

Poetry
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Lecture 37
John Keats

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John Keats (1795-1821)



- Historical and Literary Context
- Keats
- Negative Capability
- Elgin Marbles
- “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles”
- “Ode on a Grecian Urn”
- Analysis
- An Intrinsic Reading
- An Extrinsic Reading



Hello, now let us begin with John Keats's poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” First, we will have an introduction to the poet, his concept negative capability, his interest in Elgin marbles which actually inspired him to write many poems including this Ode on a Grecian Urn. Before that we will read ‘On Seeing the Elgin Marbles.’ a sonnet. Then we will analyze the poem linguistically and rhetorically. Thereafter, we will offer two readings; an intrinsic reading and an extrinsic reading.

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Historical and Literary Context



- Reaction against the neoclassical style and outlook
- Open revolution of people against oppression
- Silent revolution of poets against traditional tastes
- Short-lived lives of poets like Claire, Keats, and Shelley
- The negative capability of accepting uncertainties
- Organic unity of poems
- Intense examination of self, nature, and imagination
- Senior and junior generations of Romantic poets



First let us look into the historical and literary context. There was a reaction against the neoclassical style and outlook in the early 19th century. There was open revolution of people and against oppression. Some silent revolution among poets against traditional tastes also was seen; some of the poets like Claire, Keats, and Shelley had short lived lives.

From this period, particularly from Keats, we understand the concept of ‘negative capability’ which is a state of mind, which accepts uncertainties. Keats also gave this concept along with Wordsworth and Coleridge this concept of organic unity of poems. There was a serious examination of self, nature and imagination among various poets. We have two groups of poets; senior romantic poets like Robert Southey, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and junior generation of romantic poets like Keats, Shelley and Lord Byron.

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John Keats (1795-1821)



- Fatherless at 8 and motherless at 14
- Eldest child of the family with three siblings
- Suffered from tuberculosis
- Trained to become an apothecary surgeon
- Abandoned medicine for poetry and Fanny Brawne
- Lived with a deep awareness of mortality and died an immortal poet
- Criticized negatively by *The Edinburgh* and *Quarterly Magazines* and dumped as a Cockney School poet
- Left a corpus of poetry from a brief life of 25 years
- Well-known for his odes, e.g. "Ode on a Grecian Urn"
- **Credo:** "A thing of thing beauty is joy for ever"



John Keats was born in 1795 and died in 1821 and in his lifetime, he had to go through various difficulties as he lost his father at the age of 8 and mother at the age of 14. He was the eldest child of the family with three siblings and that means with some responsibility. He also had a serious problem of tuberculosis, with which he struggled but failed and that is why he died very early.

He was trained to become an apothecary surgeon. That means, he went into the medical field to become a doctor. But he abandoned medicine for the sake of poetry and his lady love Fanny Brawne. He lived with a deep awareness of mortality, but died as an immortal poet. In his own lifetime, when he published his poems he was seriously negatively criticized by the reviewers of *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly Magazines*.

He was treated as a Cockney School poet. But he has left a corpus of poetry from a brief life of 25 years. Some of his well-known Odes are "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Ode to a Nightingale," "To Autumn" and the rest. His poetic credo can be understood from this line from his poem, "A thing of beauty is joy forever;" beauty, truth, good these were very important for poets like Keats.

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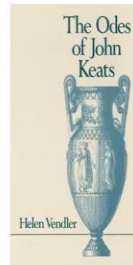
Keats's Odes



Six Famous Odes

1. "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (50)
2. "Ode to a Nightingale" (80)
3. "To Autumn" (33)
4. "Ode on Melancholy" (30)
5. "Ode to Psyche" (67)
6. "Ode on Indolence" (60)

Totally 320 lines



What are the odes written by Keats for which he is well known? We have six famous odes beginning from "Ode on a Grecian Urn" "Ode to a Nightingale," "To Autumn," "Ode on Melancholy," then "Ode to Psyche," and at last "Ode on Indolence." All put together, we have only 320 lines from these six odes, but these 320 lines have kept the fame of John Keats alive to this day. We have any number of books on these Odes, here we have one example of a book by Helen Wendler on 'the Odes of John Keats' in that picture.

