

# Keats' Grecian Urn: A Cultural Artifact

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## Abstract

The article is an attempt to analyze John Keats' famous poem, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* in the light of Cultural Studies. By pointing out the basic idea of cultural studies and borrowing Stuart Hall's theory on Encoding and Decoding, the essay meets its aim. It examines, how Keats's 'Grecian Urn' becomes the archetypal cultural artifact. The poem is notable for its theme of superiority of art and beauty, and the article spells out and observes the various cultural elements depicted in the poem. At the same time, it delineates the social and cultural background in England, the escapism of romantic poets and the significance of cultural changes that shaped a new age in English Literature. The article clearly examines the culture of Ancient Greece through the various carvings on the urn and observes how the speaker decoded the message given by that artistic work with his powerful imagination and outstanding creativity.

**Keywords :** Cultural Artifact; Culture; Decoding/Encoding; Escapism; Romanticism.

## Introduction

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty, \_that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." (Keats lines 49-50)

Estimation of beauty – that is the most significant element in the poems of John Keats. Through his poetry Keats praises beauty, and dexterously portray the superiority of beauty over other things in the world. The poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is remarkable for its examination of the relationship between art, beauty and truth. According to the speaker, it is through beauty that human beings come close to truth and it is through art they can accomplish that beauty. This essay examines that the poem not only pictures the superiority of art and beauty but also pays attention

to the life and culture of a particular community in Ancient Greece by taking the urn as a cultural artifact. "A Cultural Artifact is an item that, when found reveals valuable information about the society that made or used it" (Cultural Artifact: Definition & Examples). It is made by human beings and possesses historical and cultural significance. It provides good information regarding the social, political, economic and religious conditions of a society at a particular period of time. At the same time, the poem analyses, how the speaker decoded the message given by the visual image (Grecian Urn), with his own interpretation and imagination.

The youngest romantic poet John Keats enriched English literature through his famous odes and poems. The romantic age (1790-1837) witnessed a drastic change in the social and economic life of people. The boom in industrialization, urbanization and many other scientific inventions forced the English people to embrace a new culture. The changes that occurred in England touched its each corner. The inventions in steel and machinery, the emergence of new industrial workers from the old rural farm laborers and adoption of urban life and lifestyles are examples of it. French Revolution (1789-1799) is also a notable event that diverted the minds of the people in Britain. It is a fact that literature of a particular period shares its social and cultural background. But looking at the literature of the romantic age, we can see, even though these inventions and developments are there on the one side, the romantic writers especially the poets made a journey back to a world devoid of these changes. John Keats through his poetry made an imaginary escape from his contemporary time to the middle ages. Thus, his poetry doesn't confirm to that particular social background.

Raymond Williams in his work *Keywords* (1976) calls culture "one of the two or three most complicated words in English language" (87). He suggests "culture is a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group. It includes literacy, holidays, sport, religious festivals" (90). He suggests that "culture can be used to refer to the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity" (Williams, 87). Culture means the texts and practices whose principal function is to signify, to produce or to be the occasion for the production of meaning. At the same time "culture is synonymous with what structuralists and post structuralists call 'signifying practices'" (Storey).

In *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, the poet beautifully pictured the culture of Greece. As a cultural artifact, the Grecian Urn clearly expresses and visualizes the culture of ancient Greece. Urn means a vessel that is used

for preserving the ashes of the dead after cremation, and here, this ancient Grecian Urn preserves and tightly hold the ashes or remains of the that past Greek culture through its various depictions. The urn pictures the beliefs, codes, costumes and all the cultural values of a particular people of that society. The poem is varied for its rhythmic and aesthetic beauty. The poem begins with the lines:

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,

Thou the foster child of silence and slow time, (Keats lines 1-2)

The urn is unravished, that is, something in the urn still remains undestroyed. The unravished thing in the urn is not only its beauty but also the culture that is engraved in it by its producer. In the next line, the speaker calls it the "Sylvian historian", as it inscribed the history of a certain community, their lives and lifestyle in it. That Sylvain historian tells the story of a pastoral community, and he says that, that story is more expressive than his poem. A close examination of the urn reveals several things. The carvings depict the shapes of deities, gods, men, and all these are artful. The urn also depicts the picture of the "bold lover" who is eager to kiss the partner, their excitement and their enthusiasm in their relationship frozen a particular moment in history. In another scene the urn portrays the depiction of a ceremonial progression. Through this poem the speaker delineates the religious rituals and customs in their culture. He asked,

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? (Keats lines 31-34)

These lines evidently visualize the common ritual of animal sacrifice that existed in ancient Greece. This is still practiced in many parts of the world. It is the ritual of offering blood to appease or maintain favour with a deity. In the beginning, this particular ritual is practiced to propitiate god for the wellbeing of a community or society. Later people began to realize it as a barbaric act and started practicing animal sacrifice to please the god by giving the blood of animals instead of humans. Nowadays most religions condemn such heinous rituals, but still people in different

cultures believe and practice such things. The ritual of offering red flowers is a similar belief, there the red flower symbolizes sacrificing blood to the gods for satisfying them. The speaker observes the crowd near the altar suggests the importance given to such customs by that community. In that ceremonial progression, a mysterious priest is leading a cow and it is lowing towards the sky. "Mysterious", here not only refers to the priest but also the mysterious ritual that is going to be performed by him. The cow is appareled with silken flanks and garlands. All these descriptions give us a detailed picture of the religious beliefs in their community. Then the urn represents in it, a "little town" and silent streets, that became silent forever in that artistic work. The street is emptied because the crowd in the altar must have come from the town. It strengthens the fact that people in that society strongly believed in such things and gave immense importance to it. The speaker fancies that the people are fixed on the urn and frozen in that moment and will not return to the streets. The town is desolate by art and the people will never return.

