



“Romantic Pursuits in Ode on a Grecian Urn By John Keats” – A Study

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Abstract: If the “Ode to a Nightingale” portrays Keats’s speaker’s engagement with the fluid expressiveness of music, the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” portrays his attempt to engage with the static immobility of sculpture. The Grecian urn, passed down through countless centuries to the time of the speaker’s viewing, exists outside of time in the human sense—it does not age, it does not die, and indeed it is alien to all such concepts. In the speaker’s meditation, this creates an intriguing paradox for the human figures carved into the side of the urn: They are free from time, but they are simultaneously frozen in time. They do not have to confront aging and death (their love is “forever young”), but neither can they have experience (the youth can never kiss the maiden; the figures in the procession can never return to their homes).

The speaker attempts three times to engage with scenes carved into the urn; each time he asks different questions of it. In the first stanza, he examines the picture of the “mad pursuit” and wonders what actual story lies behind the picture: “What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?” Of course, the urn can never tell him the who’s, what’s, when’s, and where’s of the stories it depicts, and the speaker is forced to abandon this line of questioning.

In the second and third stanzas, he examines the picture of the piper playing to his lover beneath the trees. Here, the speaker tries to imagine what the experience of the figures on the urn must be like; he tries to identify with them. He is tempted by their escape from temporality and attracted to the eternal newness of the piper’s unheard song and the eternally unchanging beauty of his lover. He thinks that their love is “far above” all transient human passion, which, in its sexual expression, inevitably leads to an abatement of intensity—when passion is satisfied, all that

remains is a wearied physicality: a sorrowful heart, a “burning forehead,” and a “parching tongue.” His recollection of these conditions seems to remind the speaker that he is inescapably subject to them, and he abandons his attempt to identify with the figures on the urn.

Key words: physicality, “parching tongue”, “burning forehead”, human passion, etc.,

Introduction: Keats as a Romantic Poet:

John Keats is in many ways the most romantic of all romantic poets. Romantic poetry aims at the complete expression of the individual as compared to classical poetry, which aims at the expression of social experience. Other romantic poets have some political or social comment in their poetry. But the poetry of Keats is not a vehicle of any prophecy or any message. It is poetry for its own sake. It has no moral, no political or social significance. It is therefore the purest poetry.

All romantic poetry is more or less escapist. Romantic poetry presents not the world of reality but the world of dreams. The romantic poet seeks an escape from the hard realities of life in a world of romance and beauty. Keats is the most romantic of all the poets in the sense that he is most escapist of them all. His "*Ode to a Nightingale*" is marked by a contrast between the happiness of the bird and the unhappiness of the poet.

The song of the Nightingale makes the poet long to escape from the world of reality over-shadowed by misery and death. But this does not give rise to a desire to overthrow tyrants, as it does in Shelley nor does he think of a better world.

Addition of strangeness to beauty:

The romantic quality in literature has been defined by Pater as 'the addition of strangeness of beauty'. In nothing else is Keats as romantic as in his frank pursuit of beauty. Beauty is Deity; Beauty for him is synonymous with truth. A thing of beauty is for him a joy forever: Beauty is his religion. It is in this pursuit of beauty that he completely forgets himself and the world around him.

"*Ode on a Grecian Urn*" is a complex poem which deals several ideas. But the most significant idea of this poem is the in relation to life. Beauty and truth are not two separate things.

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all

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

The romantic imagination of the poet reveals in a flash a world beyond this world-the world of eternity where the nightingale sings forever and forever. The song of the nightingale becomes a symbol of the universal spirit of Beauty.

Like all romantics, Keats has love for nature and its varied charms. He has a vivid sense of colour, and he transfigures everything into beauty that he touches with "the magic hand of chance".

In his *Ode to autumn*, the treatment of the subject is objective as Keats presents a rich and vivid picture of the season. The poem is a nature-lyric and only the beauty and bounty of nature during the Autumn are described in a vivid and realistic manner. He describes Autumn as the "season of mists and mellow fruitfulness"-In the third he says,

"Where are the songs of spring Ay where are they?

Think not of them, thou has! thy music too."

To the poet autumn is complete in itself with its own beauty and luxurious fruitfulness.

Sensuousness is the out-standing characteristic of Romantic poets. Keats is pre-eminently a poet of sensuousness.

One of the most striking notes of romantic poetry is that of supernaturalism. Keats dealt with the supernatural in his *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. And in that little poem he has condensed a whole world of super natural mystery.

Love of the past is another character. Like all other romantic poets, Keats seeks an escape in the past. His imagination is attracted by the ancient Greeks as well as the glory and splendor of the Middle Ages. Most of his poetry is inspired by the past.