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"Negative Capability"



"at once it struck me what quality went to form a **Man of Achievement, especially in Literature**, and which **Shakespeare** possessed so enormously — I mean **Negative Capability**, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason — Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that **with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration** rather obliterates all consideration."

Keats's letter to brothers George and Tom, [21 Dec 1818]



What is this Negative Capability for which Keats is equally well known? In one of his letters to his brothers George and Tom dated 21st December 1817, he wrote this:

“At once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in literature, and 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- Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetratum of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.”

Keats Letter to brothers George and Tom [21 Dec, 1817]

From this concept of negative capability, we understand Shakespeare is a great poet; Keats is a great poet; all other poets who can have this sense of being in uncertainties without irritable reaching after fact and reason they are great poets. Therefore, for poets like Keats, beauty is the most important feature in life and art. His ode, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in fact deals with the theme of beauty.

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Elgin Marbles

- The Earl of Elgin (1766-1841)
- Ambassador to Turkey
- Brought the Parthenon Marbles to England
- Sold them to the British Museum in 1836.
- Keats and his painter friend Benjamin Haydon visited the British Museum in 1837
- Keats wrote a sonnet on the same evening of March 2, 1817.
- Composed the ode in 1820.



Keats was interested in Greek art and culture. He visited British museum and saw these Elgin Marbles. These were in fact brought to London by “The Earl of Elgin” who was an ambassador to Turkey. He brought the Parthenon Marbles to England and later sold them to the British museum in 1836. That is when Keats and his painter friend Benjamin Haydon visited the British museum in 1837 and saw these marbles. On seeing these marbles, Keats wrote a sonnet on the same evening of march second 1817. He also later composed this “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

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On Seeing the Elgin Marbles (1817)

My spirit is too weak — mortality
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
And each imagined pinnacle and steep
Of godlike hardship tells me I must die
Like a sick eagle looking at the sky. 5
Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep
That I have not the cloudy winds to keep
Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye.
Such dim-conceived glories of the brain
Bring round the heart an undescribable feud; 10
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
Wasting of old time — with a billowy main —
A sun — a shadow of a magnitude.



Here is the sonnet, 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles' written in 1817 on seeing these marbles;

“My spirit is too weak — mortality
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
And each imagined pinnacle and steep
Of godlike hardship tells me I must die
Like a sick eagle looking at the sky. 5
Yet it is a gentle luxury to weep
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Bring round the heart an undescribable feud; 10
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
Wasting of old Time — with a billowy main —
A sun — a shadow of a magnitude.”

This magnitude, this grandeur Keats saw in Grecian Art.

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“Ode on a Grecian Urn”



- Written in 1819 and published in 1820
- 50 lines
- Five stanzas of ten lines each
- The Grecian Urn is a tale/ history in a poem.
- The history of humankind is all about love and death.
- Keats's meditation on the eternal quality of art and the evanescent nature of love and happiness.
- If beauty is truth, truth is beauty.



Now, let us understand a few background details about this poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Keats wrote this poem in 1819 and published it in 1820. It has 50 lines and 5 stanzas; each stanza has 10 lines. This poem is actually a tale, it is a history, it deals with the history of humankind and tells about love and death.

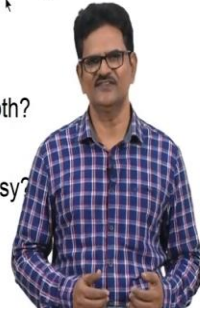
This poem is a meditation on the eternal quality of art and the evanescent nature of love and happiness. This temporal love and happiness is captured eternally, in art form on this urn which motivated Keats to write this immortal poem. The essence of this poem is this ‘if beauty is truth, truth is beauty’ and that is what we have to know, according to Keats.

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Ode on a Grecian Urn, Stanza 1



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-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape 5
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?



Let us begin with the first stanza;

“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-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape 5
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?”

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Ode on a Grecian Urn, Stanza 2



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 15

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!



