

John Keats' Ode on a Grecian Urn: The timeless reprise of antiquity, classical mythology and eternal beauty

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Abstract

Classical mythology has been a generously-giving spur of English poetry contributing themes, characters, and plots hundreds of years. In the present paper, the ubiquitous theme of classical mythology in English literature, i.e., the myth of eternal beauty prevailing in ancient mythologies, will be refuted. For since borrowing from John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," this piece reads the manner in which authors and poets have responded to the ancient concept of beauty, from mythological image and narrative to trace its contradictory nature: its beauty and repression, its ability to endure through time and inability to partake in the life. Criticism brings the Grecian art down to the dust since the chariot of immortality in Keats' ode and at last relies upon the fact that the poem is a passionate criticism of the complicated interdependence of art, beauty, death, and the immortality of classical myth.

Keywords: Classical mythology, English Literature, John Keats, Ode on A Grecian Urn, eternal beauty, grecian art, myth, time, mortality, immortality

Introduction

The way myth transcends time and culture can be seen in Homer in his Iliad and Odyssey and Sophocles in Oedipus Rex. Individual earliest stories conceived under the Mediterranean sun are not of the wisdom of the human nature- love, ambition, destiny and the eternal problems of the human kind such as struggle of good and evil. This classical tradition has much to offer English literature, also, rewriting ancient myth and motif to develop the contemporary themes and describe universal truths. (Bush, 1937) [2].

The interesting thing about the classical mythology is that it can narrate profound philosophical concepts in thrilling tales. The heroes and heroines, monsters and mortals of the ancient mythologies are archetype characters and situations and are an explanation of how the human mind works and how the entire society works. (Frye, 1957). Moreover, the appreciation of physical and aesthetic beauty in classical mythology has been a stimulus to creativity among artists and writers since the existence of art and literature. Sought out, batted, foiled with time and death, the theme of beauty is timeless and has reappeared in literary pursuits of ancient times in numerous successive manifestations.

The paper aims at discussing how the classical mythology has had a long-term impact on the English literature more specifically in relation to the concept of timeless beauty. A close-up analysis of the poem by John Keats called Ode on a Grecian Urn studies the manner in which the poem addresses the character of the complexity and the frequent contradictory aspect of beauty in classical art and myth. It contends that the poem is a deep exploration of the tension of the beauty, mortality, and the continuity of classical mythology as a means of explaining the human condition through the consideration of how the poem has been used by

Keats to describe the urn as an aesthetic ideal and time-stopping symbol

Classical Mythology and the Hunt for Eternal Beauty

Classical mythology cannot be divorced out of eternity of beauty. The gods and goddesses residing in the world of immortality on Olympus were the embodiment of eternal youth and beauty. Their statues, which were made out of marble and attached them to poetry, solidified this connection between the divine and enduring beauty as well. Myths like the one of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty, and Apollo the god of music and arts put beauty on the highest level of importance in the pantheon, and in the thought of the culture in general.

Classical mythological search of everlasting beauty is though normally tragic and warning. The story of Narcissus, who falls in love with himself and dies because of it is also the warning about the danger of vanity and the danger that beauty can be a destructive phenomenon. In the same manner, the mythical figure of the Tithonus, who grows in immortality, but not in the youth, is a caution on the partially nature of bodily immortality and the need to accept that of the process of dying and being born into the world (Ovid, Metamorphoses).

In their own admiration of the body and beauty the ancient Greeks had been just as beautifully aware of the ephemerality of the human life. Their art, and particularly sculpture and vase painting, was disposed to be so framed as to fix momentary instants of motion and elegance to celebrate the activity of life as they knew it to be superficial. This tension between permanence and impermanence is probably one of the most basic aspects of the classical art and mythology, and it is conveyed very emphatically in the later artistic and literary works.

The Hellenic Ideal and John Keats

John Keats (1795-1821) himself was the ideal Romantic, famous as sensuous imagery, questioning beauty and mortality, and intense engagement in classical subject matter. (Bate, 1963). The poetry of Keats himself is replete with veneration of the art, and of the mythology of ancient Greece, whereof he gave the supreme inspiration aesthetic and philosophical. One of his best poems and the most beautiful poems in English language is his ode on a Grecian Urn of 1819. The poem concerns directly the question of beauty which is eternally on the face of a Greek urn, and it deconstructs its richness, providing a highly intellectual approach to the relations of this with time, its death, the psychology of the human being.

The familiarity of Keats with the classical mythology was not based to any significant degree on the actual familiarity with the ancient civilization or the languages. Instead, he was familiar with literary and art images of the classical world through translation, sculpture and painting which he read in a Romanticism style that emphasized emotion, imagination and sublime. Thus, he was able to read the classical ideal to himself and as an artist interpreting its themes and motives in his own pictorial and philosophical interests.

The prose of Keats is filled with enthusiasm over Greek art and mythology, the ultimate source of philosophical and aesthetic stimulation available to him. In England, there is no finer poem than "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819). The poem is concerned with timelessness beauty which has been cut on a Greek urn. The poet explores its richness and provides a very adult perspective of the way in which it relates to time, death and human mind.

Ode on a Grecian Urn: An Immortal Conversation

The "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a poetic dialogue with the artefact itself, an urn holding pictures of many scenes of life in ancient Greece. The poem is a meditation on the objects and figures depicted on the urn and brings the speaker to consider the nature of beauty, truth, and the relationship between art and reality.

