

## Implications of Romantic Hellenism by John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley

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**ABSTRACT :** *The Romantic Movement (1770-1848) in Europe was the result of inspiration, subjectivity and primacy of individuals in the field of art, literature and music. In case of English literature, the second generation of romanticism involved George Gordon Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats. Their contributions were creatively aggressive; lyricism, idealism, broad imagination and extended use of ancient myths was the core of the second epoch. Greek myths and culture became a major source of interest as they were abundant in fantasy and adventure, provoking higher level of imagination for both readers and writers alike. The Greek architecture, art and philosophy was also highly appreciated in Romantic poetry as they were enriched in intellect and aesthetics. Their impact in English literature is referred to as Romantic Hellenism. This paper attempts to shed light on the different implications of Romantic Hellenism in poetry through analysis of some authentic poems of John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley; how the classical Greek myth, art, literature and philosophy influenced their subject matters and determined its verses. What makes this paper distinctive from what has already been studied on is the survey of the inner meanings of four of the eccentric use of Hellenism in Prometheus Unbound, Ozymandias, Ode on a Grecian Urn and On First Looking into Chapman's Homer. Besides it also shares a glimpse on how they shifted from borrowing an aspect of myth and converted it into their own mythological wisdom. .*

**Keywords-** Romantic Hellenism, Greek myth, Romanticism

### I. INTRODUCTION

Romanticism was the movement for the rejection of orders, harmony, balance, idealism and rationality. It was the era for the rise of the individuals, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the personal, the spontaneous, the emotional, the visionary, the mythical and the transcendental. Aidan Day (1996) claimed that the Romantic writers worked during one of the most momentous epochs of western cultural history. The movement also directed its focus on the history of culture and this is where the Greek influence played its role. The powerful artistic liveliness present in everything connected to Greece has inspired critics and individuals from the very beginning of time. It presented the world with its original and unparalleled masterpieces through mythology, language, music, art, literature, history, architecture, painting and sculpture. And these aspects were broadly highlighted and appreciated through the works of the English poets and authors of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The English Romanticism was divided into two generations in the course of the revolution. The representatives of the first generation were William Blake, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Their subjects sang highly about rural life or the natural scenery; they had a common theme of alienation to enhance their negative view on the evil that industrial civilization had brought to the society. Their romanticism focused on the beauty of nature, exotic alien sights and some super natural elements whereas the second generation took a different turn in expressing themselves. The

representatives were George Gordon Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats. They were more active and had a wider range of subject matters, stretching their boundaries of imagination. And the use of Grecian deities provided them with greater creative freedom and religious sensibilities.

This research paper claims to discuss elaborately how the myths, architectures, art, sculpture, philosophy and literature of the ancient Greeks are appreciated and involved in the romantic era, how it played a role in different perceptions in poems, sonnets and lyrical dramas and how their philosophy of culture combined with the British ideology created the uniqueness in each of these discussed literary pieces by John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley.

## II. BACKGROUND

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the philosophical revolution was accompanied by certain reaction towards the Greek and Roman myths and classics. In the Romantic period it was taken for granted that the intellectual and artistic achievement of ancient Greece and Rome was one of the foundations of western culture. The Classical world permeated almost every aspect of life, from political institutions and philosophical enquiry to scientific method and the basic forms of architecture (Stefan Hebron, 5<sup>th</sup> May 2014). For the serenity and simplicity of visual art of the Ancient Greeks, they were admired and considered as a kind of elemental source of knowledge and inspiration.

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) was one of the most influential poet in the history of English literature and also a major representative of the second generation of romanticism. Like many other romantic poets, he had the power to translate the truth through imagination. His poetry started to be considered as a divine form of art, it became a kind of prophecy. Some of the visionary characters with power of his poems are inspired from actual Greek myths or actual living figure. They are often destined to face doom like that of Greek tragedies because their especial power isolates them from men and they get alienated which again is a feature of the romantic or fictional genre of British literature. Shelley had this tendency of unifying different norms of literature which made his contribution even more distinctive. His lyrical drama “Prometheus Unbound”, which will be discussed in the later parts of this paper. It is an example of his dual capacity to unite joy and despair through shaping up his imagination by alteration of the actual myth of the Greek Titan.

On the other hand, John Keats (1795-1821), who is best known for his comprehensive study on the lesser known myths and philosophy. He established his own way of decoding the Grecian spirit. He extended his knowledge of the Greeks by analyzing their architecture, literature and sculpture with the use of his own visual imagery. His genius on the Grecians was far more sensible and creative than any other Romantics. Keats lived a rather short and depressing life as he suffered from anxious “belatedness” but still, in his rather short life he had created a number of remarkable odes regarding the abstract Greek elements. Since the aim here is to bring out the rare and different involvements so “On first looking into Chapman’s Homer”, which is a completely different take on this theme will be discussed along with one of his odes.

