

# Poetic Consciousness of John Keats - Ode on a Grecian Urn

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## **Abstract:**

**This paper tries to explain the poetic creativity of John Keats representing his ideas regarding the time and cultural norms, the poem of focus being “Ode on a Grecian Urn”. The paper explores the poetic processes in the poem through the expressions in language that take us to various times and spaces showing us the eternity of the creative urge in the mankind. Grecian Urn is a metaphor of the creativity which lives through the ages. In this research paper, the symbolism of ‘urn’ epitomising the poetic consciousness of John Keats has been studied with a lens of both Occidental and Oriental world views.**

**Keywords: Poetic consciousness, beauty, truth, paganism, John Keats, Rabindranath Tagore**

John Keats is an important English poet who represents the Romantic poets of English literature. His times, though he himself lives barely 25 years, (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Keats/The-year-1819>) represent a unique time in the history of Europe which represents the opening up of Europe to the ideas of several parts of the World. The centuries of Great Discoveries in maritime explorations have been over – which means that the ‘world’ has been discovered. And now the time to integrate the ideas from various parts of the World has started. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, it would be interesting to see how the Romantic Movement has integrated the ideas of the world as known to the English people at the beginning of the colonisation of various societies. This paper aims at the specific reading of a poem by John Keats entitled “Ode on a Grecian Urn” for understanding the time and space in the poetic consciousness of John Keats. There are not many studies of the odes by John Keats in this context. The purpose of this paper is to study John Keats for understanding the pagan consciousness integrated in his poetic consciousness, thus understanding his revolutionary ideas for his times.

The poem under consideration here is itself a symbolic representation of the times passed from the Greek Antiquity to the age of the poet’s creativity. The picture of the urn has been explained in various ways by the poet in the first stanza of the poem. The ‘urn’ is like the silent, secluded ‘unravished bride’ for which the time has slowed down. The picture remains the poet of the times which have already been lived and the ‘sylvan historian’ would talk about it, but the poetic form to express the story of the urn is more beautiful than all the historians would tell us about the form and function of the urn. Writing an ode for such an image from antiquity shows the respect the poet has for the survival of the age old values which have been revived during the post-Renaissance period in Europe. Keats evokes Greek images of ‘dales of Arcady’ and then asks questions regarding the identity of those lived in these places that inspire the contemporary times. The poet writes, “What men or gods are these?” and then discusses about various aspects of their lives. What the poet knows about them suits his taste as he says “heard melodies are sweet”, and the aspects he may not know about them triggers his imagination to explore the times represented by the Grecian Urn in the picture. The poet expresses this feeling, related to his poetic imagination, by the comparative expression ‘sweeter’

regarding the ‘unheard’ melodies. The urn, by various interpretations through linguistic expressions, appears to be unsuggestive in its symbolism as the poet expresses almost everything. As David Perkins writes about the imagery of Keats, which is apparently applicable on the imagery of ‘urn’ as well, that , “...a rather flat and unsuggestive use of an image which was later to acquire power from being condensed into the sustaining, emotional current...”.(Perkins, 1953) This imagery becomes a bit more flat when in the second stanza, Keats write that the ‘lover cannot kiss’ and that ‘she (=urn)’ cannot fade and will always remain ‘fair’. The time will not have any impact on the urn as it presents before us the lives of those who lived with the ‘idea’ of this ‘urn’ and we cannot “bid the Spring adieu” as the idea lives for ever. Those who perpetrate the idea (in this case the ‘urn’) live ‘unwearing’ and like a ‘happy love’, ‘forever young’ to the people who will understand the idea of the ‘urn’. The poet intends here perhaps that the generations will change and the ideas of good times, as represented by the ‘urn’ from the Antiquity, will remain young forever.