The themes of Keats's poetry are romantic in their nature. Most of his poetry is devoted to the quest of beauty, love, chivalry, adventure, pathos-these are some of the themes of his poems, (disappointment in love).

Keats is known as the Romantic poet in the English literature. His poetry is a fine example of highly romantic poetry. In fact, it touched almost all the aspects of romantic poetry, love of beauty, love of nature, love of the past, supernaturalism, glow of emotion, and last but not the least in importance, the revealing power of imagination.

Immortality

In the third stanza of John Keats's poem "Ode on Grecian Urn," the poet addresses a tree that will never shed leaves. The description creates a paradox of lifelessness, and life is also expressed beyond the fair lady and the love and acquires a more temporal form. The symbols of eternity encapsulated in the poem repetitions of the word "forever" are also present in describing the unheard song and pipes playing endlessly.

In addition, John Keats's odes present his own existential vision through a living death of immortal lovers who surpass this paradox through the scene of sacrifice. In whole, Keats's poem is a deep philosophical reflection on the complex conflict between life and art, symbolizing eternity, living death, and the existence of art beyond the real world, which transfers the readers to another conceptual dimension.

The Contrast between Life and Art in Ode on a Grecian Urn

In the poem, Keats adheres to a philosophical representation of the connection between art and life through the concept of eternity. What is the meaning of Grecian urn? Why is it the central object in the poem? Time does not affect the urn because it is composed of stone, that never ages and that can resist any changes: "...happy, happy boughs! That cannot shed your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu" (Keats 1, line 21-22). Keats envisions the theme of immortality in Ode on a Grecian Urn to capture the conflict between art and life because "once [the poet] has imaginatively grasped the eternal beauty of the model and the material through which the sculptor of the urn worked, the problem of their actual existence completely vanishes" (Sato 3). This relation becomes one of the central "Ode on a Grecian Urn" themes.

Keats's deviation from reality enables him to cognize the actual connection between art and life beyond time and space. His attempt to capture the immortal beauty is also brightly perceived in one of other John Keats's odes – *Ode on Melancholy*: "She dwells with Beauty – Beauty must die; / And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips/ Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh..." (Keats 3, line 21-23).

In this respect, the poet as if "provides a vivid account of the intense, complex struggle to replace with hope the bleakness of a world deprived of the consolidation of faith" (Bohm 3). At this point, Keats believes that imagery is one of the most potent tools enabling to connect the concept of art and life.

The living death is another topic in Ode on a Grecian Urn, integrated by the author to reach the connection between art and eternity. Keats's aspiration to create the town outside the art is also challenged in the poem: "O Attic shape! Fair attitude! With brede / Of marble men and maidens overwrought... as doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!" (Keats 3, lines 41-45).

Interpreting this, the poet believes, "...'consecrated objects' is a strong hostility toward the temporal advancement that is perpetually proving the absolute to be, after all, relative" (Burnett 400).

Similar to this, Keats condemns temporality in his other poems: “I have been half in love with easeful Death, / Call’d him soft names in many a mused rhyme” (Keats 4, lines 52-54). When one reads these lines, it is understandable that Keats’s desire to achieve immortality is committed to “a consciously alternative plan of salvation” (Lams 424). Therefore, all his creative searching is aimed at prolonging his poetical existence.

Romantic pursuits in Ode on a Grecian Urn:

“If I am destined to be happy with you here- how short is the life I wish to believe in immortality- I wish to live with you forever”

Excerpt from John Keats’ letter to Fanny Brawne 1820

John Keats’ letter to his fiancée in 1820 reveals the writer’s intense longing for immortality. Amidst his profound awareness of his own mortality after his tuberculosis diagnosis, Keats considers the bounds of his desire. Though the letter above was not written to Keats’ modern readers, the publication of his personal letters introduces another dimension to Keats’ words, in which the reader is an additional, unconscious object of the writer’s desire. In a similar manner, Keats’ poem, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” challenges and explores the limits of eroticism, as the speaker desires both the urn itself and the erotic scenes presented on its surface. Keats blurs the boundaries of the real world and the fantastical while he confronts the conventional confines of eroticism. By presenting the urn and the speaker as both seducers and seduced, Keats establishes a space for a fluid eroticism that parallels his conception of a fragile reality. Thus, in recognition of his impending death, Keats uses the poem to construct a world in which eroticism and reality exist in an in-between state and prevail as immortal.

