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### HELLENISM IN JOHN KEATS'S *ODE ON A GRECIAN URN*



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#### **ABSTRACT**

*According to history, Greek was very advance in all the aspects of civilization. Then they were the icon of all kinds of cultural activities for the whole people of the world. As a result, in the field of literature, the feature of their civilization was a potential influence. Many poets, especially in English literature were inspired from them, but John Keats was the most important name among the poets. His literary achievements were a tremendous notable side of English poetry. It was the query of*

*the critics of all time that under what kind of influence Keats was so successful dealing with Greek customs in his literature. Along with this, his technique of writing in this discussable point should be mentioned briefly. So the essence and main subject of this thesis was depended upon the experiment on the "Hellenism" or Greekness of Keats in his literary works.*

#### **KEYWORDS**

*Civilization, Essence, Hellenism, Query, Tremendous. Greek Culture*

## RESEARCH PAPER

### INTRODUCTION

John Keats, is one of the greatest romantic poet from the second generation of Romantic poetry. He is famous in the history of English literature as the youngest among the Younger Romantics. His masterpieces poems are *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, *Ode to Nightingale*, *Ode to Psyche* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn* etc. *ode on a Grecian Urn* is one of the several 'Great Odes' written by Keats in 1819. These poems reveal the poet's preoccupation of beauty in objects as well as experiences around him in both life and nature.

A recurring theme in Keats's odes (seen in this poem as well) is the transience and mutability of life in contrast to the timelessness and permanence of art. This particular ode is an *ekphrastic* poem meaning one which describes, is inspired by and meditates upon a work of art – painting, sculpture, etc.

In the ancient time Greek was called 'Hellas' and the inhabitants of Greek were called 'Hellenes'. The word 'Hellenism' comes from that 'Hellenes' meaning the Greek culture and civilization .But Hellenism is not confined within Greek. It is a popular literary term and style .It is well known that the European civilization in modern time was influenced by Greek philosophy. So, it is very natural that these Hellenic or Greek culture had largely contributed to the world literature and civilization. However, the literary term 'Hellenism' is connected mostly with John Keats, John Milton or Swinburne .But Keats was the supreme master among the poets dealing with 'Hellenism' for all era. He did it so smartly that no other poet even in Greek overcame him. Actually, he had established the 'Hellenic' style in English poetry and given an extraordinary gravity to Greek culture. While studying Keats's poems depended upon this style, I found that Keats wrote those poems with a special kind of temperament and interest, which is above all unique. Keats was inspired through many sources for this purpose. The main features, influences and aspects are briefly discussed in this thesis. Though Keats was a born Englishman, P.B.Shelley once said that Keats was a Greek. We are well known that in his short life of twenty five years, Keats had not get any opportunity to research on Greek culture, mythology or any other customs. So we are very wondered in what kind of way Keats blended his carrier with 'Hellenic' customs. As Keats had not inherited any Greek culture, probably he was overpowered toward everything that was Greek. Actually, he was a born Greek in heart. So there need not any special support for him to write in this peculiar diction. I think there is no other poet in English literature except Keats having such an outstanding capacity. So it is not too much to say that John Keats had discovered the glamour of Greek custom better than any other Greek poet. He was influenced from many sources like translations of Greek classics, classical dictionary, Greek sculpture, mythology,

anthropomorphic faculty and his passion for beauty. But I think the most active influence was probably his own tendency and nature. History narrates that Greek was very advance in all aspects of Civilization. Then they were the icon of all kinds of cultural activities for the whole people of the world. As a result in the field of literature, the feature of their Civilization was a potential influence. Many poets, especially in English literature were inspired from them, but John Keats was the most important among them. His literary achievements were a tremendous notable Side of English poetry. It was the query of the critics of all time that under what kind of influence Keats was so successful in dealing with Greek customs in his literature. Along with this his technique of writing in this discussable point should be mentioned briefly, So the essence and main subject of this paper was depended upon the experiment on the “HELLENISM” or Greekness of Keats in his literature works. The word “Hellenism” is derived from the word “Hellene” which means Greek. So, Hellenism means Greek temperature quality, culture, manner, Greek spirit and Greek idioms. English literature sustained its greatest loss due to the premature death of John Keats. He was not only the last but also the most perfect of the Romantics. Keats among the Romantics was different in many ways, especially in mood, temperature, spirit and love of Greek art, culture and mythology. Keats “Hellenism” on his love for Greek arts, Sculpture and mythology has made him distinct in the gallery of Romantics. It was Shelly who first expressed his opinion that “Keats was a Greek” though, Keats was not an English man or not an English poet. His passion of Greek ideas and idols was very great which vividly expressed his poems. The Greek influence came to him through his reading of translation of Greek classics, Lempriere’s classical dictionary and through Greek Sculpture. One of his friends lent him a copy of chapman’s translation of Homer. He was fascinated by the new word of wonder and delight, which Homer revealed to him. He felt as he had discovered a new planet.

*Ode on a Grecian Urn*, is steeped with Hellenism or Hellenic aspects.

### **Lines 1-10**

Deals that John Keats begins with powerful poetic language. The poem in a ravishing style employing the metaphor of silence. He addresses the vase to bride of silence who is still unravished. The Urn which still look virgin. Again he calls it the foster-child who is nourished by silence and slow time. Silence and slow time are personified here. Time has become timeless here on the Urn. The urn is historian and is representing the sylvan forest scenes carved on it.