The speaker called it as the "Attic shape" (shape related to Greece), that is decorated with marble men and women using forest branches of green trees and plants ("trodden wood"). It inscribes in it the "cold pastoral life", that seems as paradox because pastoral life relates with life with simplicity, serenity and features green meadows and cattle. Cold pastoral suggests that, it is not real and are lifeless. The urn is lifeless but at the same time it represents the real life of a society in that period. The speaker claims that people in his generation will grow old and die but urn will stay in middle of all kinds of trouble as a cultural artifact. It tells this story to all ages and all people through the carvings it holds. Here the speaker shows his gratitude to the artist who gave life to this urn through the beautiful carvings. The urn also gave us a very valuable information regarding the features of artistic works and sculptures of Ancient Greece.

The man sitting under the tree and playing a flute is also an important depiction in the urn. The speaker says that the music played by him is melodious and will always be playing the same song. His over enthusiasm to escape in to that imaginary world is very exquisitely portrayed through this. He says "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter". In his deep mind the speaker made an imaginary journey in to that imaginary world and as a dream wish fulfillment, he is passionate to live there. This escapism is an important ingredient in romantic poems. The romantic poets tried to throw away the shackles of their distressed world and romanticism in literature was actually the rejection of the values and movements such as Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution that

held as paramount. Here the poet's immense interest to entice that pastoral culture is indisputably visualized. According to him, everything in it exists as "happy". The men and women, their love is different from the ordinary notion of happy love. The lover cannot kiss his love, so he should not grieve because she never loses her beauty. The frozen passion shown on the urn is far above living passion. It indicates the permanent and unending love because it is not bound to miseries and always preserve the freshness. At the same time, the young man playing the pipe, beneath the trees, can play the melodious music and it hold its sweetness forever. The trees, will forever hold the leaves and will not "bid the spring adieu". The trees will never be "bare "and so they remain happy forever. In that way the world of the urn is frozen in time. The charismatic art fascinates the speaker along with it, the community, culture and life in it also enchanted him.

"Beauty lies in the eyes of beholder". Though the urn is silent here, it tells the story of a pastoral life. The life in the urn depends on the visitor or on the observer who keenly observes it. The speaker with his imaginative power heard the story of that life and tells to others through his poem. Here the urn doesn't talk a word but the speaker continuously communicating with it and decoding the information in his own way. "The level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference and positioning in different discursive fields of meaning and association, is the point where already coded signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional more active ideological dimensions" (Hall, 12). According to Hall's theory on Encoding and Decoding, the texts are encoded by the single meaning given by its producer and then the receiver decodes the message or negotiate it with his or her prior experience and cultural background. Here, the speaker's urge to live and enjoy that life makes him describe the urn in such a beautiful manner. This continuous communication in that way is a good historical information. Stuart Hall, in his essay *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*, proposed four stage theory of communication. They are Production, Circulation, Use (consumption) and Reproduction. He deconstructed traditional communication model and identified a complex structure involved in message production and its reception. At the stage of production, the message is appropriated as per the technical needs. At the stage of 'Use' the audience can decode the message as per the socio-economic and political background. The way of decoding the message changes along with the difference in backgrounds. The audience must have differing socio-economic and political background. Hence, the poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is the product of the brilliant imaginative skill of John Keats and his efficient

cy to decode the message with his artistic ability and powerful creativity.

John Keats poems are remarkable for sensuous beauty and artistic skills. Among the romantic poets, Keats is the most romantic poet of his age, because of the element of escapism in his poetry. He distanced himself from the revolutions and developments that enticed England in that age and embraced the world of imagination. With his excellent imaginative skill, he made a peaceful world that is devoid of the harsh realities of the age. Shelley considers Keats as Greek poet because of his interest in Greek object and at the same time he is famous for his Hellenism in writing. The subject matter of romantic poetry depends on the world of dreams and imagination. Escapism means to flee from the real world and to live in an imaginary peaceful world. It is actually the “habitual diversion of the mind to purely imaginative activity or entertainment as an escape from reality or routine”. In that way, it is a fact that the harsh realities of the contemporary life and the resulting restlessness and frustrations forced the romantic poets to build a peaceful world in their imagination and seize that culture. Among them John Keats through his poetry continuously trying to embrace his imaginary culture and life. This essay plainly delineates, how the social as well the cultural changes in his age directly and indirectly influence his writings simultaneously, how the Urn become an archetype of a cultural artifact.

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