

Immortality Through Art

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Öz

Bu makalede romantik dönem şairlerinden olan John Keats'in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" ve "Ode to a Nightingale" şiirlerindeki ölümsüzlük temasının aşk ve sanatla nasıl bağdaştırıldığı incelenmiştir. "Ode on a Grecian Urn" şiirinde, ölümsüz aşk bir vazodaki figürler üzerinden anlatılmıştır. "Ode to a Nightingale" şiirinde ise şair bülbülün sesini zamandan bağımsız olarak bir şey olarak görür ve bülbülün bu sayede ölümsüz bir varlığa dönüşebilme yeteneğine imrenir. Şiirlerde ölümsüzlük isteği ortak tema olsa da, bu tema farklı objeler üzerinden kurulmaktadır.

***Anahtar Kelimeler:** Şiir, Şiirde İmgecilik, John Keats, Ölümsüzlük Teması, Aşk*

Sanatla Gelen Ölümsüzlük

Abstract

In this article, it is examined how the theme of immortality in the poems "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "Ode to a Nightingale" of John Keats, a poet of the romantic period, is related to love and art. In the poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn", immortal love is expressed through the figures on a vase. In the poem "Ode to a Nightingale", the poet regards the voice of the nightingale as independent of time, and the poet envies nightingale's ability to transform into an immortal entity. Although the common theme is the desire for immortality in the poems, this theme is given by means of different objects.

***Keywords:** Poetry, İmgecilik, John Keats, Theme of Immortality, Love*

John Keats' point of view in his great odes is basically structured upon a longing for immortality. However not necessarily the immortality of a man, but the immortality and universality of love too. As his odes consist of imaginary thoughts, everything is possible except for his own immortality. Being a mortal man, he desires an immortal woman with the aim of making his love eternal. The figure of woman is symbolized in all of the poems differently; she may be a nightingale, an urn or a goddess. Although all of them are in different forms, they have immortality in common. Nevertheless, they cannot be identified independently; they come into existence as long as there is a man who desires and imagines them. Man is the creator of them with his imagination, and without a man they are nothing.

In "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn", there are both desire and sorrow overlapping each other. While the poet, the male figure, suffers from the mortality of human life, he also observes and envies other immortal things around him. Sometimes they are alive just like a human, sometimes they are still and without emotion. Although a nightingale shares some basic features with people as mortality, in the poem it somehow manages to be immortal. This situation has become a trigger for the poet to be jealous of the nightingale. "Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, /But being too happy in thine happiness" (Ode to a Nightingale, 5). It gives him pleasure in sorrow. The paradox of his emotions leaves him somewhere in between mortal and immortal life.

For the sake of searching happiness, he even desires death. "Keats has toyed- or at least half-toyed- with the seductive call of escape through suicide." (Blades, 107). Death may be the only thing in life that brings the motivation to live. Keats, being a person who can never find the love, searches it in his imaginary life, and he reflects this impossibility in his poems as well. Being in love with death is the only type of love he has. However, he admits that immortality is not acquirable. "I have been half in love with easeful Death" (Ode to a Nightingale, 52). By capitalizing Death, he personifies it and turns it into someone to fall in love.

“More happy love.../Forever warm and still to be enjoy’d,.../All breathing human passion far above,/ That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy’d.”
(Ode to a Nightingale, 25)

Through his wingless journey to the forest with the nightingale, he breaks off his connections with the world. Nightingale becomes the symbol of timelessness in art and beauty thanks to its song. It “leaves the world unseen” (Ode to a Nightingale, 19). Since that moment, everything is possible as much as it is possible on earth.

