

Everlasting Tension:

A Comparison of Themes between John Keats and Hellenistic Art

Kate Kauffman, Lynchburg College

Throughout history, art has served as inspiration for many writers; the themes that are brought into pieces of art offer a multitude of ideas about which writers have long taken advantage. John Keats is no exception to these authors. Born in 1795 near London, Keats became “well acquainted with ancient and contemporary literature;” however, when young, he pursued a career as a surgeon by almost completing an apprenticeship and attending medical school in London.¹ In 1814, thanks to friend Cowden Clarke, Keats gave up his medical dreams to become a writer. Only two years later Keats had his first poem published and in 1817 published a collection of thirty poems and sonnets in the volume titled *Poems*. Receiving negative feedback on his publication, Keats traveled through the Isle of Wight, Scotland, and Ireland, eventually falling in love with Fanny, a beautiful girl from London. Enwrapped in love and poetry, Keats “exhausted himself mentally,”² and began producing many of his famous works. However, at the age of 25, he traveled to Italy to “recuperate from tuberculosis,”³ where his physician refused to allow him to write, claiming that “emotional excitement was a danger to the life of a consumptive patient.” Keats died shortly after in 1821, committing suicide by overdosing on medication.

Keats contemplated material beauty and expressed a profound sense of perception through his writing.⁴ He recognized a “debt to Classical antiquity”⁵ that can be seen in his poems, such as “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Written in four stanzas, the poem “Ode on a Grecian

¹ Sir Sidney Colvin, “Biography of John Keats” <http://www.john-keats.com> (16 November 2008).

² Colvin, <http://www.john-keats.com>

³ John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” 380-381.

⁴ Keats, 380-381.

⁵ Colvin, <http://www.john-keats.com>

Urn” exemplifies the tension in Greek vase painting and the everlasting qualities of each aspect of the vases. Questioning the struggles, loves, and lives of the figures on Greek urns, Keats explores the unspoken and unheard thoughts of these vases while also drawing in mythological themes that were integral to the ancient Greek lifestyle.

Three of this poem’s stanzas can be related specifically to three pieces of Greek Hellenistic art. The end of the first stanza, questioning the stories behind the paintings relates beautifully to the three highlighted pieces. The second and third stanzas embody the theme of infinitely relaying emotions that will never be fully completed, as well as the everlasting qualities of those emotions. *Nike of Samothrace*, *Barberini Faun*, and *Laocoön and his Sons* are the three pieces that relate to the themes present in Keats’ poem. All three pieces are from the Hellenistic era, when artists began to explore beyond the rules and conventions set by Classical Greece. Embracing dramatic poses and striking contrasts of light, shadow, and emotion, these Hellenistic artists captured the purest essence of each emotion they sculpted, producing pieces that embody the emotional tension described in Keats’ poem.

Nike of Samothrace depicts the goddess of victory alighted on the bow of a Greek warship. Originally raising a crown for the naval victor, her missing arms would have mimicked the expansion of her full wings. Made of marble in 190 BCE, the eight foot sculpture is from Samothrace in Greece but currently resides in The Louvre in Paris. The sculpture was displayed in the upper basin of a two-tiered fountain with boulders filling the lower basin.⁶ This dramatic effect created an illusion of water rushing against the bow of the ship, emphasizing the magnitude of the victory through a sensory experience. The Hellenistic artist paid close attention to the environment to ensure that the statue’s emotions were in perfect harmony with its

⁶ Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner’s Art Through the Ages*, 13th ed. (United States: Thomson-Wadsworth, 2008), 1: 149-150.

surroundings. In Greek mythology, Nike is the goddess of victory, strength, and speed. Closely related to Athena, the goddess of wisdom, Nike frequently embodies triumphs. *Nike of Samothrace* differs from previous Greek sculptures of Nike, which appear calm in comparison to the intense action portrayed in her landing here.⁷

The third stanza of Keats' poem focuses on the everlasting qualities of Greek vase painting, which are also reflected in the strong emotion evident in the *Nike of Samothrace* sculpture. Keats' focus on love is similar to the theme of forever being caught indulging in emotion, like the passion of victory portrayed by the sculpture. With her wings fully extended and the dramatic gathering of her dress around her legs in the wind, Nike is at the height of her expression and passion, in the act of crowning the naval victory. She will be forever caught in this ecstasy, forever victorious, forever exalted and "for ever young."⁸ Captivating her audience with awe of such passion, just as the vase painting described by Keats captivates its audience in the delights of springtime love, Nike also embodies a tension that will never be released. When he writes, "A burning forehead and a parching tongue," as the painted lovers yearn for the resolution of their suspended action, Keats is suggesting that statues such as Nike are yearning for the completion of that victory.⁹ Yearning to crown the naval victory and to continue the celebration or to move to the next victory, Nike is instead suspended in her climactic ecstasy of alighting the ship. This suspension can also be related to the *Barberini Faun* and more specifically through the second stanza of Keats' poem.

As the deities of the forests and mountains in Greek mythology, satyrs are usually shown as half human and half beast though the *Barberini Faun* is shown with only small horns rather

⁷ Kleiner, 150.

⁸ Keats, 380-381.

