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JOHN KEATS WAS A TRUE ROMANTIC POET

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ABSTRACT

“Ode on a Grecian Urn” was written by John Keats in 1819 and published in 1820. In this poem Keats compares human life as transient as it is everlasting. The theme of the ode is that a thing of beauty, depicted in art, is immortal. This ode is a regular ode, for it is written in the same metre throughout, and all its stanzas consist of the same number of lines, i.e., ten.

Keywords:- transient, beauty, art, immortal, depicted

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INTRODUCTION

John Keats was born on October, 31, 1795. He worked as a surgeon at Edmonton. Under the influence of Leigh Hunt and with the help of Clarke, Keats now settled down to a literary life. Keats was a man of great courage and, instead of being crushed by adverse criticism, he went on with his work with the idea of producing poetry that the world should not let die. As Matthew Arnold says, Keats had “flint and iron” in him. *Endymion* is romantic in subject, treatment and language. It contains an extravagant wealth of imagery and suffers from an excess of unnecessary details. But it also contains some remarkable passages of great beauty and charm.

Keats' life made pathetic reading exposure during a walking tour in Scotland and the strain of nursing his brother Tom, who died in December, 1818, brought about a breakdown in his health. He felt very depressed and downcast. To aggravate his misery, he fell passionately in love with a girl called Fanny Brawne who did not respond to his love. According to some biographers, she had agreed to marry him but he could not marry her on account of his poverty and growing illness.

Keats published only one more volume, “*Hyperion*” and other poems in 1820. This volume contains his great contributions to literature: The fragmentary *Hyperion*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, the splendid Odes *Ode to Autumn*, *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on Melancholy*, and *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, and a ballad *Labelle Dame Sans*

Merci. All these are precious treasures of English poetry. Shelley was so impressed by the beauty and promise of Hyperion that he sent a generous invitation to Keats to come to Pisa and live with him, but Keats declined the invitation as he had little sympathy with Shelley's social and political views. Keats had seen a premature death due to Tuberculosis. He died in Rome on February 23, 1821, and was buried in the old Protestant cemetery near the Pyramid of Caius Cestius. Conscious to the last and attended by rare devotion by Severn, he chose his own epitaph: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water". Young as he died, he was one of the most germinal poets, and left a deep mark on English Literature.

Ode on a Grecian Urn

Ode on a Grecian Urn was written in 1819 and published in 1820. In this poem Keats compares human life as transient as it is everlasting. The theme of the ode is that a thing of beauty, depicted in art, is immortal. This ode is a regular ode, for it is written in the same metre throughout, and all its stanzas consist of the same number of lines, i.e., ten.

The poem consists of five stanzas. In the first stanza the poet addresses the Grecian Urn (case) and refers to the scenes carved on one of the sides. In the second stanza the poet suggests that beauty and love, depicted on this side of the urn, are eternal. In the third, the poet contrasts human love with the love depicted in art. In the fourth, he refers to the scene of animal sacrifice depicted on the other side of the urn. In the fifth, he suggests that the Grecian urn has a message for mankind namely 'beauty is truth, truth is beauty'.

According to W.T. Arnold. The Greek vase which inspired Keats, was no fragment of his imagination but had a real existence, and is now it is said, "under the arcade at the south front of Holland House".

But the love scene and the pastoral sacrifice scene do not occur together on any single work of ancient art, and Keats probably imagined his urn by a combination of sculptures actually seen in the British Museum with other known to him only from engravings and particularly from Piranesi's teachings.

A.S. Murray believes that "Keats obtained his knowledge of the urn from Piranesi's work (volume XIII), published in 1750. Which gives an engraving of it. In that engraving a small crowd of people came from the left towards a veiled priest who stands beside an altar, beside which also a youth plays on pipes. On the right a heifer is being led to the sacrifice". It has been further said that the inspiration of this ode came from a collection of pieces of Greek sculpture which had been acquired by the British Museum from the owner, Lord Elgin in 1816.

