

Nature and time keats wordsworth and the power of human memory literature review ...

[Health & Medicine](#), [Beauty](#)



What is the essence of nature, and does time impede that essence or is it a companion of nature, giving it its rhythms and courses? The Romantic poets of the eighteenth century spent a great deal of time pondering nature and time in their poetry, but none more so than William Wordsworth and John Keats. While both of them strove to understand man's relation with nature and time, there were startling contrasts to how each of them approached the subjects. This contrast can be seen clearly in two poems, Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" and Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." While both of these pieces discuss the beauty of nature and how timeless it is, Keats mourns how memory and perception can distort it, while Wordsworth revels in the joy of human memory and perception and how it can make the sights that we see in the natural world all the more sweeter, giving us an even finer appreciation of its gifts.

In "Ode on a Grecian Urn," John Keats ponders the images on an urn and their significance. He sees them all as beautiful but at the same time mysterious because they cannot tell him of their existence—he can only guess at what is happening. He writes, "What men or gods are these? / What maidens loth? / What mad pursuit?" (lines 8-9). Keats seems to both love and fear the effect that time has on memory when it comes to the figures on the urn. On one hand, they will never grow old or be affected by it; for example, the trees will be forever fresh but at the same time, they will never know the glory of the changing seasons and Keats observes of them that they "cannot shed / Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu" (21-22). For Keats, time has given these images eternal beauty for him to gaze upon, but there is a price to pay as well, for time has also erased memory here as

well, and he can only guess at the events taking place and the reason for such celebration.

Time is both generous and a thief for Keats, giving eternal youth to the lovers that he observes on the urn but giving no clue to their past or to the individual lives that are being lived on it. He writes, “Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!” (44-45). For Keats, it does not appear to be an even trade, for even though the image is frozen in time and it is beautiful, it is also impossible to make a personal connection with it, and it is this connection with nature that the romantic poets like Keats always strove to find. Time offers Keats nothing here but a dead memory, and it mutes the beauty that he sees on the urn. It is nature draped in eternal youth, but it is forever out of his reach.

Unlike Keats, William Wordsworth embraces time in its relation to nature and memory in his poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.” In the poem, Wordsworth comes upon a massive field of daffodils “Beside the lake, beneath the trees, / Fluttering and dancing in the breeze” (lines 5-6). The field of flowers seems endless to Wordsworth and he notices how lively they seem to be, “Tossing their heads in sprightly dance” (12). Unlike the image that Keats observed on his urn, this is nature in motion—the flowers are waving and dancing in the breeze, delighting Wordsworth and making him feel a part of everything around him. They thrill him and he observes, “A poet could not but be gay, / In such a jocund company” (15-16). The connection he makes with the wide field of flowers and how they affect him is obvious, but unlike Keats, time is not a thief here, but something that only makes what he observes here all the sweeter once he is out of its sight.

While Wordsworth is very pleased with the scene he is observing in the poem, at the same time, he had “ but little thought / What wealth the show to me had brought” (17-18). He is in the moment and does not concern himself with how it is affecting him and for this poet, the passage of time does not rob him of what he saw but only makes his memories of the image more significant. He writes that when he is alone and it is quiet, the memory comes back to him, allowing him to make that connection to nature once again:

They flash upon that inward eye

Which is the bliss of solitude;

And then my heart with pleasure fills,

And dances with the daffodils. (21-24).

For Wordsworth, the memory only grows stronger with time; it is not faded or diminished, like the images on Keats’ urn, but a blessed gift that he can return to again and again, making him feel peaceful and giving him that all-important connection with nature that was so vital to poets of this time period.

The Romantic poets of the eighteenth century spent much time and energy pondering nature and its existence in time in their poetry, but none more so than John Keats and William Wordsworth. While each of these poets strove to understand man’s relation with nature and time, there were startling contrasts to how each of them approached the subjects. This contrast is obvious in Wordsworth’s “ I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” and Keats’ “ Ode on a Grecian Urn.” While each of these pieces discusses the beauty of nature

and how timeless it is, Keats mourns how lost memories and time can distort it, while Wordsworth revels in the joy of human memory and perception and how it can make the sights that we see in the natural world all the more sweeter, giving us an even finer appreciation of its gifts when we recall them. No matter if we see time as a thief of our memories or something that makes them even more beautiful, one thing is for certain—it sets the world on its axis and gives us an appreciation of the natural beauty that surrounds us, no matter how much of it we each have left.

References

Keats, J. (2008). Ode on a grecian urn. In L. Kirzner and S. Mandell. (Eds.), *Compact Literature*. (8th ed.) (pp. 1007.) Boston: Bedford.

Wordsworth, W. (2008). I wandered lonely as a cloud. In L. Kirzner and S. Mandell (Eds.), *Compact Literature*. (8th ed.) (pp. 897). Boston: Bedford.