

A critical analysis – john keats, "ode on a grecian urn"

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



The Romantic Period introduced a variety of writing styles. The authors of the early eighteenth century altered many of the earlier romantic pieces. The early writers primary area of concern was nature. It was not until the latter part of the eighteenth century that authors began to focus on the supernatural as well as nature. John Keats unique style of writing gave the world a great respect for his work. Keats felt his poetry should effect the readers emotions, and only great poetry could move the reader to the point of enjoyment.

In doing this Keats felt the only way to achieve his goal of “ moving his audience” was to surrender to uncertainties, or by believing much of life is unexplainable, especially human beings, who strive on emotion that guide their wants and needs. In the “ Ode on a Grecian Urn”, the urn represents a story without regard to time. (Bloom 16). The unchanging marble arrests time through the urn. (Bloom 16). “ When old age shall this generation waste, Thou shalt remain” (lines 46-47), describes the unchanging marbles and the characters on the urn.

With the unchanging marble, the urn has slowed time towards eternity, making artwork immortal (bloom 16). This shows the immortal side of the Grecian urn physical appearance. The unchangeable urn also displays a tale of an everyday place. The urn show the people with their endless deeds. “ Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare; Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss, Though winning near the goal- ye, do not grieve; She cannot fade, though thou hadt not thy bliss, Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (lines 15-20). Life is halted and can never continue from this point.

The fair youth, the Bold Lover, the trees of spring, and the season spring, can ever leave their endless deeds. Immortality of the town is shown. What little town by river or seashore, Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel, Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn? And, little town, thy streets forevermore Will be silent be..." (lines 35 – 39). The town will never see people inhabiting it, bringing loneliness and immortality throughout the town. These are the advantages mortality give to the living.

The themes of immortality and morality can be seen throughout " Ode of a Grecian Urn. " The unchanging marble of the urn can be considered immortal just as the tale displayed on the urn. The fact that the tale on the urn can never change shows the disadvantage of being immortal and the reason why morality can be better. The poem begins by probing the reader with a series of questions presented by the speaking subject. Keats then permits the urn to speak without speaking, to " express a flowery tale more sweetly than rhyme.

Keats has trouble getting outside of the answers he continually struggle with during his writing career. He presents a series of questions he expects the urn, or the representative of the urn to answer. Scott says, " the ode does not begin with the speakers attempt to compete with the urn, but with a homage to its strange genealogy and its paradoxical powers of eloquence" (Scott 135). Scott also says, Keats immediately becomes impatient with the urn's silence and seeks to impose his own dialogue on the existing surface of the urn.

Andrew Bennett recognizes Keat's desire to enter the dialogue saying, "Keats always seems about to burst into narrative" (Bennett 130). He appears from the beginning to question the urn, then later adds his answers. Keats now haunts the reader at the end of the poem by questioning the nature of truth represented by the urn. Stillinger accurately states in "The Hoodwinking of Madeline", the question of the urn, "Who said what to whom at the end of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn?' " (Stillinger 167- 173). Truth is related to whom we identify as the speaking subject.

Someone or something is addressing the reader directly. Someone is defined as "a friend of man". Keats sees the "happy lover" as well as the "object of desire", the three boughs and the piper. The urn contains a scene ambiguous in meaning. He presents questions within the first through fourth stanzas. He demands origins, names and meaning in regards to specified events. The unanswered questions are left for the reader to answer. Jason Muro says, the ode inscribes a sine wave, with five distinct points along its length. First, the poet is steeped in despair brought about by the world's unrelenting flux.

Second, upon entering the urn, he is filled with hope he has found the antidote for despair. Third, he finds his hope unfounded, the antidote was a placebo. Fourth, he closely examined the urn, he embodies a terror more intense than the despair from which he sought relief. The Placebo is in fact poison. Last, he embraces transient conditions of the world as an antidote to the terrors of the urn. The point of origin of Keats' initial problem from which he wants to ascend becomes his point of salvation he wants to climb by the end of the poem.

Keats became apart of his poetry by becoming all of its characters in one aspect or another. He is the “ unheard melody that is never really heard or appreciated in its lifetime”. He is the tree that will never go bare, because he died during the spring season of the year. He is the bold lover that will never kiss yet will forever love. Line after line Keats is the representative of the objects and people he describes. The happy boughs, happy melodist, and the pining lover. I believe the poet and the urn to one in the same.

The question is, What was the meaning of “ beauty is truth, truth is beauty? Stiller believes it to mean, “ face value, the statement is false, and Keats knew this and understood this, but maybe considered it a simple, sarcastic equation that would guarantee a frivolous, superficial existence in a society consumed with who’s who. ” (200). Keats was making a mockery of the ideal, ‘ forever happy’ lifestyle by realizing no one is truly happy no matter how thing appear to the outside world. The urn may have been representative of Keat’s dream of a short lifestyle. A group whose motto was “ Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” and were there beliefs to their end.

What was the true sacrifice Keats endured within this work? Was so much of his time spent creating this fictional urn, only to inform society of his final analogy of his time on earth? Did Keats consider himself to be the “ Sylvan historian? ” Had he mastered the superficial rules to life and living on earth? Was he letting the reader in on his theory? of “ Beauty is truth, truth beauty? ” These are questions that may remain unanswered by Keats, but remain a mystery to whomever has the opportunity to explore “ Ode on a Grecian Urn. Taking a look into to today’s society, we find the same belief.

Appearing to be physically perfect is the new trend. We worship Hollywood stars and try to model our own lives after them. The media makes the world of Hollywood perfect and we sometimes have a difficult time deciphering between our world and their world. There are many of us who aspire to be like the 'stars' yet there is a hidden message within the lives they lead. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." This message is apparent whenever a 'star' is in the spotlight. Society believes in the reality behind the message "Beauty is truth, truth beauty."

We want to believe this message is the key to all our happiness. We all at one time or another within our lives have tried to live according to our favorite celebrity, just as Keats idolized the people projected on his urn. Keats life unfortunately ended before it ever began yet he was able to realize despite his heartbreak and illness, that this is almost never true. No matter how perfect things appear to be on the outside, it's totally different when you attempt to put the other person shoes on and takes a stroll. In other words, things are not what they always appear to be.