Stanza 2,

“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

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She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,

For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!”

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Ode on a Grecian Urn, Stanza 3



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.



Stanza 3,

“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! 25
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.”

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Ode on a Grecian Urn, Stanza 4



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.

35



Stanza 4,

“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,

35

Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,

Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

And, little town, thy streets for evermore

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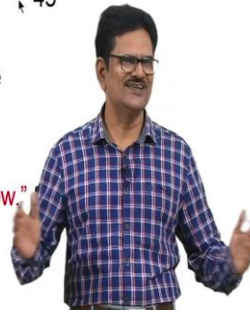
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.”

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Ode on a Grecian Urn, Stanza 5



O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
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! 45
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."



Stanza five,

“O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
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! 45
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."

This is the last stanza and the last two lines are immortal lines, they have been a source of inspiration for poets and people all alike.

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Thematic Contrast



- Silence and Speech/ Song
- Ecstasy and Misery
- Spirit and Body
- Fair and Black
- Win and Lose
- Grief and Celebration
- Desolation and Consolation
- Cold and Warm
- Old and Young
- Beauty/ Truth and Ugliness and Untruth



When we pay attention to the thematic contrast we have in this poem, we identify a pair of words like silence and speech which also can be song in this poem. Ecstasy and misery, spirit and body, fair and black or ugly, win and lose, grief and celebration, desolation and consolation, cold and warm, old and young, beauty truth and ugliness and untruth.

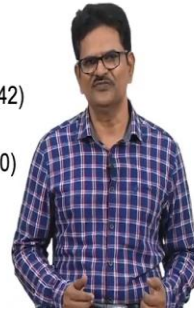
This silent form sings a song. It tells a history, that is why we have this silence and speech. Associated with this silence and speech, we have many pairs of contrasts like ecstasy and misery and from there we come to beauty and truth on the one hand and ugliness and untruth on the other hand.

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Poetic Devices



- Apostrophe:** to the Grecian Urn
- Personification:** Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness, (1)
- Allit/Asson:** Thou foster-child of silence and slow time, (2)
- Paradox:** Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; (11-12)
- Transferred Epithet:** happy boughs (21)
- Personification:** Love (25)
- Anaphora:** For ever (26-27)
- Alliteration:** Of marble men and maidens overwrought, (42)
- Chiasmus:** "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." (50)
- Image of the vase:** 1. a pictorial art, 2. a poetic model,
3. theme of time and eternity



We can see a number of poetic devices in this poem starting from apostrophe to a number of images of the vase. The poem is a kind of address to the Grecian Urn by the poet. There is a Personification in the very first line, 'Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,' this urn, lifeless urn is considered a bride by the poet.

We have alliteration and assonance within the same line, 'Thou foster-child of silence and slow time.' we have indicated this difference between alliteration and assonance by this underlining 's' and then the color code 'I' in red color. So, we can see both alliteration and assonance in line number two. We have one of the most beautiful paradoxes that we have seen in poetry that is, 'heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter.'

We also have a transformed epithet in 'happy boughs.' We have personification of 'love' in line number 25; anaphora can be seen in line number 26 and 27 which starts with forever, forever. We have again alliteration in 'of marble men and maidens overwrought,' marble men and maidens when we put them together like this there is a beauty in the sound.

We also have chiasmus in the last two lines, "beauty is truth, truth beauty, — that is all Ye know on earth and all ye need to know," nothing else, nothing else to worry about, his whole life, that is Keats' whole life was devoted to this beauty probably the beauty of Fanny Brawne, his own poetic art represented by this Grecian Urn.

