and make vivid the moments of life which is characterised with temporariness. The study is significant because it conveys a precious message to mankind how they can comprehend life by understanding the identification of beauty and truth.

Research Methodology:

This research paper is written using theoretical and analytical method and by collecting data from accessible secondary sources. The paper is descriptive in nature and is prepared by critically evaluating the poem

Discussion and Findings:



'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is one of the finest and greatest odes penned by Keats in May, 1819 where the romantic poet balances the forces of art and life to present the permanence of art and transitoriness of life. The ode is occasioned with Keats seeing an urn, a work of art which contains a record of the past life which will never come back. The poet sees a Grecian urn and the human forms depicted thereon- men who might be mistaken as gods, women struggling to escape and the pipers playing on. The sight of all these pictures acts as fuel to the working of the poet's mind which sets his imagination at flight and a series of questions come to his mind:

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

This makes the romantic poet conscious of the superiority of Art over Life. The unheard music represented by the piper intensifies the poet's imagination and as such it immediately becomes sweeter. A thing has its importance until it remains beyond our access. It loses its importance the moment it comes to our vision. In the poetic world of Keats, silence has great importance and hence it is possible that sometimes the words unuttered have more significance than those uttered. On the surface of the urn, the lovers are unable to catch his beloved but what is interesting to note is that the beloved also cannot fully escape his sight which she would have done in the real life. This makes the love as well as its object eternal and here credit goes to the immortality of Art:

"Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard

Are sweeter, therefore, ye soft pipes, play on"

The trees sculptured on the urn will never be deprived of the freshness of spring. The branches of the trees will be forever happy because art has made them static. This will motivate the happy melodist to sing new and soulful songs without being wearied. The young lover will always be warm and passionate pursuing his lady love. This is suggestive of the fact that the trees and the lovers will vanish in the real life but art has made them everfresh:

"Ah, happy happy boughs! That cannot shed

Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu."



The sacrificial procession depicted on the urn also suggests the superiority of Art over Life. The poet sees a crowd of people probably going to the green altar of sacrifice. A priest is seen leading a heifer with her silken flanks decorated with a garland to the sacrificial altar. The poet imagines that they might have come out from some peaceful citadels of a town situated by a river or on the sea-shore or on a mountain. Their coming out means their living places are emptied at that time and it will remain so forever:

“And little town, thy streets for evermore

Will silent be; not a soul to tell

Why thou art desolate, can e’er return.”

Art is frozen and static as it represents deathless beauty. Earth represents the real life. It is art that snapshots life in a particular time and makes it static and desolate. The particular moment captured by art will remain isolated forever. This moment cannot go back to join its parent time. That is why, Keats addresses the Urn, the symbol of art, as cold and lifeless which is detached from the flow of time:

“Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought

As doth eternity: cold pastoral”

Keats presents the Urn as the genuine relic of ancient Greek art that sculptures so many things- marble men and maidens, forest branches and trodden weeds. The poet is of the view that the Urn, as a work of art, will surpass the cruel clutches of time and in the midst of other sufferings not known to us but the present generation will not survive for its mortal nature. While doing so, the Urn, according to the poet, will teach us the lesson that there is nothing true but the beautiful and there is nothing beautiful but the true. Hence, beauty and truth are always identical and this is the only thing we must know:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

**Conclusion:**

“Ode on a Grecian Urn” is one of the greatest odes in the English language which celebrates the permanence of art and the fleeting nature of life and other earthen things. Throughout the poem, Keats balances the forces of art and life. He sees an urn, a work of art, containing records of yesteryears which will never come back. It stands tall in the flow of time thereby giving permanence to the transient life. While doing so, Keats balances the changeless life in art and the changeful life on earth. In the words of Middleton Murray, ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ is not a dream of unattainable beauty, nor is the urn itself the sign of an impossible bliss beyond mortality. It has a precious message to mankind, not as a thing of beauty which gives exquisite delight to the senses, but as a symbol and prophecy of a comprehensive human life which mankind can attain.”

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