

The Individual-Nature Relationship in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

Adnan Al Zamili, Mohsen Hanif

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Abstract

This article discusses the individual-nature relationship in John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in light of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poetic theories associated with this concept which are embraced by his poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". More than that, it displays, in a poetic discussion, a critical analysis of Keats's ode as a strong interconnection that ties the individual to nature. The main focus of this study is the sensory relationship of Keats with nature taking into consideration that it is identical with Coleridge's poetic theories. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" exposes consistently Coleridge's opinions concerning the individual-nature relationship which starts when the individual perceives nature then ascends to form spiritual unity and becomes one with it. Finally, Coleridge creates a new nature out of the nature he perceives through the use of imagination. In Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" the unification between the individual and nature is based upon a beneficial rule that both of them has an active role that makes it easy to apply Coleridge's theories which carry the same point of view.

Introduction

Art, beauty and truth's close relationship is examined by Keats in "Ode on a Grecian Urn". The individual, through art, can attain beauty by which comes closest to truth and by them all the individual nature relationship can be proved. "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a mysterious poem has an undefined speaker looks at a Grecian urn decorated with rural and rustic life images in ancient Greece. The scenes on the urn are frozen in time and seem to have captured life in its fullness as well as they excite, mystify and fascinate the speaker in equal measure. The questions that the urn provokes are more than the answers it provides that makes the response of the speaker shifts through different moods. The speaker directs his speech to the urn deeming it adopted child of silence as well as a pure partner of quietness itself and vast lengths of time which depicts better than does the poetry of the speaker's era or perhaps language more generally. Whether the figures it depicts are gods or human beings, the stories told by the images on the urn astonish the speaker and provoke him to wonder which part of Greece they are in. He wonders about the specific identity of the reluctant-looking woman and the male characters and whether the scenes show a chase and an attempt to escape.

The speaker's fascination by the urn related to the fact that the urn is a genuine historical object that is created to depict a historical moment of time. It is combined with sheer luck that permits historical moments to survive for millennia. Calling the urn, a 'Sylvan [rural] historian,' foregrounds the importance of objects in relation to history and, instantly, draws a link between the urn's historical moment and the speaker's, since the urn has survived as a "foster-child of silence and slow time". The 'silent,' inanimate quality of the urn is emphasized as well as the immense length of time in which the urn has existed. The urn cannot say anything about history or the images that are engraved on its sides unless it is accompanied by the viewer's imagination. Thus, through this effort of imagination, the poem becomes a real-time example to actively engage with the past; therefore, a feel, in complete, for the world of Ancient Greece has been achieved. The speaker's imagination creates an atmosphere of which a particular point in history is brought to life. Keats in first stanza says:

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (*The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* 135, lines 1-10).

During this first stanza the individual-nature relationship is depicted clearly as the speaker announces that he is, passively, standing before a very old urn from Greece on which images of people who have been frozen in place for all of time, as the “foster-child of silence and slow time”. The narrator explains that he, without any interaction with the figures stuck on the side of the pottery urn, discusses the matter in his role as a historian who just wonders what legend or story they try to convey and treats it as something ‘still’ which has no life. The speaker ponders on and describes a picture seemingly exposing a gang of men chasing women in a ‘mad pursuit’ in a way that showing he wants to know more about the ‘struggle to escape’ or the ‘wild ecstasy’. He projects different narratives onto one scene; therefore, the juxtaposition between these two ideas gives a proof that he is unsure of which one is true in a way that reflects his negative position that the internal world of the speaker is in no direct interaction with the external world represented by the images stand before him.

In a letter to his brothers George and Thomas in December 1817 Keats explains: “*I mean Negative Capability that is when man is capable of being in Uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.*” (*The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* 277). John Keats lived to escape the confines of barren reality by trusting his sensations of the heart, letting go of the self-guided by passion and spontaneous feeling and becoming a passively receptor. This passivity in perception initiates the first stage of the individual-nature relationship in order to allow the imagination to do the work of the heart, transforming the initial feeling from the first stage to the second one and then to the third one in which the individual is able to impose poetry.