We have some images of this vase in this poem, this vase can represent a pictorial art, it can be a painting, it can be a sculpture, it is a poetic model also and it deals with the theme of time and eternity. How to capture this evanescent passing time in art is the burden, the responsibility of poets, artists in general.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



- Rhyme: ABABCDEDCE
- **Rhythm and Meter:** Iambic pentameter
- **Caesura, Enjambment and End-stopped lines:**
Heard me | lodies | are sweet, | but those | unheard ➔
Are sweet | ter; there | fore, ye | soft pipes, | play on;
Not to | the sen | sual ear, | but, more | endear'd,
Pipe to | the spi | rit di | tties of | no tone:
- **Variations in rhythm:**
 - Spondee:** Heard me, soft pipes
 - Trochee:** Play on, Not to, Pipe to,
 - Pyrrhic:** lodies, tties of



We have wonderful rhyme, rhythm and meter in this poem. The rhyme scheme is ABABCDEDCE. The rhythm and meter can be understood in one phrase iambic pentameter, this is a traditional poem and we have Caesura, Enjambment and End-stopped lines in the example we have.

We can also understand the rhyme and all that:

“Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard

Are sweet er, there fore ye soft pipes play on;

Not to the sensual ear but more endear'd,

Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:”

We have of course variations in rhythm as we can see Spondee in ‘Heard me,’ ‘soft pipes.’ We also have Trochee in play on, not to, pipe to, we have Pyrrhic in melodies second part of melodies and second part of ditties.

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Overall Impression

- Impressed by the silent Grecian urn, Keats urges her to tell her tale more impressively than a poem could do in rhymes, but he writes one of the greatest odes in English.
- Keats attempts to interpret what the urn could mean and allows it to be a state of mystery and achieves the quality of negative capability that he admires in Shakespeare.
- He privileges silent and passive scene as a source of eternal love and happiness.
- He finds the deserted town portrayed on the urn as desolate.
- Keats considers his own youthful age wasted in comparison with the teasing urn which speaks a nugget of wisdom on beauty as truth.



To give an overall impression of this poem we have these points to look at; the Grecian urn is very impressive for the poet that is why we have this poem. Impressed by the silent Grecian urn, Keats urges the urn to tell her tale more impressively than a poem could do in rhymes. But what Keats does is to write one of the greatest Odes in English.

Keats attempts to interpret what the urn could mean and allows it to be a state of mystery and achieves the quality of negative capability that he admires in Shakespeare. Whatever he admired in Shakespeare; he could exemplify that in his own poem. He privileges silent and passive scene as a source of eternal love and happiness. Whatever picture he could see on the vase, he writes about the fair youth and the procession, that is a symbol of love.

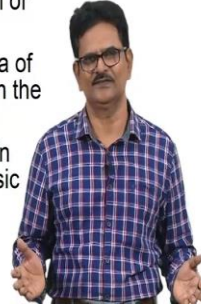
He finds the deserted town portrayed on urn as desolate because nobody is there, everybody has left the town to attend the procession. Keats considers his own youthful age wasted in comparison with the teasing urn which speaks a nugget of wisdom on beauty as truth. The urn is an inspiration for the poet to achieve something remarkable in his short time, that is why he has written this poem.

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An Intrinsic Reading (Brooks 1944)



- T. S. Eliot and Middleton Murray faulted the ode for the statement of “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,”
- The statement, “**Ripeness is all**,” from a character like Edgar in *King Lear* is acceptable artistically.
- Similarly, Brooks transforms the urn into a dramatic character to accommodate the speech at the end artistically and thus disentangle it from the problem of belief and scientific truth.
- Brooks achieves his critical aim by positing the idea of “history without footnotes” as the sylvan historian in the ode tells the tale/ history of the depopulated town.
- It means Brooks uses images and ideas from within the poem and not from outside the text, e.g., intrinsic criticism.



We said we have two readings, one intrinsic, another extrinsic. Let us see these two first. Let us start with an intrinsic reading offered by Cleanth Brooks. T. S. Eliot and Middleton Murray in fact found fault with this poem because they did not believe that this statement ‘beauty is truth and truth beauty’ could stand the test of scrutiny.

The statement “ripeness is all” from a character like Edgar in *King Lear* is acceptable artistically because this is in a drama. But in the case of poem, who speaks? is it a dramatic character? is not very clear to us. That is why Eliot and Middleton Murray did not accept it. Similarly, Brooks transforms the Urn into a dramatic character to accommodate the speech at the end artistically and thus disentangle it from the problem of belief and scientific truth.