⁹ Keats, 380-381.

than with the traditional goat tail, flanks, and hooves.¹⁰ Companions of Dionysus, the god of wine, satyrs spent their time dancing, drinking, and chasing nymphs. The *Barberini Faun*, found in Rome ca. 230-200 BCE, is made of marble and stands at seven feet and one inch; it now resides in the Glyptothek Museum in Munich. The sculpture is typical of Hellenistic art as it explores abnormal poses and addresses intense sexuality. The satyr slips into a restless and drunken sleep with his eyebrows furrowed as if in deep thought, his entire body showing an overwhelming muscular tension to reinforce his restlessness.

Keats' second stanza of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" describes unheard melodies and unresolved desires that relate beautifully to the exaggerated emotions of the *Barberini Faun*. Slipping into a "suspension of consciousness and the entrance into the fantasy world of dreams," the sleeping satyr will never resolve that suspension, always just on the edge of the dream world.¹¹ Just as the "Bold Lover" will never kiss the other and the piper shall never finish his song, the satyr can never leave this restless state for the tranquility of deep sleep. However, Keats reassures us that "unheard [melodies] are sweeter" than "the spirit ditties of no tone" and that the young lovers and the piper should play on without grieving.¹² Keats suggests that the knowledge of their immortality should calm them so that although their situation will never be resolved, their suspended emotions and desires will never leave them either. The way that Keats writes such simple words that relay so much emotion mimics the skills of the sculptors who effortlessly carve tension that speaks far beyond the surface of the marble. The sleeping satyr speaks not only to Greek mythology; it also embodies the Hellenistic era's urge to explore new boundaries of tension and sexuality. The faun's facial expression relates to an audience who understands this suspension and is able to sympathize with the creature's inability to resolve the

¹⁰ Micha F. Lindemans, Satyrs, <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/s/satyrs.html>, (16 November 2008).

¹¹ Kleiner, 150-151.

¹² Keats, 380-381.

tension. Keats is clearly part of that audience as he relays this sympathy in his poem for the bold lovers and the eager piper.

The final sculpture that relates to Keats' poem is *Laocoön and his Sons*, which dates from the early first century A. D. The seven foot, ten-and-a-half inch marble statue, which is believed to have been originally sculpted by Anthanadoros, Hagesandros, and Polydoros of Rhodes, was found and resides in Rome. The story of Laocoön and his two sons comes from Vergil's account in the *Aeneid*. Laocoön was strangled to death by serpents sent from the gods after trying to warn his Trojan comrades of the danger of the Athenians' Trojan Horse.¹³ Believing that they were the side favored by the gods in this war, the Trojans interpreted Laocoön's fate as proof that the Trojan Horse was sent by the gods. Vergil creates a graphic and vivid account of Laocoön's suffering and agony, allowing the sculptors to take it even further in this Hellenistic depiction. This sculpture is an example of the reverse inspiration of writers for artists, as the three sculptors brought to life the agony of Vergil's Laocoön.

At the beginning of "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Keats addresses similar tensions as seen in *Laocoön and his Sons*, providing questions to the often unanswerable actions depicted on Greek vases. The questions at the end of the first stanza tie in perfectly with *Laocoön and his Sons*, who capture the "wild ecstasy" and "struggle to escape" described by Keats.¹⁴ The graphic and exaggerated pain depicted not only in Laocoön's face but also seen pulsing through every muscle of his naked body also relates to the everlasting qualities mentioned later in Keats' poem. It seems almost too cruel for the sculptors to have brought this struggle to visual life because it adds a timeless aspect to his pain. Forever being punished and left in pain, Laocoön and his sons will never experience the stillness of death or any relief from their torture. Wild ecstasy and wild

¹³ Kleiner, 153-154.

¹⁴ Keats, 380-381.

struggle describe this statue simply, but perfectly. Keats' curiosity in his first stanza paints for his audience a picture of a story in progress, much like following the thought process of the vase painters and sculptors. The well thought-out steps used to create art, which are described effortlessly by Keats, embody the Hellenistic era's attitudes to art, going beyond the classic rules to create tension-filled sculptures while changing the limits of visual experience.

Just as these Hellenistic artists strived to exceed familiar expectations in their art, Keats in his poem, aims to reveal deeper ideas than what is portrayed on the surface of the art on the urn. Asking questions about the art and delving into the pieces' deeper meanings, Keats is able to relate not only to the Grecian urn, for which his poem is titled, but also to express the themes inherent throughout the Hellenistic period. By making the stories personal and the tensions real in this way, Keats allows his audience to appreciate and to sympathize with the everlasting qualities of art. Without prying and questioning, the stories and intentions behind these pieces would be left undisturbed below the surface, allowing the viewer only a superficial experience. Keats, however, strives to stir up his reader's and the art viewer's curiosity, causing the significance of ancient Greek art to break above the surface and forcing its tensions, desires, and ecstasies to be felt instead.

Bibliography

Colvin, Sir Sidney. "Biography of John Keats." <http://www.john-keats.com> (accessed 16 November 2008).

Keats, John. "Ode on a Grecian Urn." In *Shaping Truth: Culture, Expression, and Creativity*, edited by Barbara Rothermel, Vol. III, *Lynchburg College Symposium Readings*, 3rd ed. 380-381. Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2005.

Kleiner, Fred S. *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*. Vol. 1, 13th ed. United States: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008.

Lindemans, Micha F. "Satyrs." <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/s/satyrs.html> (accessed 16 November 2008).