This feeling of loneliness and passivity that the speaker of the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” experiences, that keeps him out of unity with nature in the first stanza, mirrors the feeling of isolation and forsakenness of the Mariner in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” which takes him away from being in union with nature. The Mariner is in complete loneliness after the death of the crew:

Alone, alone, all, all alone.

Alone on a wide wide sea!

And never a saint took pity on

My soul in agony. (*The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 196, lines 232-235)

Using the word ‘alone’ for four times ‘on a wide wide sea’ where no ‘pity’ on his ‘soul’ denotes that the mariner feels a total loneliness and does not feel in unity with nature; therefore, he does not have realized the availability of many other life forms on the “wide wide sea” to avoid such much harsh loneliness. The Mariner has participated in an aggressive act against nature that forces her to revenge herself which is an “old notion [...] that when man participated in an act against nature, she takes her revenge on those who offend her. It has been commonly asserted that the Mariner's penance could be seen as some sort of retribution for having violated nature, symbolized by the albatross” (Lindgren 79). As opposite to the speaker of the “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, the Mariner is disgusted by the creature he does notes around him:

And a thousand thousand slimy things

Lived on; and so did I.

I looked upon the rotting sea,

And drew my eyes away;

I looked upon the rotting deck,

And there the dead men lay. (238-243)

The mariner exposes his feelings of guilt about himself when he compares himself to the slimy things of the external world so that he suffers completely and utterly loneliness “that God himself/Scarce seemed there to be” (599-600). The loneliness of the Mariner reaches a degree that he cannot even pray to win a kind of closeness and a degree of unification with god which is a fact that is exposed in “I looked to Heaven, and tried to pray;/ But or ever a prayer had gusht,/ A wicked whisper came, and made/ My heart as dry as dust” (244-247). Both the speaker of the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and the Mariner found conciliation between their inner feelings and the surrounding milieu that they perceive nature in accordance with how they feel about themselves, in that since they themselves are parts of nature, they must first love their own beings in order to love nature as well.

The second and third stanzas of the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” are:

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:

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave

Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;

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! (Lines 11-20)

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
 Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
 And, happy melodist, unwearied,
 For ever piping songs for ever new;
 More happy love! more happy, happy love!
 For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd.
 For ever panting, and for ever young;
 All breathing human passion far above,
 That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue. (*The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* 277, lines 21-30).

The speaker ponders over the musical instruments on the urn and wonders whether the scenes on display represent some kind of delirious revelry. Although he praises music, he claims that the unheard music is ever better. In tribute to silence, not for sensory reward, the speaker implores the urn's pipes to keep playing. The speaker focuses on a young piper, who is frozen on the urn, sits under a tree and can never stop playing his song as well as the trees can never shed their leaves. A scene, engraved on the side of the urn, depicts two young lovers whose lips can never meet although they are nearly kissing. Though the kiss will never happen, they do not need to be upset due to the fact that they will always love each other and the woman will always be beautiful.

These stanzas begin to develop the ideas by projecting anxious shifting thoughts about mortality onto the urn, which, at the same time, seem to stand for both life and death. For the speaker, at points in the poem, the images on the urn seem to come alive. The figures of the scenes which appear carefree and blissful are praised and create "happy, happy" feeling in the speaker who is looking to bountiful nature, pipe playing musicians and lovers at play. These scenes celebrate life and represent a kind of victory over death. The speaker, indeed, praises the tree that will never "be bare" and the lovers who sit beneath it as "For ever panting, and for ever young". All the lives depicted by the urn seem alive because they are rendered so well and perform actions full of humanity and vitality. In attempting to identify with the couple and their scene, the speaker uncovers his covetousness about their ability to escape from the temporary nature of life that this love, he believes, is "far above" the standard human bond which can grow tired and weary. Although the lover of the maiden can never have "thy bliss", that is, he can never kiss her in his frozen state, she "cannot fade" in a way that reflects the complicated anxiety about the inevitable march of time which makes stopping time does not mean just death, but life as well. Mortality is thus a distinct *part* of life not simply as an *end*. In these two stanzas the speaker, through his imagination, transfers from being passive and from being unable to unify with nature to a state full of activity in which the individual-nature relationship is transferred to the second stage. Through his imagination the speaker gives a life for everything he beholds on the urn to be unified with, to penetrate the minds of the lovers and feel their sense of love, to taste the notes of the music which is unheard yet, to unify with the trees that will never shed their leaves and to feed the images with his human features of love, happiness, sorrow, enjoyment, breathing and panting. Both the speaker and the images that he beholds are active and affect each other. The objects on the urn are similar to a mirror that reflects the internal world of the beholder and give it life which is a situation reminds of the Mariner who begins to reflect the moon's light back to the moon which leads to the second stage of the relationship with nature. The coming out of the moon with a star or two beside gives a different view to the nature around the Mariner:

The moving Moon went up the sky.
 And no where did abide:
 Softly she was going up,
 And a star or two beside (*The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 197, lines 263-236).

The light of the moon stands for the light of the imagination which idealizes and unifies what it perceives. The Mariner, in "Her beams bemocked the sultry main,/Like April hoar-frost spread"(lines 267-268), metaphorically, like the frost, reflects back the moon's light which imply the second stage of the individual-nature relationship. The individual and nature, in the second stage, reflect each other like two correspondent mirrors in a way that the moon sheds idealizing and unifying light to the Mariner who perceives the moon in that light, thus his perception of the moonlight becomes identical to the light itself. The Mariner forms empathy and unification with the moon, in his yearning for the way it journeys:

In his loneliness and fixedness, he yearneth towards the journeying moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward; and everywhere the blue sky belongs to them, and is their appointed rest, and their native country, and their own natural homes, which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected, and yet there is a silent joy at their arrival. By the light of the moon he beholdeth God's creatures of the great calm. (Wu 722)

The significance of Truth and Beauty's Oneness

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 this folk, this pious morn ?
 And, little town, thy streets for evermore
 Will silent be ; and not a soul to tell

Why thou art desolate, can e'er return. (*The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* 135,lines 31-40)

A spiritual scene is depicted by the speaker who describes a ceremonial progression towards a sacrificial green altar. The scene also embraces an image for a shadowy priest leading a cow which is dressed with flowery and silken rug and is mooing towards the sky. The image of those in the procession causes the speaker to wonder that from where they come. He is wondering whether the town that has fallen quiet because they have left by the river, sea shore or mountain. The speaker acknowledges that no one is left to explain why the town is empty or why, in silence, its streets are frozen forever. The speaker in his attempts to engage with the urn shows a certain kind of progress that his idle curious attempt in the first stanza gives way to more deeply identification in the second and third stanzas, whereas he increases his own concern in the fourth stanza and thinks of the processional purely on its own terms that he thinks of the "little town". Using words having spiritual meaning like 'sacrifice', 'alter', 'priest', and 'pious' uncovers that the interaction between the speaker and the images on the urn starts to take a spiritual direction. They are "all the symbols of immortal beauty. Sacrifice has long history with its divine ceremony" (Song 172). People by sacrificial ceremonies "can survive generation after generation, becoming the immortal master of the universe" (172). Sacrificing a 'heifer' achieves the same goal: to be eternal. The 'alter' is in the relationship with holy eternity since the place where people put their sacrifices on. To be 'green' is to be pretty and young as well as to be long and forever. 'Cold pastoral' refers to eternity of beauty since coldness is the state of being frozen and 'Pastoral' symbolizes beauty. Being frozen beauty, 'cold pastoral', expresses the exact meaning of eternal beauty. This number of spiritual words prepare for the third stage of the individual-nature relationship which is founded on spiritual basement. It is important to note that Keats, in a letter to fellow poet Percy Bysshe Shelley in August, 1820, likens the poetic imagination to a religious edifice "My imagination is a monastery, and I am its monk" (*The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* 443). Thus, the heifer is symbolizing the blood and flesh of nature; therefore the ritual is a shared commitment to gods and involves the whole of the community. The resonation of the natural values in the natural elements is uniquely presented here in a way that such presentation reflects the very healthy and meaningful relationship between individual and nature.

Both the speaker of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and the Mariner start to change from that of sensual existence as in the first stage in which through their senses they perceive the world to a spiritual existence as a second stage through which they begin to perceive the world spiritually. The experience in the new existence is spiritual and no longer sensual. For the mariner, the following lines are good example:

Each corse lay flat, lifeless and flat,
 And, by the holy rood!

