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Keats' Negative Capability and Oneness of Beauty and Truth in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'

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Abstract

The job of a literary artist is to coin out a new idea or meaning which is beyond capacity for an ordinary man to reach or imagine. When we study the Romantic Period (1785-1832) of English literature, we find that John Keats had that dexterity. Without playing with words Keats has always given new visions, new perceptions for the things which seem to us very ordinary. In the world of literary criticism Keats is mainly famous for his theory of Negative Capability and his unique philosophy of oneness of Beauty and Truth. This paper intends to investigate this philosophy and belief of Keats in his poem, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* under the title *Keats' Negative Capability and Oneness of Beauty and Truth in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'*.

Key words: Negative Capability, beauty, truth, art, oneness, life, transient, permanent, real

Introduction

In English literature the Romantic Age is considered as the second melodious period after the Elizabethan period. William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, Lord Byron, P. B. Shelley and John Keats were the most prominent poets who gave this period such sweet songs which appeal the both, head and heart of the reader. These songs go beyond the realm of philosophy of the life and achieve the subtle meaning of life.

Though Keats was highly influenced by his ancestral poets like Chaucer, Spencer and Milton, even by many of his contemporary poets like Leigh Hunt, Chapman, William Browne, he was different from them in his style, choice of words and phrases. That is why the reader finds amalgamation of simplicity with uniqueness. He deals with sensations rather than with ideas. This makes him different from many of his contemporary poets, especially from Shelley.

Keats was very close with concrete life rather than with abstract imaginings. He lacked Shelley's that vision which was charged with intellectual fire, however, his choice of human things, like love, sorrow and beauty has made his poems unique. He is the only poet who has given the philosophy of oneness of Truth and Beauty. He loved the principle of beauty in all things. This principle came to him through external Nature which he found in Shakespeare's felicity; luxuriant richness of thought which he found in Elizabethan poets and playwrights and in the Greek Art. This world of beauty was an asylum by which he used to escape from the harsh, dreary and painful reality of the life.

Again it is Keats who has introduced a literary term called Negative Capability. He wrote a letter in December 1817 to define a literary quality stating,

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“which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is, when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Abram 235). Explaining the term, Abram further writes that it can be taken to characterize an impersonal, or objective, author who maintains *aesthetic distance*, as opposed to a subjective author who is personally involved with the characters and actions represented in a work of literature, and as opposed to an author who uses a literary work to present and to make persuasive his or her personal beliefs.

The term Negative Capability is used to describe the ability of the individual to perceive, think and operate beyond any presupposition of a predetermined capacity of the human being. It is said that after Shakespeare only Keats had that ability to study the object or any situation beyond what it looks or represents actually. *Ode on a Grecian Urn* reveals Keats’ philosophy regarding Negative Capability and oneness of beauty and truth. O’Rourke believes that “the specificity of the poem lies in a general misapprehension of the issues from which it springs” and further says that “the poem and the urn can be subsumed from the outset under the term “art” and assigned a common set of values” (30). According to Hofmann this Ode can be regarded “as ancestral to surrealist translations of discarded utensils into art objects” (252). Both the opinions are correct. Keats begins the poem with the words:

Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness! . . .

. . . What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (1-10).

In ancient Greece the dead body used to be cremated and its ashes used to be buried in a vase like urn made of marble or brass on the outer side of which different kinds of scenes and situations used to be carved. Keats had a soft corner for the Greek Art. He had seen a Grecian urn and was fascinated by it. The present poetry is the consequence of that observation. In the first stanza the words “unravish’d bride of quietness” stand for the lady who is married, however virgin yet. According to Keats the Grecian urn that he had seen was centuries old and buried in the earth, however it had not yet lost its beauty. Though the urn is nurtured by Silence and Time (here Silence and Time are personified, the time that has silently bear the ravages of the Age), it has yet maintained its beauty. This speaks a volume of Keats’ poetic insight. The poem reveals the triumph of beauty of Art. The urn has been considered as “Sylvan historian” because it carries the carved pictures which tell the stories of the past. Words like “men or gods”, “maidens loth”, “mad pursuit”, “struggle to escape”, “wild ecstasy” etc. indicate the physical hunger and a woman is subjected to satisfy that appetite. The references of history and passionate love both narrate the story of ravages of time; however, poet’s focus can be noted on the urn which has not lost its beauty in spite of all the challenges of the time. Keats was not ignorant of the historical references and the sexual perversion prevailed in European countries during his contemporary age; however in the poem he, perhaps in order to console his soul, has fixed his eyes on the things that give pleasure. In the second stanza Keats writes,

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard . . .

. . . A burning forehead, and a parching tongue (11-30).