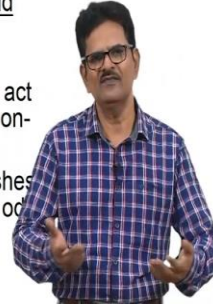
If the poet presents it as a belief and as a scientific truth how do we believe it? that is a problem. So, if it is presented as a speech from the character in a poem or in a drama then the problem between belief and scientific truth can be tackled very easily; that is what Brooks has done. Therefore, Brooks achieves his critical aim by positing the idea of “history without footnotes” as a sylvan historian in the ode tells the tale or the history of the depopulated town.

It meant Brooks uses images and ideas from within the poem and not from outside the text that is how Brooks practices this intrinsic criticism. These two sentences ‘beauty is truth, truth beauty that is all you need to know,’ Brooks is able to support this statement by making this poem into a drama, as if somebody speaks from the poem itself not from outside.

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An Extrinsic Reading (Burke, 1943)

- Kenneth Burke offered a “dramatistic” reading of the ode in 1943 to appreciate Keats’s reconciliation of the opposition between practical and poetic ideals in the poem by a close study of the images.
- He used extrinsic details from the life of the poet, including Keats’s tuberculosis, love for Fanny, and interest in the Elgin Marbles.
- He developed the critical triad of drama, prayer and chart to examine the unconscious, rhetorical and historical aspects of the poem, respectively.
- Language is symbolic and the poem is a symbolic act but it privileges the poem which originates in the non-symbolic urn.
- Vridgers argues that Brooks consigned Burke to ashes by a footnote to Burke’s essay in his essay on the ode thereby resurrecting Burke today.



Now, we have an opposite reading that is extrinsic reading, how to support this view from facts outside the poem. Kenneth Burke offered a dramatistic reading of the ode in 1943 to appreciate Keats’s reconciliation of the opposition between practical and poetic ideals in the poem by a close study of the images.

Kenneth Burke used extrinsic details from the life of the poet including Keats’ tuberculosis, his love for Fanny and his interest in the Elgin Marbles. He developed the critical triad of drama, prayer and chart to examine the unconscious, rhetorical and historical aspects of the poem respectively.

Language is symbolic, according to Kenneth Burke and so the poem is a symbolic act, but it privileges the poem which originates in the non-symbolic urn. Poem is separate from the urn which Keats saw in the British museum. Vridgers, a critic argues that Brooks consigned Burke to ashes by a footnote to Burke’s essay in his essay on the ode thereby resurrecting Burke today. Actually, Burke’s essay appeared earlier. Brooks wrote later on but then, Brooks referred to this Burke’s essay in a footnote. That is why, this idea of history without footnotes is here and this footnote by Brooks today has resurrected Burke’s reading.

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Summary



- Historical and Literary Context
- Keats
- Negative Capability
- Elgin Marbles
- "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles"
- "Ode on a Grecian Urn"
- Analysis
- An Intrinsic Reading
- An Extrinsic Reading



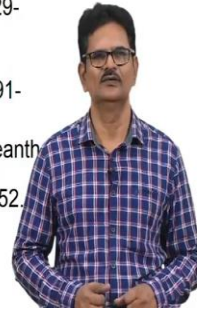
In summary, we have seen the historical and literary context of Keats, which enabled him to come up with his poems and also poetic concepts like negative capability. Keats had a serious interest in Greek art and culture which we understand through his visiting the British museum, seeing Elgin Marbles, writing a sonnet on this Elgin Marbles in 'on seeing the Elgin Marbles' plus his ode, "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

We analyzed the poem linguistically and rhetorically offered our impression and then, we went on to discuss this poem with reference to two critical essays, one by Cleanth Brooks, another by Kenneth Burke. Actually, these two readings are two different approaches to the poem. One critic, Brooks uses the images within the poem without reference to other facts from outside the poem, whereas Kenneth Burke uses some external factors to read this poem. From internal or external sources whatever way we approach the poem, the poem is considered to be one of the greatest poems in English. Let us see some references now.

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Thank you.