A man, all light, a seraph-man,

On every corse there stood. (*The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 205,lines 488-491)

Nature is generous for the speaker of the Grecian Urn and the Mariner; therefore, they are rewarded for each step towards unity with her many steps on her side towards them. The man who opens himself unaware to the influence of nature is healed by that influence. They are able to perceive the beauty of nature around them through their awakened imagination and through the love that has been placed in their hearts. The music in "Sweet sounds rose slowly through their mouths, / And from their bodies passed" (lines 352-353) in the "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is a symbol of the output and outcome of the imagination. The speaker of the Grecian Urn and the Mariner are now completely in the second stage of the individual-nature relationship.

The last stanza in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" examines "the union of truth of nature with their highest ideal beauty" (Notopoulos 181):

O Attic shape ! Fair attitude !withbrede
 Of marble men and maidens overwrought.
 With forest branches and the trodden weed;
 Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
 As doth eternity : Cold Pastoral !
 When old age shall this generation waste,
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' — that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. (*The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* 135, lines 41-50)

For the speaker, humankind comes closest to truth through beauty, whereas he can attain this beauty through art. The poem, at its heart, admits the mystery of existence, but sensing this mystery needs good art that gives humankind a basic, if temporary, way of representing it. The famous end of the poem is vital to understand the position of the speaker on art, truth and beauty, and contextualizes the lines that have come before. In the context of the poem, the concluding sentiment of the speaker "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" demonstrates that truth and beauty are the same. The role of the art is to uncover this beauty and truth. They are presented as clearly definable aspects of human existence. The connection between them is intuitive that an attempt to make sense of these intuitions is the one-way conversation with the urn, and what it represents.

The last stanza implies the third stage of the individual-nature relationship in which truth stands for the individual who is always seeking and searching about it whereas beauty represents nature and as "truth and beauty reflect one light, [which is] eternity where truth and beauty are one" (Notopoulos 182), so the individual and nature are unified in one eternal light. The relationship between the individual and nature offers an answer to the question of the relationship between beauty and truth and it does discuss unequivocally that these two are essential to one another and co-dependent since "Beauty and truth are two sides of one and the same thing" (Haque & Rahman 60). Furthermore, the strength of this relationship may be depending on its mystery. The expression "All ye need to know," suggests that the individual needs to know more about the truth in order to ascend high levels of knowledge. The last lines might suggest that they are about praising beauty, in spite of that the individual's position is ultimately much more nuanced. The individual's desire to represent itself and its world is reflected in the inanimateness of the urn's scenes. The scenes thus become abstract representation of beauty as well as pictures of human life. They are pure beauty, untainted by the fact of the actual existence or eventual death, so the beauty of the urn is absolute since it represents the idea of beauty. Eventually, beauty is both as something to be aspired by the individual or an abstract idea to be unified with it.

The speaker of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is following the Mariner's steps who ascends from the spiritual second stage of the individual-nature relationship to the third stage in which his love and relation with the creatures that surrounding him becomes the same of that of God towards his creatures:

He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.
He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all. (612-617)

The inadequacy of sense perceptions and the importance of imagination, sympathy and love in forming a beneficial relationship with nature and the ability to form a harmonious relationship with her results in a sense of contentment and peace for the Mariner during his journey through the three stages of his relationship with nature.

Conclusion

This study explores the individual-nature relationship in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in light of Coleridge's poetic theories concerning the individual-nature relationship that are embodied in his poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". Also it is a study that gathers Coleridge as a theorist and Keats as a poet who is unconsciously adopted Coleridge theories concerning the individual-nature relationship. Furthermore, it proves the identity between Keats's opinions and Coleridge's theories concerning the individual-nature relationship. This study also proved that the individual-nature relationship in Keats's ode, is a beneficial one in which both the individual and nature have active roles in the unification which make it easy to apply Coleridge's theories that imply the same point of view. The vigilant reading for this study enables the reader to discover a new reading for Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" that is never be provoked before.

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Author Information

Adnan Al Zamili

PhD Candidate Department of Foreign Languages
Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran

Mohsen Hanif

Assistant Professor Department of Foreign
Languages, Khaazmi University, Tehran, Iran.