In these lines Keats has given the most subtle message of the life to the reader. He finds pleasure in fancy rather than in reality. The poet finds contrasting elements in real and imaginative events of the life. In real life the musician will get tired after playing music for a long time and that is why he will eventually stop playing his instrument. Therefore the poet considers the unheard music sweeter than the music that is heard. He believes that the heard music is sweet as it appeals to one of our senses, but it is transient, while the unheard one or imaginative is sweeter as it is enduring. Therefore, he wishes that the pipes depicted on the surface of the urn may continue their music. He wants them to be heard not by the senses, but by imagination. Similarly in real life spring is short and it is followed by autumn. Therefore, trees are bound to shed their leaves. But the trees depicted on the urn never shed their leaves. According to him in real life love is also transient that is why it is followed by revulsion, dissatisfaction and disappointment, while the love depicted on the urn is eternal. The heart of the lover will always throb with passion because the beauty of the beloved depicted on the urn will never fade. Thus in his belief art is superior to the real life where love and beauty fade away. It is art that has kept them fresh, alive and blossomed on the urn even after many years. In these lines the poet overlooks the odds of the life and finds the pleasure in triumph of the art. In Nawaz's words, "Everything that preserve through art has no end". In the fourth stanza the poet writes,

Who are these coming to the sacrifice? . . .
. . . Why thou art desolate, can e'er return. (31-40)

This stanza tells us about a new scene depicted on the urn. A procession is going on. People are going to an altar with a calf to offer it as a sacrifice. This has emptied the town. In real life generally people come back to their town after completion of the procession. But the picture shown on the urn juxtaposes the real life. On the first glance it seems that the poet has shown here the gloomy aspect of the life, but when we scrutinize the stanza and read in between the lines we find that it gives a subtle message that in real life even in crowd man may feel loneliness, but it is the time when one should search own self. Even while living a worldly life we can have a vision for a spiritual life, the life beyond this territory of the earth, in order to achieve that oneness between the infinite and the finite forms of the Creator and the created. Here the diction that Keats has used makes the poem sublime and subtle at the same time. Salimian notes that "the poem is portraying an eternal thing being encoded via the linguistic codes of the poem" (54). That is why the reader needs that dexterity to decode that hidden message conveyed by Keats. In the last stanza the poet writes,

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede. . .
. . . 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty',—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. (41-50)

Keats was highly under the influence of Greek elements, like Greek literature, thought, sculpture, etc. He was truly a representative poet of Greek elements. The present ode also reveals the poet's love for Greek sculpture. In the last stanza he

addresses the Grecian urn as the “attic shape” which he considers having “fair attitude”. According to the poet the Grecian urn that he has seen is a piece of Greek art as it represents the splendor of the work of art. Though it is the silent form, the carved men and maidens and rural scenes on the urn echo certain epoch of Greek culture. Their perpetuity indirectly conveys the reader a message to give up vain speculations. The words “Cold Pastoral” symbolize two things. One the scenes that are depicted on the urn represent the rural life and secondly as they are merely carved things and not alive, that is why the poet has considered them cold pastoral. Thus, the poet sees the impermanence of the life along with the permanence of the art. This perception is substantiated in his words, “When old age shall this generation waste,/Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe” (46-47). The poet knows that one generation will be replaced by another generation and along this continuity, its suffering would also go on in some or the other form. In the same way the urn will continue its existence as it is.

The last two lines of the poem show the poet’s love for beauty and his belief for the oneness of the beauty and the truth. O’Rourke considers the final lines “ENIGMATIC” and observes that “Keats is engaged in a meditation on the opposition between the mutability of life and the eternity of art” (27). Here, Keats firmly believes that the beauty is the supreme truth. He goes beyond the realm of scientific facts, logic and reasoning. His poetic insight takes him to a new world of imagination that discovers beauty in all the aspects of the life. He has loved the principle of beauty in all things. He finds beauty and truth as inseparable. He believes that whatever is beautiful must also be true, and whatever is true must also be beautiful. Here the word ‘truth’ does not mean the facts of the life, but true to the life. It stands for the real word. In real world happiness does not last long. However, the poet finds this impossible permanence of happiness possible on the urn. Thus, he finds this beauty not only in fancy and imaginative world, but also in the real world. He believes that in spite of many limitations, human beings have this knowledge of oneness of beauty and truth and this knowledge is more than enough for all the purposes of their lives. What the man needs is dexterity to find the even in the odd. Peterfreund has interpreted this truth in a different way. In his words this truth can be “a steadfastness or constancy that defies the allied realities of process and change”. It can also be “an agreement with the object of representation that places such realities of process and change above any sort of steadfastness or constancy in the attempt to attain verisimilitude in rendering” or it can be like the “claims of steadfastness or constancy and those of verisimilitude, positing a truth in the object that can virtually be seized wholesale by the subject, through the act of “mental apprehension,” without much in the way of concern for the character of the subject or the qualities evident in the rendering of the object” (63).

Conclusion:

Thus, in the present poem Keats has artistically woven his philosophy of Negative Capability and his belief regarding the oneness of beauty and truth. Keats’ traumatized personal life and indifferent health aimed at his premature death.

Moreover, the harsh criticism of his poetries by the critics of his contemporary age was a direct and open assault on him. However, he had immobilized his pen at only pleasure which can be noted in the poem where we find the recurrence of the word "happy". Failure, disappointment, disheartens etc. are the reality and inevitable elements of the life. Keats was not an exceptional person. He too was highly affected. But his triumph, which the critics have noted after his death, remains in objectivity of his poetries, which reveal that in spite of pain, sometimes human beings get episodic and transitory pleasure. The sense lies in seizing it, forgetting all other things. Then only the human beings can enjoy the beauty in all the aspects of life.

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