Such an idea of antiquity in a Christianised Europe is kind of a new light that brings happiness and diverse responses to some of the eternal existential and philosophical questions of humankind. The age of Keats often dealt with such questions as the Romantics were in the process of rejecting several age old Christian doctrines. That was the age of opening of the Anglo-European mind to the world across time and space. The first three stanzas take us to travel in space and more in time as the times of the Greek Antiquity along with their ideals and morals are presented to us through various images related to the Grecian Urn for which the poet has written an ode. It is not surprising that such a challenge by the poet was not immediately accepted during his time. Gradually the ideal of a material object inspiring the ideas across time and space gets poetic recognition and the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” becomes the “Ode to a Grecian Urn” as well. As Klaus Hoffman remarks, “Indeed, Keats’ poem is an ‘Ode’ not ‘on’ but ‘to’ a Grecian Urn” (Hoffman, 2006). This change of the ‘on’ to ‘to’ makes the ‘urn’ itself the object of praise in the ode. The poem is about (as expressed by ‘on’) the urn, and the ‘ode’ is attributed to the ‘urn’. This interplay would represent the acceptance and reception of the ideas that poet presents through the imagery of ‘urn’ from the Greek Antiquity. In the subsequent stanzas also, the poet continues the same representation of ideas through the images from the times of the pagan Antiquity of the Ancient Greece. The ‘urn’ is desolate and yet symbolizes so many actions and ideas from the past. Keats explains all these ideas by the images of ‘sacrifice’, ‘altar’, ‘priest’, ‘river’, ‘sea shore’ and situations like ‘pious morn’, ‘streets for evermore will silence be’. There is no one who can decipher the history or narrate the story of the ‘urn’ to us – yet the ‘urn’ represents so much for us. And this travel in time and space further goes to the new worlds and new ideas that the poet gets from the ‘orient’. The ‘Orient’, whatever spatial designations it might have, has been an important aspect of the Romantic Movement ideas. The last stanza takes us to the Indic roots of ideas as well.

The last stanza of the poem has a famous line:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”

These lines have been extensively used in the context of the Indian understanding of truth, beauty and aesthetic or philosophical concepts on life and its various aspects. As Vijay Kumar Roy writes, “Keats’ concept of beauty was Oriental in its multi-chromatic grandeur, an expression of the rare mental quality known as synaesthesia. He was aware of the true realm of beauty. Beauty was his religion. He expressed it through his pure heart, but unfortunately he could not live longer and could not express it fully, therefore he is misunderstood. His later works reveal his true concept of beauty and that is the source to perceive his hidden ideal that “Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty.” (Roy, 2013) Roy has clearly shown here the closeness of the Keats’ concept of beauty and truth to the Indian ways of understanding these concepts. He further cites from George Santayana and states that he “supports this view and illustrates that, “We know on excellent

authority that beauty is truth, that it is the expression of the ideal, the symbol of divine perfection, and the sensible manifestation of the good.” ([www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org))” (as cited by Roy)

The idea of ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’ has been studied by several thinkers. Even great minds like Tagore discussed these ideas. As Aruna Ray writes in *Ancestral Heritage of Rabindranath*, “The literary heritage of India deals with the ideal of ultimate Beauty which is interwoven with the ideal of ultimate Truth, and Goodness—the eternal ideal of Satyam, Shivam and Sundaram. So the conception of Beauty or Sundaram is not a singular idea. Beauty is futile in the Indian eye if it does not terminate into ultimate Truth, and if there be not any ideal of Goodness. Any idea, bereft of Goodness is taken as inauspicious and should not be a topic of literature.” (Ray, 1975)

The last two lines of the poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” appear to have left indelible influences on the creative genius of Tagore. Saroj N. Ray remarks, “Tagore was known as the Shelley of Bengal. Perhaps the reason lay in the poet's revolutionary ardour, the exuberance of his imagination and to some extent, his prolific imagery. The poetry of his youth also shared the airiness and sentimental vehemence of Shelley, not to speak of the unworldliness of the English poet. But his preferences were for Keats from whom he seemed to have drawn his inspiration as an artist. The English poet's creed, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' found an echo in Tagore's oft-repeated phrase Satyam Shivam Sundaram (Truth, good and beauty are identical).” (Ray, 1960) These studies on Tagore and influences on Tagore of Keats show us how much Keats was close to the Indian mind as his writings could find easily an echo to the thought processes of an Indian genius who equally tried to amalgamate the worldview of his contemporary times (almost a Century later than Keats) to show the similar ideals of the world that a Pagan-centric Christian mind in Keats could visualise. The ideas in the times from these Pagans (whether ancient Greek or the living traditions of India) influenced the creative urge of Keats in such a way that his poetic expressions concretised in the references and intertextuality of texts travelling far beyond his times in terms of time and space.

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