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TITLE: Inanimate Witness of History

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PAGES: 228-234

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/1379348>

## INANIMATE WITNESS OF HISTORY

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### Abstract

*John Keats is known as an English Romantic poet and his “Ode on a Grecian Urn” reflects the characteristics of romanticism which emerged in the late 18th century. Keats was the representative of both English and European romantic movement. An ancient Grecian Urn is the main focus of the poem which is built on a recognizable plan in three parts. The first stanza represents the introduction, the second, third and fourth stanza forms the main part, and the last stanza covers the conclusion. Keats analyzes pictures on different sides of the urn in detail to find out some clues about the societies living in the past. he reflects his own feelings individually without any outer interferences. The poem reflects the adversity between the permanence of art and transience of human life. The poet also interacts with the urn throughout the whole poem and searches multiple meanings. For this reason, the poem can be regarded as a journey into the mind of Keats, and thus it serves as a bridge between past and present. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on how this literary piece reflects complexities of Keats’ response to life, and he tries to relate a work of art to real life.*

**Keywords:** John Keats, Ode, Romanticism, Urn

### 1. Introduction

John Keats is known as an English Romantic poet and his “Ode on a Grecian Urn” reflects the characteristics of romanticism which emerged in the late 18th century. According to Douglas Bush, Keats was “not only one of the principal voices of English and European romanticism but – what is more important – a poet whose stature has grown through all vicissitudes of taste and outlook that have marked the past century and a half” (11). This proves that his works address even today. An ancient Grecian Urn is the main focus of the poem, and it serves as a bridge between past and present. Keats analyzes pictures on different sides of the urn in detail to find out some clues about the societies living in the past. He compares various scenes depicted on a vase which is the symbol of the unchanged in his “Ode on a Grecian Urn”. The poem shows

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the complexities of Keats's response to life and he tries to relate a work of art to real life.

The main question lying behind this ode is the contrast between eternity and mortal human life. As a matter of fact, the pictures on the urn shed light on the historical events which may have taken place centuries ago since they are permanently painted on it. It represents the major characteristics of Romanticism such as imagination, nature, and emotion. The poem is built on a recognizable plan in three parts. The first stanza represents the introduction, the second, third and fourth stanza forms the main part, and the last stanza covers the conclusion. In the introductory part, there is the urn in its mystery which causes several questions in the poet's mind. Various scenes depicted on the urn produce a tension between the actual world of phenomena and the realm of art in the main part. The last part is about the experience gained from the contemplation of the urn which is related to reality. This urn plays an important role since it carries the traces of the past and inspires Keats to write his poem. In this respect, the purpose of this article is to show in what ways Keats is a representative of Romantic Movement and how he evidently shows his romantic features in his "Ode on Grecian Urn".

## **2. Romanticism and its Reflection in John Keats' "Ode On a Grecian Urn"**

In his poem, the poet addresses and praises the urn since he regards it as the continuation of life. In fact, he appreciates the imperishability of the urn. The events on the urn give information about beautiful things such as love, singing or happiness; however, the poet reminds that these beautiful concepts cannot last forever. They are bound to disappear after the death unlike the urn. The first stanza shows a mysterious situation, and the opening lines of the poem attract the reader's attention immediately. The poet stands in front of the urn and talks to it as if it was animate; "Thou still unravished bride of quietness, / Thou foster child of silence and slow time," (1-2). This means that the urn keeps its mystery in silence. It has been preserved through the passing ages without any destruction. There is something beyond noise and change which is the ideal world of permanence.

In spite of the centuries that passed, the urn still remains the same and that is the reason why Keats regards it "unravished bride" on which the painted figures have been captured. At this point, Keats becomes aware that the beauty of the urn may be not only deathless but also lifeless. This means that art cannot be substitute for the true experience of life with all its mystery, and he explains the everlasting nature of art through the urn. Romantics are attracted by the past, and thus they usually refer to ancient Greek art since it stands for beauty. This is an important factor which leads Keats to write an ode about a Grecian urn.

Romantics give importance to idealism in their works, and this is also the case for Keats since he idealizes the urn itself. Everything is exposed to change except art which is the urn in the poem. Keats thinks that the urn is better story teller than human beings by saying that "Sylvan historian, who canst thus express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:" (3-4). While poetry is bound to sequential time to display all the images on the urn, the urn's whole dimension is eternal. This is an example of

admiration which is related to idealism. Moreover, imagination is a key element of romanticism, and it is used as a medium to get away from unpleasant realities by romantic poets. They believed that the individual could find a way to explain truth, virtue, and ideal through imagination. The Romantics thought that it was possible to help people save the world from falsehood, evil, ugliness and open the way to a better reality beyond the unknown familiar one. William Blake expresses his thoughts about imagination as; “[t]he world of imagination is the world of eternity; it is divine bosom into which we shall go after the death of Vegetated body. All things are comprehended in their eternal forms in the divine body of the saviour, the True Vine of Eternity, the human Imagination” (qtd. in Bowra 3).