Much of the allure of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is promoted by the urn’s function as a seductress. The speaker’s immediate reference to the urn as a “still unravish’d bride” introduces the particular attractiveness associated with chaste women at the time; the word “still” only heightens the urn’s feminine purity (Keats, 1). Throughout the poem, the speaker attempts to uncover the mystery presented by the urn, particularly in the “leaf fring’d legend that haunts about [the urn’s] shape” (5). Though the ode is directed towards a tangible object, Keats’ description of the “leaf fring’d” pattern on the urn’s “shape” evokes a mere outline, silhouette, or shadow rather than a description of bold physicality. Thus, the poem acts as an attempt to perceive the interior of the “silent form” of the urn which invites exploration from both the speaker and the reader (44). In recognition of the urn’s seductive qualities, the speaker exclaims that the urn “dost *tease* us out of thought / As doth eternity” (44-45, emphasis mine). By designating the urn as teasing, the speaker implies intentionality in the urn’s seduction. In addition, the pronoun “us” establishes a collective, plural entity that the urn entices (44). Thus, Keats characterizes the urn as a seductress who is aware of her capabilities and effects on both the speaker and the reader.

However, the qualities of seduction are not solely restricted to the urn, as Keats constructs a powerful layering of eroticism between the speaker and urn and the poem and reader, in addition to the urn’s teasing of the speaker and reader. The poem’s title, designating it an “Ode on” rather than an “Ode to” is an instant source of ambiguity, as it

describes an ode on the surface of the urn despite the clear function of the poem as an ode “to” the urn. This ambiguity invites the reader, mirroring the teasing nature of the urn itself. In addition, the poem’s unconventional rhyme scheme serves to progress its seductive structure; while the first and last stanzas use a surprising ABABCDEDCE structure, the three stanzas between them use a patterned ABABCDECDE structure. Rather than using the first and last stanzas to provide a sense of closure, Keats presents the reader with a sense of disruption at the beginning and end of the poem, while satisfying the reader throughout to move the poem forward. The rhyme scheme is coupled with the speaker’s teasing of the urn; the anaphora that opens the poem of “Thou still unravish’d bride” and “Thou foster-child” establishes the poem as a dedication that is reminiscent of courting or serenading (1, 2). In addition, the speaker persistently asks questions about the events and characters upon the urn’s surface (5-10). Aside from the flirtatious quality of questioning, the speaker’s inquiries invite the perception of the urn as an object to be explored which inspires both the speaker and the reader. Thus, Keats presents a fluidity both in the directionality and function of eroticism in the poem, as the urn, the speaker, and the reader are subjected to the art of seduction.

The erotic scenes on the surface of the urn act as an additional link in the erotic chain, as the speaker directs his attention to individual characters on the urn’s surface in addition to the urn itself. Though the speaker courts the urn as an entity, he also speaks directly to the figures on the urn rather than just describing them: he comforts the “bold lover,” envies the “happy boughs” and the “happy melodist,” questions the “mysterious priest,” and even speaks to the “little town” (17, 21, 23, 32, 38). By subjecting the characters upon the urn’s surface to the speaker’s eroticism, Keats refrains from providing the reader with a clear conception of erotic directionality. Rather, the speaker’s desire exists in the real world as he courts the urn, and in the imaginary as he is drawn towards the individual characters that only come to life in his mind. Keats complicates the binaries of the real and imaginary, as the characters exist as pictures on the urn, while the urn exists as a full object in reality, yet is only an “Attic shape,” or an outline that surrounds both what is upon it and within it (41).

When observing the potential “pursuit” depicted on the urn, the speaker establishes the setting “in Tempe or the dales of Arcady” (7, 9). Tempe and Arcady, both valleys in ancient Greece, invite a vaginal imagery of the natural, rural world that the speaker idealizes. Amidst this setting, “men or gods” pursue “loth,” unwilling women (8). Thus, the men within the scene conquer both the feminine setting as well as the women that occupy it in a “wild ecstasy” of human passion (10). By seducing the feminized urn that reveals images of youthful male sexual prowess, the speaker presents an attraction to not only the urn itself, but particularly to the state of perpetual desire of the characters within it. The speaker continues to marvel at the urn’s “brede / Of marble men and maidens overwrought”—the word “brede” describes the urn’s pattern while signifying the word “breed” (4-42). Thus, the characters exist in an immortal sexual state, as they are both still and moving, and both real and imaginary. Despite his fantasies that bring movement to the scene, the speaker chooses to emphasize the stagnancy of the “marble,” statue-like, men and the “maidens overwrought, / With forest branches and the trodden weed” (42-43). Thus, the

speaker admires the women in the scene who are overcome by the branches and weeds of the vaginal, natural landscape of Tempe and Arcady, as the women are overlaid by their female counterparts in the natural world.