The poet is charmed by the urn, and the figures carved on it remind him of the legends associated with them and produce in him a thrill of delight. He tries to revive in his imagination the festive occasion of the sacrifice carved on the urn. As he projects his imagination into the dim past by means of these figures on the urn, he thinks of the glory of Greek art, giving us an insight into Greek attitude towards life and their love of beauty in its sensuous phase. Keats loves the principle of beauty in all things. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is that it sums up Keats' conception of beauty.

Beauty is truth, truth is beauty, that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know".

This fairly sums up his poetic creed. An intense sensibility to all forms of physical beauty everything that pleases the eye of seeing and of hearing and of feeling, the glad thrill produced by pleasurable sights appeals to the quickly vibrate in response this is the provocative principle of the greater part of Keats' poetry. He stands by himself in solitary grandeur in his devotion to the sensuous beauty of things.

The poem provides us with many examples of Keats' pictorial quality. The string of interrogatories in the first stanza which flash their own answer which are at the same time pictures.

What men or gods are thee? What maidens loth?

What made pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What pipes and tumbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Another remarkable picture is that of the bold lover, who though winning near the goal, can never kiss his beloved and yet another is the picture of a young cow being led to the altar to be sacrificed".

To what green altar, O mysterious priest

Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest".

The poet employs suggestive and meaningful adjective such as sylvan historian, flowers tale, leaf fring'd legend happy boughs, silken flanks and pious mourn.

Keats addresses the urn as the still unravished bride of quietness and the foster-child of silence and slow time in the first stanza. This brings out the silent aspect' of the urn as well as maidenly beauty, grace and delicacy of a bride. In the next line the urn is called sylvan historian'. Sylvan because it belongs to the rural world and historian because it tells us something about the past. And the Urn can tell the story much more attractively than what poet can through his verse(Aflowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme). The figures carved in the Urn(Keats is not sure whether they are gods or common man, probably as the leaf fringed legend) and their story is a sort of mystery for keats(haunts conveys the sense of mystery). Since the urn is Grecian the places mentioned are Temple of Arcady. The string of questions in the set shows keats' intense curiosity to know what the sculptured figures on the urn represent. At the same time they show the readers how the Urn looked. The scene represented on the Urn shows life in action. The action is some what hectic mad pursuit and struggle to escape. There is music and intense pleasure(wild ecstasy). Thus the whole of the first stanza is concrete in its detail.

When we come to the second stanza we move from the physical to the spiritual plane. It seeks to tell us that imagined experiences are much more pleasant than real ones. Those represented in art will be made permanent and immortal in the mind and moment in which they are caught. The trees will never be bare and the youth will never be tired. And as for the lover, his love will be ever fresh since it has not had its fulfillment. There is much more joy in anticipation, than in achievement.

The third stanza is continuation of the second, which amply brings forth the superiority of art over life. In art, passion is ever fresh and youthful where as in real life it leaves a heart high-sorrowful" and cloyed"(satisfied and wearied by richness and sweetness) whose effects are shown on the physique as well (a burning forehead and parching tongue).

In the fourth stanza depicted on the other side of the urn is that of a medieval sacrifice. The alter' is green'(to suggest the rural atmosphere). The silken flanks of the animal suggest how young and beautiful the cow and also perhaps its innocence and purity. There are many people at the scene of the sacrifice and keats thinks of the little town that has been emptied today, for the whole of its population had come to witness the sacrifice. In his imagination he can see the town that is desolate and that will ever be desolate. Here lies the inferiority of art, Keats seems to tell us for art arrests the moment and there will be no change whatever in future. Till now keats had been rapturously signing the praises of art for its merits over nature but even art has its own drawbacks. So by the time we reach the fifth and final stanza the warmth have cooled down.