At the end of the poem, the illusions that he dreams vanishes just like the mortality of life. Everything in the world is subject to an end, even our dreams. On the other hand, in the other poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, the point which is emphasized is the immortality of love through the art of sculpture. Whereas our mortal, worldly loves have an end and leave the heart “high-sorrowful and cloy’d” (Ode on a Grecian Urn, 29). The love on the urn would never fade away. That is the only way for love to be immortal. Unlike Psyche, who has lost her lover because of her curiosity, the curiosity on the urn keeps lovers together. “It is especially appropriate that Keats chose Psyche as his object of worship, because for him the best means of approaching the immortal world was through the use of the most active ingredient of the human soul, the imagination.” (Stillinger, 104)

In the Ode to Psyche, the theme is again the dreams against consciousness and the impossibility of reaching a balance between them. Psyche is a goddess who is so beautiful that Eros falls in love with her, and the poem demonstrates the impossibility of love between the poet, a simple mortal man, and the transcendental, immortal goddess. “Psyche was an excellent symbol for the imagination as an instrument to bridge the gap between the mortal and immortal because she stood between both: she had been mortal and she became a goddess.” (Stillinger, 104)

Woman figure preserves its phenomenal and the unattainable role in love as long as there is a man who pursues her. Moreover, his desire for building temples for her comes from his attempt to make her i.e. his love eternal. Although he knows he is mortal and cannot be with her forever, his demonstration of love is eternal at least. Psyche comes to being by means of people who believe in her because she is not a concrete person but a spirit. It is similar to “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, and “Ode to a Nightingale”; there is always struggle for eternity in different ways. In the “Ode to a Nightingale”, immortality is through the art of music that nightingale produces; in “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, it is through the art of sculpture which was made by a third person, and in “Ode to Psyche” it is through the art of architecture built by the poet himself.

In “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, love comes out of the impossibility of reunion. Impossibility of love is a determinant for the intensity of love. Although lovers have found each other, they cannot come together. The impossibility of it makes their love more flaming unlike the mortal loves. Neither the figures on the urn, nor the feeling can fade away.

The shape of the vase is also important as it resembles a woman in terms of her body form. We may handle the vase as a woman as well. Now, the woman becomes an object that is held in high esteem and admired. It is immortal with its guise like a nightingale. Keats talks to the urn, and rather than a simple object, he sees the urn as a personified thing being able to understand.

Both Nightingale and Psyche are winged and have the ability to fly into eternity, and it makes the poet desire to go to the same place with them where death does not take place. The imagination of immortality is associated with the forest whereby his imagination of forest, he disconnects with the real world and goes somewhere imaginary.

“Thou was not born for death, immortal Bird!” (Ode to a Nightingale, 51). Although the nightingale has been immortal since the beginning of its life, Psyche gains her immortality later through the love of Cupid. As long as there is an immortal love, it creates an immortal beloved as well. The

problem of immortality in the poems may be related with the life of Keats. As he had gone through a difficult love with Fanny Brawne, he had written his poetry under the effect of that love.

“Beauty is truth, truth is beauty” (Ode on a Grecian Urn, 49). For Keats, concrete beauty is the cornerstone of every kind of love on earth. That is why when he cannot find that beauty in the mortal earth that surrounds him, he prefers to hunt it in an imaginary world which he makes concrete by his emotions told in his poetry. Appearance is the only thing that mortal can see and evaluate. However, in order to see beyond the earthly beauty, man should imagine. “Heard melodies sweet, but those unheard are sweeter” (Ode on a Grecian Urn, 11). Imagination has a power to hear the unheard.

In *Psyche and the Nightingale*, love is a flying thing that he cannot catch. Whether the poet can reach his aim or not depends on the beloved. Only by his imaginary wings he reaches them, but even this imagine depends on other supernatural creatures. When these creatures decide to give an end to his dream, his wings disappear all of a sudden. Woman is the powerful one; she has dominance over the dreams of a man. On the other hand, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is different, each character is equal and there is no dominance. The only thing that has dominance is the time. Urn is the “foster-child of silence and time” (Ode on a Grecian Urn, 2). Silence of the urn becomes the symbol of inscrutability. Thus the urn stands as an unravished bride, and being unravished evaluates its worth. Actually, it is insulting for a woman to be evaluated according to her maidenhood. It gives the impression that she is valuable as long as she is a virgin, and she keeps her virtue as long as she keeps her virginity.

While Keats is trying to emphasize the power of imagination and the other branches of art including poetry against the concept of a time, it has also taken on another subliminal meaning regarding the figure of women. As an interpretation, he uses the woman, even the abstract thought of her, as a tool to reach his own ideals. The idea that woman is unattainable makes her more valuable, thus for the sake of keeping the value, he is in the quest of the impossible. I think he is in love with the impossibility of love.

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