## III. DIFFERENT IMPLICATIONS AND THEIR ANALYSIS

### 1. Finding the traces in Shelley’s work

As was mentioned above the rare yet topic relevant poems, sonnets and lyrical drama will be discussed. Chronologically Shelley had the earlier impact as he was the first to introduce the elements in disguise. It is evident that Keats have had made the greatest impact with the use of Hellenism but the 4 Act long lyrical drama by Shelley directly interacted with myth and thus it is only fair to start of the analysis with the great “Prometheus Unbound”.

## PROMETHEUS UNBOUND

Prometheus was a Greek Titan; the Titans are the deities that preceded the Olympian Gods, they were giants who were the children of Uranus and Gaea. According to the myth he was the brightest of the Titans who had the gift of foreseeing. He separated humanity from the dominating influence of the Gods and gave them fire which he stole from the Gods and for that crime he was punished by Jupiter; the King of all Gods. This is where Act 1 opens, with Prometheus still nailed to the rock, tortured by nature and devoured by eagles. The very opening speech was a resisting epitome towards Jupiter saying that his state of misery was self-caused. This brought out the features of a Greek Tragic hero; a tragic flaw of excessive pride, loved and honored by all and a downfall from a higher respectful position. The purpose of the powerful speech for self-recognition was to reunite his creation, mankind and bring it back into reality of shared freedom.

Shelley personified nature which was a common feature of Romantic era, by calling it to help him recall what he had prophesized for Jupiter. And their refusal symbolized the fact that even nature and one's own creation can betray the creator out of fear.

Another Greek feature of Shelley's work is that he turned all the vices and virtues of both nature and mankind into beings by personifying them. Prometheus breaks through this paradox by calling upon a world of forms that are not our own, a *Doppelgänger* world of correspondences, of other selves with whom we reunite in death (Harold Bloom, 1961). This is where Shelley took it up a notch by bringing the "Phantasm" which represents the ghost of our unfulfilled desires. This hatred driven force was strong enough to release him. To hate and reject so intensely is to become that which one hates. Through recantation of the curse he achieved his dialectic release.

"It to doth repent me: words are quick and vain;  
Grief for awhile is blind, and so was mine  
I was no living thing to suffer pain"

Jupiter saw the release as a rebellion not as a strife of contraries and commanded on more torture for his chained victim. This shows how the legends of rivalry between the Titans and Gods were driven by loathsome attitudes. Prometheus has been regenerated, but the creatures of earth are still slaves to the tyranny of heaven, still split apart by self-hate, blaming themselves for committing sins and abandoning ambitions. Shelley organized the settings in a dark mood to show case how men are dominated.

"We have passed Age's icy caves,  
And Manhood's dark and tossing waves,  
And Youth's smooth ocean, smiling to betray: [2.5.100]  
Beyond the glassy gulfs we flee  
Of shadow-peopled Infancy,  
Through Death and Birth, to a diviner day;  
A paradise of vaulted bowers,  
Lit by downward-gazing flowers, [2.5.105]  
And watery paths that wind between  
Wildernesses calm and green,  
Peopled by shapes too bright to see,  
And rest, having beheld; somewhat like thee;  
Which walk upon the sea, and chant melodiously! [

In the 5 scenes of Act 2, took a different turn as Asia, Prometheus's beloved sets out to a symbolic journey to rejoin him and enters the cave of Demogorgon, a deity that Shelley himself created and here Asia found out the imageless truth. The Demogorgon represented the deep truth which appeared to be sheer and he was part of Shelley's mythmaking. He collapsed the familiar dimensions of time and space into an ideal, eternal moment and place within the human mind as the Demogorgon replied "behold" when asked about the destined hour. Asia and Panthea then passed realms of misery which was soon to be turned into utopia with the help of Spirit of the Hour, Shelley visualized it as the realm of Age, Manhood, Youth, Infancy, and Death into a new paradise.

The fall of Jupiter occurs in the third Act as the Demogorgon appears and pronounces judgment on Jupiter. Jupiter cries for mercy, but his power is gone. He sinks downward through darkness and ruin. At the same time, Herakles approaches Prometheus. In the presence of Asia, Panthea, the Spirit of the Hour, and Earth, the captive is set free. With the role and narration of the chorus the drama is given an even better Grecian effect and the turn of event fulfilled the criteria of a Greek dramas which is known as the “falling action” as everything started to fall back in place after the climax.