Keats attempts to escape from the dangers of life by creating a new world in his imagination, and his new imaginary world is away from the grim facts of life. He finds a dream world in his poems to move away from the reality like the other Romantics, that is, he uses his ability to give meanings to ordinary materials to establish his dream world, and he puts the urn in the center of his poem. Peter Westland clarifies the importance that the Romantics paid to trivial materials as;

The great Romantic poets found it [the sense of mystery] not only in the inspiration of the Middle Ages and Greek art, but also in the simplicities of everyday life; an ordinary sunset, a walk over the hills, a cluster of spring flowers, the rain-bearing west wind, the song of the nightingale, a cottage girl, a simple old dales man – such are a few of the subjects that inspired to supreme achievement a Wordsworth, a Coleridge, a Shelley, a Keats (19).

Poetry was the product of the poet’s own mind and imagination. Just like other Romantic poets, Keats also searched for ways to escape from the difficult conditions of life to a realm of beauty and the whole poem is based on his power of imagination. For this reason, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” can be accepted as the victory of human imagination. Additionally, the urn takes Keats from the ordinary world of thought into the extraordinary world of imagination, and he is curious about the figures on each side of the urn. He questions that “In Tempe or the dales of Arcady? / What men or gods are these? What maidens loath? / What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?” (7-10). He talks about the efforts he has made to reach the ideal world. Keats begins to search for the meaning beyond the actual figures and several questions come to his mind when he contemplates the motifs on the urn. As the “pipes and timbrels” have brought the idea of music into Keats’s mind, he continues with the contradiction in the second stanza;

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard

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

Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,

Pipe to the spirit dities of tone.

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave (11-15).

There is an implicit paradox in these stanzas, that is, the music that cannot be heard is regarded sweeter since it appeals to the spirit rather than the ears. This proves that spirituality is more significant than sensuality for the poet. Keats attempts to express his experience with the notion of silence. He implies that everything transient had to be related to permanent reality, and thus the artist can go beyond the actual through his imagination.

Keats also touches upon the concept of time in this ode. Art passes beyond the time since it fixes sudden moments and creates a quality of permanence. For example, denial of time and change are shown by the trees which are demonstrated on the Grecian Urn and can never “be bare” (16). The scenes represented in the second stanza exemplifies this situation; “Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss, / Though winning near the goal---yet, do not grieve; / She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss / Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!” (17-20). The lovers on the urn symbolize both eternal youth and hope. Keats contrasts the world of time and change with the world of permanence while thinking the changeless scenes on the urn. The lover in the pursuit of the woman does not need to worry about the time since her beauty will never fade on the urn. Keats mentions the unending happiness in the third stanza and states that;

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed  
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;  
And, happy melodist, unweari-ed,  
Forever piping songs forever new;  
More happy love! more happy, happy love!  
Forever warm and still to be enjoyed,  
Forever panting, and forever young; (21-27)

Similarly, there is no notion of time in this stanza, and the flute player will pipe songs forever since it is the ideal melody beyond all existing melodies. The repetition of “happy” underlines the changing continuity of ideal life since the trees will not shed their leaves. He expresses this situation with cheerful excitement as the beauty of the trees is carved on a vase. Furthermore, the repetition of “forever” in this stanza refers to the eternal nature of the figures that exist on the urn. Besides, the poet compares the image of two happy lovers to real ones who have “a burning forehead, and a parching tongue” (30). The lovers carved on the urn can escape from the painful sides of life. The repetition of “happy love” conveys the contrast of ordinary concepts of love with that of the lovers portrayed on the urn. Their love is happier than any mortal being can enjoy as it will be warm forever. Unlike this eternal love, human love may bring sorrow though it may be enjoyed physically.

