

much that is cold and dead to love and warmth?

Once more the Almighty looks down upon three figures

Time, burdened and sorrowful,

Fate, grim and foreboding,

Man, petty and pompous

dancing grotesquely among the hideous ruins of the war-torn earth.

And as God determines to eradicate all this rottenness, to wipe it from existence, a fourth figure looms before Him, casting a protective shadow over Man and Earth. The figure is in agony, suffering torment, but from between parched lips, it sobs,

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Comparison

HELEN CARTER

(This selection was developed as the result of a class assignment to compare the themes of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and Yeats' "Among School Children.")

The theme of "Ode on a Grecian Urn," by John Keats, is that "beauty is truth and truth beauty;" that ideally beauty is everlasting, but actually the beauty of life, its happiness, does not last. This thought is developed through the implied comparison between the everlasting beauty and unchanging perfection of the imaginary life revealed by the figures on the urn and the changing, sorrow-beset lives of the actual world, where all things pass through the stage of beauty to a final fulfilment of purpose.

The theme of "Among School Children," by John Butler Yeats, is that "when the mind and body are in harmony, there is no distinction between the real and the ideal; the image and the actuality are one."¹ It is implied, however, that this ideal condition does not exist permanently in the life of man.

In that both express the character of

an ideology, inherently the same, the two themes are basically very similar, but the poets employ different methods of developing their ideas.

Keats is addressing a beautiful old Grecian urn which he is studying. He wonders about its history, what the carved or painted figures upon it symbolize, who they are—"What men or Gods are these?" Commenting upon a "fair youth, beneath the trees," who is evidently playing on pipes, he says, "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter." Tunes heard by mortal ears may grow stale but one that is never heard, one that plays to the soul, will never die or cease to be beautiful in the minds of men. Furthermore the youth cannot leave his song, the contentment represented by the scene will always be his. In real life, so Keats implies, the song would die

¹ Cleanth Brooks, Jr. and Robert Warren, *Understanding Poetry*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1943, p. 484.

and the boy would move away, perhaps leaving his happiness behind.

The "bold lover" is addressed in the same manner. Though he will never be able to kiss his love, he will always have the thrill of anticipation; she will never grow old or lose her beauty; they will always be together, and he will always love her. Such is not true of life.

He sees the leafy trees and realizes that they will be forever in their glory, for spring will never depart, and winter will be forever in the future. The scene described in the fourth stanza is a pastoral picture of a religious sacrifice. A heifer is being led by priests to the "green altar" while many people follow the procession.

To conclude the poem, Keats concentrates the substance of the implied comparison inherent within the whole into the last five lines. He uses a great deal of selectivity in choosing pictorial images, and the result is a unified whole—mellow, graceful beauty.

Where Keats uses the term with its thought-provoking figures as the source of motivation for developing his theme, the situation stimulating the movement in "Among School Children" is the author's visit to a school room, where the children's eyes

"In momentary wonder stare upon

A sixty-year-old smiling public man."

The scene provokes a contemplative mood, and the man dreams "of a Ledaean body" (referring to Leda, the mother of Helen of Troy), his love, and the time the tale of childhood "tragedy" drew them together in "youthful sympathy." The children in the room make him wonder what she looked like at that age. Then he sees her "as a living child," and as

she looks today, old—"hollow of cheek." The three stanzas show the relationship of youth to maturity and maturity to age, and follow naturally the sequence of the thought of a person in a reverie.

From the specific he proceeds to the general and wonders what mother would think of her son at sixty years of age as "compensation for the pangs of his birth," and the "uncertainty" of his life's road. Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras were old men, "scarecrows." Mothers' images or ideals are seldom fulfilled by their sons, for at the height of their wisdom and at the peak of their success they are old and no longer possess the beauty of youth.

The seventh stanza expresses the idea that both nuns and mothers worship images, but the marble and bronze ones revealed in the light of the nuns' candles are not the same as the images, ideals, which haunt the minds of men and mock humanity because of the inability to attain ideals.

The theme becomes more obvious in the last stanza when the poet shows that where there is complete harmony the real and ideal are one—"O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer, Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?"—and calls attention to the movement and expressions of a dancer, which become so much a part of the dance that it is impossible to tell the actuality (the dancer) and the image (the dance) apart.

The poems are much alike in their use of classical language and subdued rhythm, which are in both appropriate for the theme and method of development. Keats is clear in the pattern he uses for development, while Yeats leaves more to the imagination of the reader.