The urn now becomes a shape (though Attic). Though it represents men and women, it is no more human. The gestures are not real. What is real is its fair attitude' or the pose of the urn. 'Bredé' means the design to embroidery which is man-made. Though it shows the delicate craftsman, ship and is thing of beauty, it is perhaps no match for real life. Thus, there seems to be a contradiction in keats mind regarding his feelings towards the urn. It has suddenly become the cold pictorial because it is made of marble which is lifelines and perhaps also because it does not seem to sympathize with human life; whatever it is, the urn is like the thought of eternity which ever includes human imagination. It is an mysterious as the infinite human life is transient(old age shall this generation - generation waste) but art is immortal (Thou shalt woe). Now keats is reconciled to the coldness of the urn for the realize that the coldness is inherent in its nature and not deliberately inimical to man.

And so he calls it a friend to man whose message to mankind is no more than beauty is truth, truth is beauty". In this world of sorrow and change it is enough if we know that there is something permanent and joyful in the form of art.

Since this ode deals with imponderables of human life it is generally considered the most philosophical of keats odes. When compared to the 'Ode to a Nightingale' it is much less passionate and less

lyrical. But with regard to fine phrases, chiseled perfection of diction and the grace and symmetry of form no other ode can surpass the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. It is the most regular and dignified of Keats's odes.

The concluding lines of the poem which are famous and often quoted have given rise to an endless discussion and wide variety of interpretations. According to Robert Bridges the lines redeem a poem which is otherwise poor, while Quiller Couch, finds in them as uneducated conclusion, T.S.Eliot, however considers them as serious blemish on a beautiful poem. Prof.Carros says that truth' here means reality' and explains the lines perhaps rightly thus.

"There is nothing real but the beautiful, and nothing beautiful but the real".

Prof. C.M.Bowra restricts the scope for the message by saying that the lines should not be taken to mean a complete philosophy of life but theory of art, a doctrine intended to explain Keats's own creative experience. According to him, "the lines tell us what great art means to those who create it while they create it, and so long as this doctrine is not applied beyond its proper confines, it is not only clear but true". There is also an Indian view of the lines that they hint at Satyam, Sivam and Sundaram (inspiration and beautiful).

Keats was a true romantic poet. He possessed almost all the romantic traits and it would be true to say that the over-mastering elements in his poetry were essentially romantic. A Love of Nature, a love of beauty, interest in the strange and the mysterious, medievalism, subjectivity and imaginative power, all these can be found in his poetry. He also found in Nature an inspiration of poetry.

For what has made the same or

Poet write. But this fair paradise of Nature's light.

Like all romantic poets Keats seeks an escape in the past. He seeks solace in death, which is more vivid in his famous ode, Ode to a Nightingale.

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,

To cease upon the midnight with no pain.

The chief characteristics of Keats poetry are

(a). Minuteness of details

(b). Sensuousness

(c). Concreteness

All these can be illustrated in some of these examples. The following lines appeal to our smelling senses – I cannot see what flowers are at my feet. Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs. Both in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet.

Sense of sight:

Have ye tippled drink more fine,

Than mine host's canary wine.

Sense of sight:

Sitting Careless on a granary floor, the hair soft-lift by the winnowing wind.

Sense of hearing:

A little noiseless among the leaves,

Born of the very sigh that silence leaves.

(I stood Tip Toe upon a little hill).

CONCLUSION

Shelley was the first of his contemporaries to have recognized the Hellenic nature of Keats's poetic genius. Like Shelley Keats is regarded as a Hellenist. He loved Greek literature and myths and carefully studied Greek sculpture in the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum. He studied the Greek myths in Lampro's classical Dictionary and elsewhere and his love of them is vivid in Endymion. Lamia and Hyperion which had good myths for their themes.

By Hellenism a number of things is meant. First love of beauty, not in the abstract, but related to the form of female body. Secondly, it means passions for love. Thirdly, it means a belief in the supernatural beings. His imagination was deeply stirred by Homeric tales of the Gods and Goddesses of heroic deeds of the Greeks and Trojans in the war of Troy, and of the passionate love games.

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