Later, in a vision, Panthea and Ione see how all the evil things of the world lay dead and decayed. Earth’s happiness is boundless, and even the moon feels the beams of Love from Earth as snow melts on its bleak lunar mountains. Earth rejoices that hate, fear, and pain have left humankind forever. Humanity is now master of its fate and of all the secrets of Earth. And this happy ending tells us a lot about Shelley as he showed his worldly view and expectations through the tale of Prometheus. He took inspiration from the Greek classic but he showed that it need not necessarily end in tragedy if one can rectify and if the right justice is served. Harold Bloom claimed that this is not the apocalypse of any time-bound sect, political or religious or philosophical, but the humanizing dream of the autonomous imagination, holding to a faith in the truth and effectuality of its own disinterestedness (Bloom,1961).

### OZYMANDIAS

Ozymandias has been the most in depth Hellenic poem of Shelley. Unlike Prometheus Unbound, it has a short sonnet like format. It did not necessarily talk about the mythical elements of the Greeks rather it emphasized their language with the tittle itself as it is the Greek name of an Egyptian emperor. It also made its focus on the ancient architecture and the politics that lived among their rulers. Although the poem was about an Egyptian King it still had the influence of the Hellenic way of portrayal. It is one of Shelley’s greatest masterpieces. It can be considered to have Greek influence because of the appreciation of architecture, the ideology of the immortality of art, the cruel rulers and the power of gods over all mortal creation.

Ozymandias represented tyranny and the broken monument described in this poem represented the decay of civilization and culture showing that tyranny is temporary but it is the work of art that kept it alive after all those years.

“Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,”

The description of the correctly nailed expression revealed a lot about the kind of ruler he was, it unveiled a story which lasted even though the ruler did not, just like the ancient ruins of Greek sculptures and architecture. And with the later development of archeology greater knowledge about the Greek rulers were acquired, hence it played a vital role in the theme of this poem.

And on the pedestal, these words appear:  
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare

This was Shelley’s way of suggesting that all tyrants ultimately end up in the only kind of kingdom they deserve, in this case a barren desert. The term “King of Kings” has a great significance with the attitude of Zeus or Jupiter and having such attitude coming from a mortal being cuts deeper into irony as the reader realizes the forces of mortality and mutability. Shelley has served justice in the concluding line by subjecting tyrants to time as all human beings will face death and decay, as it is prophesized to all mortal beings. The poem remains primarily an ironic and compelling critique of Ozymandias and other rulers like him, but it is also a striking meditation on time-bound humanity: the traveler in the ancient land, the sculptor-artist who fashioned the tomb, and the reader of the poem, no less than Ozymandias, inhabit a world that is “boundless and bare.”

## 2. Finding the traces in John Keats' work

So far we have seen recognition of myths, language and ancient ruins, and with the analysis of Keats' works we will look into some different implications of Hellenism. Keats internalized from his encounters with Greek art a sense of strength, power and authority that demanded imitation, but he also experienced a sense of tension that undermined any complacent inclination to celebrate the nicely balanced harmonies of "classical" sculpture, together with an unnerving intimation of his own diminutive stature as poet. Among the many Hellenic works of Keats', "Ode to a Grecian Urn" and "On first looking into Chapman's Homer" are the most unique ones, having indirect imagery and links connecting to the various aspects of the Greeks.

Odes are lyrical poems which are not very lengthy and are often subjected to praising abstract or natural ideas. The term "ode" itself is derived from the Greeks. And since Keats believed that the Greeks had invented the "poetry of gladness" and identified in them "the religion of the Beautiful and the Religion of Joy" (Su. Y, 2016), so it is only acceptable that his perception towards the Greeks is much more authentic.

### ODE TO A GRECIAN URN

Hence in this poem Keats looks to the timeless truth embodied in the urn, which is a kind of vase or pottery with occasional inscriptions on them. He is overwhelmed by the skills of the Greek potter who managed to create such high quality art which remained immortal even though its maker or the story behind it is long gone. Immortality has always served as one of the main themes of any Greek literary piece.

The ode opens up with the comparison of the urn to a virgin, who had an unconsummated marriage affair with quietness. It is personified as a historian who had witnessed all but was frustrated with its inability to speak. According to Keats it is a virgin because its mysteries are still unrevealed and undecided like many other legends of ancient Greece, but unlike most the urn was not a ruin, it was still intact. It remains so until each observer creates a different interpretation.

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?

Like the art of poetry, the scene in it can be translated into stories of any form but he was curious to know what event made them act like the way they are acting. He was envious of the fact of how this wonderful moment was made immortal like the Gods for the sake of art. He noted that although the melodies being played by the pipers on the urn cannot be heard, this silence is somehow better, perhaps because the melodies dwell in a higher part of the mind, or the imagination or fancy, as this part of the mind had been termed at the time: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ Are sweeter."