The poem starts by addressing a set of questions to the urn: "Thou still unravished bride of quietness, / Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time." (Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," lines 1-2). The urn is already established here as a site of stillness, as opposed to the active motion of time, and rather towards its own stillness and quiet. The term still unravished bride gives the impression of virginity and untarnished beauty as though the urn had been able to shelter itself in an unviolated and immune position against the ravishments of time and transformation.

While viewing the time frozen in existence on the urn, the speaker finds himself even more drawn into the times of love and bliss without sounds. He witnesses the retinue of musicians, the pipes and timbrels permanently arrested playing: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on." (lines 11-12). This famous verse suggests that silent, unseen music of the urn is more effective than real music, just because it is located in the realm of pure potentiality, not troubled by the frailties and distractions of the world of time.

The second stanza contains the setting of young passion and desire, in which a young man is courtship a maid. The speaker feels wonder and outrage over this endless now of frustrated longings: "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, / For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!" (17-20). The speaker takes hold here of the paradox of immortality. As the lovers avoid the pain of loss and deterioration, they also avoid the recognition of their passions. They are trapped forever in a state of anticipation, never reaching its culmination.

The third stanza of the poem offers a procession of villagers driving a heifer to the sacrifice, the creation of an atmosphere of religious ceremony and of village celebration. The urn stands at the heart of the scene, and that is where the "little town" from which these villagers hailing are depicted to be as eternal and forgotten: "And little town, thy streets for evermore / Will silent be; and not a soul to tell / Why thou art desolate, can e'er return" (lines 25-27). This is the power of the power of art to remind us of things and stories, giving a sort of immortality that transcends the limits of individual life.

The Paradox of Eternal Beauty: Timeless Immortalization

Keats' beauty in his ode is the ensnaring of the eternal paradox of beauty. The Grecian urn shows us a vision of the world free from time and deterioration, and yet shows as much a vision of stasis and possibility that never comes to be. The poem wrestles with how probable it ever can be to have heavenly beauty existent in its frozen form or if it needs to be found rather in the imperfection and change of the moving world.

The beauty that is preserved in the urn forever is a form of beauty that survives life. The corpses of humans on the urn are frozen in an eternally present, and they are unable to develop, alter, or experience the full range of human emotions. While they are free from the pain of loss and decomposition, they are also free from the pleasure of consummation and richness of experience.

This dilemma of seeking the beauty that is eternal and the fact of mortality of the man is summed up in the last two lines of the poem: Beauty is truth, truth beauty,--that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know (lines 49-50). These fire lines have been read in as many ways as one can imagine, and the most immense accomplishment man has made was the one that led to beauty and truth. However the poem also speaks of the restrictions of such a search and suggests that beauty and truth are abstractions and maybe ultimately an illusion of the variety of life.

The final line of the urn can be interpreted as the assurance of the eternally unending strength of art to offer the comfort and the feeling in the face of death. Alternatively, one could understand it as a very free and even ironical comment, which suggests that the search of immortal beauty is avoidance of the demands of the human nature.

The classical Myth, Timeless Testimony and the Ode

The very fact that Keats composed Ode on a Grecian Urn, a testament to the classical myth as the power to inspire and appeal to artistic and intellectual feeling. The questions about the beauty of the eternity of the poem, the questions concerning the character of the relation between life and art, the reflective discovery of the limitation of time, are all still relevant about nowadays. The poem is half a literary work of beauty devoted to the classical art because it is a focused examination of what it is like to be a human and seek meaning amid a time when evanescence defines everything.

The influence of the classical mythology on literature and the arts has been realized through the "Ode" as well as an earlier work. The way artists and writers have described and drawn on the classical space has been influenced by its explanation of the contradictory nature of beauty that is, its interest in the tension between the fixities of shape and the evanescence of life, and its interest in how and why one is moved by such descriptions of such experiences.

In addition to this, the fact that the poem remained popular indicates that classical myth may remain relevant as a source of knowledge about human nature and social forces. The old Greek and Roman mythology and legend still forms a profound well of insight into love, loss, ambition, fate, and eternity of bad and good, and so a fine market of fantasy into modern artistic and intellectual life.

Conclusion

The Romantics obsession with the past gave the English literature rich store of imaginative material and in the Ode on a Grecian Urn, Keats appeals to the tradition and uses it in questions the paradox of eternity of art and transience of people. The prevailing cult of beauty; so, entrenched in ancient art and mythological tradition, has been a very alluring object of desire by poets and artists. The Ode on a Grecian Urn by John Keats is an in-depth insight into such an affair that offers a fruitful image of the paradoxical reality of beauty as stated in the classical art of portraiture.

The poem by Keats makes the readers speculate on the possibility and limitation of life to eternal beauty. Though the Grecian Urn introduces the readers to a world without time and dissolution and to an image of fixity and perhaps frustrated life, causes them to question whether there is ever any beauty that exists in a world of ceaseless arrested perfection, or must hide the motion and flux of things to survive.

Finally, Ode on a Grecian Urn is a testimony to the prolonged existence of classical mythology and to its continued ability to remain pertinent to our information about human nature. The beauty, truth, death, and immortality, as introspected in the poem, is a touching and poignant testament to a long history of art and to the quest of man to find a sense in a temporary existence. By invoking the classical concept of beauty, Keats created a poem which outlived its time and spoke of the universal human need to extend and find meaning in the face of death. The authority of antiquity, which was so eloquently immortally generated in the ode of Keats, lives in the present, reminding us of the eternity of myth, of the long-lived power of beauty.

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