Though the speaker presents a phallogocentric fantasy in his fictionalization of the urn's images, it is the urn that ultimately holds the most power. The speaker calls the urn a "Cold Pastoral" that puts an end to the heat of the "burning forehead" and "parching tongue" of both the characters in the scenes, the speaker (as he worships the urn), and the reader (as they read the poem) (45, 30). Thus, despite the masculine interpretation of the scenes upon it, the urn prevails in its role as a seductress. Therefore, Keats does not maintain a phallogocentric power structure in his representation of the urn, as both the urn and speaker are equally capable and in control; their seductive qualities are of equal caliber.

In continuation of his construction of a suspended state, Keats' use and reference to sound facilitates the existence of a layered eroticism and an ambiguous reality. As the speaker discusses the fantasy world of the urn, he imagines the "unheard" melodies produced by the urn that "pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone" (11, 14). In other words, the speaker alone can observe the music of the urn that exists in stagnancy; it can only be heard in the speaker's mind. Therefore, sound in the poem possesses an imaginary quality that mirrors the speaker's fantastical observations of the urn's scenes. Despite his abstract presentation of sound in reference to the urn, Keats' construction of meter and rhyme produces a traditional bodily experience of sound that is absent in the urn's music. Keats breaks the iambic pentameter of the poem when he discusses the effects of the urn's "piping songs," as they create "More happy love! more happy, happy love!" (24, 25). The consecutive stresses of "More ha-", followed by the repetition of trochaic word "happy," disrupt the poem's phonetic melody to describe the musical melody of the urn (25). In addition, the loud, repetitive trochees present a stark contrast to the silent, hardly discernible "piping" sounds produced by the characters on the urn (24). Thus, Keats' layering of sound in the imagined music of the urn combined with the sound of his meter parallels his construction of a layered eroticism; the phonetic, the imaginary, and the erotic exist in an otherworldly plane that Keats presents as real.

Conclusion:

Keats concludes the poem with an establishment of yet another form of fluid layering, as he designates immortality to the poem itself that parallels that of the urn. Regardless of whether Keats intended the quotation marks around the poem's final lines, the speaker or urn's lesson that "beauty is truth, truth beauty" equates the corporeal, feminine quality of physical shape with that of the masculine intellect that exists in the realm of the mind (49). Thus, the imaginary world is paired with the real while the beautiful urn is paired with the intellectual speaker. The seducers and the seduced are separate and the same, as is the real and the imaginary. In addition, the urn itself simultaneously possesses the qualities of truth and beauty in its role as both a "historian" and a "bride" (3, 2). Thus, Keats parallels his layering of eroticism in his final message that exists within the urn and between the urn and the speaker. In his compression of both sound and space as truth and beauty are combined, Keats represents both

physically and phonetically the state of simultaneous existence that he describes on the surface of the urn, as the stagnant characters are brought to life. By explaining that the lesson of truth and beauty is all that we, as readers, “know *on earth*,” Keats references another world in which such binaries can exist without being in opposition (50, emphasis mine). Since the poem acts as a manifestation of this suspended state of the in-between, Keats discusses an imaginary world of limbo while presenting a version of it on the page. In the context of Keats’ urn-speaker, speaker-reader eroticism, the lesson also serves as a reference to the poem itself as the “truth.” Therefore, the poem becomes the urn, and remains as an immortal vessel that bridges the unknown of the dead with the present.

As an object that holds the ashes of the dead, the urn exists both in the physical world as a tangible entity while in close proximity to the world beyond, as it provides a space in which the spiritual entities of loved ones can be imagined and experienced. It is not peculiar that Keats was so fascinated with the immortal qualities of this ancient urn, as he was profoundly familiar with death both in the passing of his parents at a young age, and his tuberculosis diagnosis that alerted him to his own impending end (“John Keats,” 1082-1083). Thus, the poem serves as a space in which the young writer’s desire, when confronted with death, can exist in multiple planes. As the speaker marvels that the characters on the urn will be “Forever panting, and forever young,” he longs for a state of living, breathing stagnancy that is only attainable in the urn and in the poem itself (27). The speaker even suggests that “All breathing human passion” exists “far above,” thus blending the world of the afterlife with that of bodily desire (28). The urn, both on the patterns on its surface and in the ashes it contains, becomes an object between both worlds internally and externally. The poem, in its layered states of eroticism and reality between the speaker, reader, and urn, becomes a space between the past and present, and the real and imaginary in which Keats and his desire become immortal. Thus, the speaker’s description of the urn also acts as a declaration towards the poem itself.

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