*Thou still unravished bride of quietness,  
Thou foster-child of silence and slow Time  
‘Sylvan historian who canst thus expresses  
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme.’*

At the moment Keats seems to be overwhelmed by the beauty of the Hellenic art. The poet by asking different questions in a series, tries to enter in to the experience of the art. The questions tell us Keats's own quest of the nature of art. This is a creative mind speaking in creation, who tries to forget himself in art – away from the realities of life.

The shape of the urn is inscribed with legendary tale done in bordered pattern leaves what does the legend tell ? Is it about the God or human beings or both ? Does it belong to Arcady or Tempe. Tempe and Arcady both places remind Keats nostalgically of the beauties of Greek. Keats is watching the scene as a spectator and asks what mad pursuit is it about, why are these passionate men and Gods running after unwilling virgins ? Why there is a beautiful music going on. The last question, what wild ecstasy ? shows that Keats has begun to share the wild ecstasy of the art. It is perhaps the same wild ecstasy which is in the form of Nightingale's song will make the poet fly with the bird on viewless wings of poesy. The query what struggle to escape is significant here. Perhaps Keats is asking the question from himself as to why does he try again and again to escape in to art ? What is the joy ? The answer awaits him till the end of the poem.

**Lines 11 to 20:-**

Keats here is revealing in the pleasure of imagination. He states that the music which is unheard sounds sweeter than the music, we here by our sensual ears. That is why he asks the piper on the vase to continue singing. The song will not be sung to the mortal ears. But to our spirit of imagination. One can only imagine the music and enjoy though one knows not the tone or the tune of the song. These lines have only musical reference but a musical structure also.

Second stanza deals that Keats's love is simple for the ancient Greek arts, and hellenism. Keats love for the ancient Greek Urn's beauty is conveyed as:

*Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;  
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,  
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:*

On the urn there is scene which shows a young man who is singing a song under the tree. The poet tells him that his song will never finish because it is fixed and arrested in art. The leaves will not know decay. The lover on the urn is trying to kiss a girl but he cannot, though he is very near the goal. He is consoled by the solace of art which Keats offers to him. In art the youth will always love her and she will always be beautiful. This is, though not fulfilled state but this joy of love will always be there because it is transfixed through art.

**Lines 21 to 30:-**

The time shown on earth is spring and tress are laden with flowers. The boughs on the trees are happy boughs.

*'Ah, happy, happy boughs! that can not shed  
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;*

They will always look like that the vegetative nature in actual life is in direct contrast to this artistic representation of it. The music of the piper will also continue. The love on the urn and the ever passionate nature of love shown on it will continue forever. Whereas the earthly love turns into boredom after some time and finish. Keats is not establishing the superiority of art as it is on the urn over the reality of life. He looks at the trees surrounding the lovers and feels happy that they will never shed their leaves. He is happy for the piper because his songs will be forever and happy that the love of the boy and girl will last forever unlike mortal love. The emphasis is still upon the warmth, turbulence of life especially at the end of the stanza.

**Lines 31 to 40 :-**

There is another scene on the urn which shows a procession which is going to sacrifice a calf. It is headed by mysterious priest. Keats here is again catching his poise and ask the mysterious priest about the procession. Why the animal is dressed with garlands ? why does the animal cry. The initial question – who are these coming to the sacrifice ? works both within and without the frame of events in the stanza. Then Keats gives picture of the town which the people in the procession has vacated. The town is pointed as situated near the river at the foot of the hill and on the hill top there is a fortress. The town is empty Keats says, will always remain desolate and no one will never tell its tale.

Keats's poetry is a mixture of various allusions to the art, culture and literature of Greek. In this regard 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is a perfect instance. The pictures which are engraved on the Grecian Urn show Keats' love for the Greek art, culture, and ideals. For instance:

*Who are these coming to the sacrifice?  
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,  
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,  
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?  
What little town by river or sea-shore,  
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,  
Is emptied of its folk, this pious morn?*

**Lines 41 to 50 :-**

The urn which Keats describes in the poem is a beautiful object in Greek art. Its surface is carved with many beautiful objects. There are picture are man and women on that. It included the carved patterns of wild branches and the grass which is walk over by these revellers. The poet continues watching the urn which forces us to give up vain speculations about it as we do about eternity. The explanation sign after ' Cold Pastoral ' denotes that Keats shifts in attitude. Now the Pastoral scenes which he has described as warm and showing ever



worm love and forming the surrounding for the ever fresh love and music to continue forever.

The urn will have a message for man saying that whatever is beauty is truth, and truth and beautiful are identical that is Keats concludes the poem with lines

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

It means that whatever is beautiful is truthful and whatever is truthful is beautiful this is only essence of thought and knowledge which people should know. For Keats, beauty became a very subtle and embracing concept. Like the Greeks, Keats too adored beauty. He believed in a close relationship between truth and beauty. However, he did not attempt to escape from the harshness of human existence to an ideal world of beauty.

The most important factor in Keats' Hellenism was his own Greek temperament of his mind. Reader can feel the passion for beauty; beauty is truth. For Keats, beauty became a very subtle and embracing concept. Like the Greeks, Keats too adored beauty. He believed in a close relationship between truth and beauty. However, he did not attempt to escape from the harshness of human existence to an ideal world of beauty.

## Conclusion

I am going to conclude that Keats is a visual poet, a writer of senses and feelings but his poems and letters bear splendid witness to the quality of his thoughts. Keats can extremely referred as a pure poet who has a passion for beauty and truth. His poetry is for the sake of poetry and nothing else. His use of Greek Hellenistic ideas in his poems is praiseworthy.

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