There is a shift in tone from the celebratory mood of the previous two stanzas to a somber, almost sad picture of the deserted town and its eternal silence. The celebration of life on the urn has its counterpart in the unspoken death of the village. Again Keats brings life and death together. The point is that if there is much that is desirable in the immortality of his lovers and their eternal celebration of love and life, there is also much that is undesirable in this idealized world; not only will the lover never actually kiss his beloved but also everything that surrounds this event likewise will be frozen in time, including the abandoned village. It is all like the legends and myths and literature, it is what it is made, nothing more or less; it cannot continue on its own, it cannot reach the inevitable.

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."

In the end it can be said that the urn's beauty is truth, because age cannot waste it; or our woes cannot consume it. The questions of whether the permanence of art is good or bad, whether immortality is better than mortality, or whether stasis is preferable to change are all set aside. In the end it talks in favor of a statement about the lasting importance of truth, the beautiful truth, the capacity of art to



convey that truth from one generation to the next. Whether or not one agrees with Keats's poem is ultimately unimportant; what is important is that his poem discloses a truth, the great and enduring gift of art and how it held the true color of the Greeks for all those centuries.

Keats brought out the theme of appreciation of the Hellenic art and showed its vital role in bringing the Greek culture and tradition to the respectable position it is now in, how it is through art that they are remembered and considered as the greatest civilization in the history of mankind.

#### ON FIRST LOOKING INTO CHAPMAN'S HOMER

This poem by Keats is based on the Greek literary pieces by Homer; Iliad and Odyssey and their translated form by the playwright George Chapman. What makes it unique is his devotedness towards the Greeks, how he has heard all about Homer, read his creations, learnt all the histories surrounding his storyline, even visited the place of origin himself and also witnessed actual "bards" of Apollo, the sun God and yet he still did not lose interest on this subject matter. In fact, he even went as far as reading another translated version of Homer and only then he realized that the "pure serene" of the adventure regarding Homer's work.

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,  
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
Round many western islands have I been  
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.  
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;  
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:

This showed the admiration toward the Greek literature and his own root of English language, it showed how something so grand and enriched can be made even better when it earns the beauty of one's own language.

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken;  
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men  
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—  
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Then he started implying different scenarios of extended metaphors like most romantics but the twist is that he drew the metaphors from the developed field of astronomy of the Greeks. He compared his joy with that of a Greek astronomer and philosopher. His discovery of Chapman's version was like the discovery of planets by the Greek astronomers and it cleared his vision of the "realm of gold" which is Greece since his own language put his mind into a better imaginative faculty.

The phrase "eagle eyes" emphasizes the speaker's attention to detail as he looks into Chapman's Homer, while the images of the ocean extending to the horizon and the view from the mountain's peak correspond the metaphorical expansion of the boundaries of Homer's world. As the poem ends in silence, we could imagine the speaker reading on the edge of his seat, with bated breath at the prospect of undertaking a new voyage through Homer's world; like rediscovering something that you were familiar with but yet never had a chance to have a closer look at, before reading Chapman's piece. Or, we could picture him absentmindedly gazing in the distance, his voice trailing off, canvassing in his mind the broad expanse of Homer's world, the mountains and seas that stood between Odysseus on his journey home and once again relating to the legends and the literary verses of Homer.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Romanticism is the movement that altered the barriers to English literature, which inspired norms of higher levels of imaginations which was widely influenced by the Greeks in the field of architecture, art, philosophy, mythology, astronomy and literature. The use and involvement of these features are called Hellenism. The different implication of Hellenism by Percy Bysshe Shelley in his lyrical drama Prometheus Unbound where he combined the actual mythology with his own philosophy about nature,

human mind and power and invented some fictional character to fulfill this goals. Here the aspect of myth was highly encouraged by Shelley. Ozymandias by Shelley was analyzed next which is a poem based on the impact of the Greek architecture on the other parts of the world and how the worldly tyranny is temporary and how it is nothing compared to the power of the Gods. There was also some effect on the poem that focused on the language of the Greeks. The application of Hellenism through the appreciation of literature and art by John Keats in his poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn", where the details of the beauty of truth and respect for the ever living Greek culture has been discussed. It also featured how the richness of their origin inspired the civilization of different parts of the world. Finally, "On first looking into Chapman's Homer" was analyzed which took the readers back to the time of Homer and his poems. A contrast between Greek and English literature was also brought up by Keats in this poem. Evidently, I ventured to show through my analysis of these two famous romantics: the brilliance in the simplicity of Shelley's direct interaction with the subject matter and Keats' genius in his in depth inspection of different features of Hellenism

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