The idea of beauty has a deep impact on Romanticism. Romantic poets signify the beauty of simple objects to hide negative parts of material world. According to Michael Ferber, “[b]eauty alone makes the whole world happy, and each and every being forgets its limitations while under its spell” (20). Keats thinks that the urn looks beautiful just

like a bride, and it becomes the symbol of reality. This beautiful urn will resist against the eroding effects of time even after the centuries since real beauty is equal to immortality. Its beauty will remain the same, and it will transmit its beauty from one generation to another. According to Karl Kroeber, Keats's urn "aims to be taken as both a real concrete object and as an ideal; for it is central to the Romantic understanding of Greek art that such art actually produced, at its finest moments, perfect and complete embodiments of a perfect and complete idea of the Beautiful" (447). Keats presents the urn as an ideal object which represents the eternity.

Keats describes a Pagan ritual rather than Christianity in the fourth stanza. He is not a Christian, and he believes that Christianity restricts the thoughts and free will of individuals. He contemplates a complete different religious ceremony to be away from the religious belief of the material world. The mysterious priest preparing an animal for ritual sacrifice reveals Keats's ambiguous state of mind since he suddenly realizes "little town by river or sea shore, / Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel" (35-36). Furthermore, he becomes aware that this little town is deserted, and its streets are forever silent; "And, little town, thy streets for evermore / Will silent be; and not a soul to tell / Why thou art desolate, can e'er return" (38-40). As the poet faces the emptiness and the silence of the town, he thinks that the timeless perfection of art has its own imperfection. Moreover, Keats believes that the urn only gains meaning when the imagination fills it, and he exclaims that;

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede  
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,  
With forest branches and the trodden weed;  
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
As doth eternity. Cold Pastoral! (41-46)

Keats implies that works of art seduce man from the ordinary life of thought to the extraordinary life of imagination, that is, he attempts to relate the meaning of this timeless enjoyment to the actual world of time. The phrases "Cold Pastoral!" and "silent form" suggest the poet's own surprise, in that, he complains about the coldness of the urn. Moreover, romantics give their messages without criticizing the life itself in their works. The urn breaks its silence by giving a message at the end of the poem; "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'---that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (49-50). These lines are actually poet's imagination since the urn cannot talk as Cleanth Brooks indicates "we ordinarily do not expect an urn to speak at all" (155). Keats implicitly tells that the true beauty is the one which stands against the truth of time. The poet uses the word "beauty" to describe the truth and dreams about being surrounded with different types of beauty during his life.

It is known that the Romantics are affected by Plato who created two different worlds in his mind. Plato is in the pursuit of the truth, and he thinks that the events people experience in this world are illusionary. Ernest Bernbaum explains that; "[o]ne was the world of ideal truth, goodness, and beauty: this was eternal, infinite, and absolutely real.

The other was the world of appearances, which to common sense was the only world, and which to the idealists was so obviously full of untruth, ignorance, evil and ugliness” (304). Therefore, the last line of the poem can be associated with the Plato’s world of Ideas and world of Appearances. Since the soul comes from the world of Ideas, the perfect world can only be reached via spirituality. It is possible to claim that the word “beauty” refers to the world of Ideas while “truth” is related to the world of Appearances in “Ode on a Grecian Urn”.

Nature is a crucial aspect of Romanticism since it is the tangible manifestation of God’s existence. According to Romantics, nature can guide man to the ideal, and that is why Keats refers to nature throughout his poem. Westland clarifies Keats’s method of using nature in his poems as; “Keats is content to express his nature through the senses; the color, the scent, the touch, the pulsing music – these are the things that stir him to his depths; there is not a mood of Earth he does not love, not a season that will not cheer and inspire him” (140). Keats is affected by the nature, and he associates senses like smell, sight, touch and hearing with the nature in “Ode on a Grecian Urn”. For example, he refers the color “green” to describe the trees since they are frozen on the urn, and they will never shed their leaves. Also, Keats associates the hearing with music which is stated nearly in each stanza. In addition to this, Keats’s word choices such as “flowery, pipes, pastoral, and river” exemplify how he is influenced by the beauty of the nature.

### **3. Conclusion**

Individualism occurred as a result of Romanticism, in that, the spirit of Romanticism was shaped by radical individualism. This individualism means separation from the society, and people are absorbed into the nature to find themselves. Romantics put forward that people feel better in nature and that is why, they leave urban materialistic societies which are in corrupt. Like the other romantic poets, Keats talks about the significance of the nature in his “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, and he reflects his own feelings individually without any outer interferences. As a result, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” reflects the adversity between the permanence of art and transience of human life. Keats interacts with the urn throughout the whole poem and searches multiple meanings. For this reason, the poem can be regarded as a journey into the mind of Keats. His observations of the urn raise some questions about the nature of truth, beauty, power of imagination and the function of art all of which were the main concerns of Romantic poets.

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