

Critical Response

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Title of work:

'Preserving the moment: A Quest for Transcendence'

'Preserving the moment: A Quest for Transcendence'

Heraclitus (Greek Philosopher) said 'we can never bathe twice in the same river. If you suffer, it is not because things are impermanent. It is because you believe things are permanent. When a flower dies, you don't suffer much, because you understand that flowers are impermanent'¹. It is a fact of the human condition, shared across humanity, that all things are subject to decay, victims of time. There is a universal timeless preoccupation surpassing all cultures to preserve the moment and escape the reality of human mortality, a pursuit of transcendence, *jouissance* and to permeate the impermanence of life trying to make things permanent, preserving in a concrete way. It is through art that ability to transcend is achieved, to have a part of us survive and surpass the limits and ravages of time. John Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and also touching on 'Ode to a Nightingale', and 'Ode on Melancholy' are an exploration of the center on the dichotomy of eternal ideals and the always ongoing change of the physical world. Similarly, in Baz Lurhmann's 2001 film 'Moulin Rouge' the persona of Satine is magnificently beautiful but also dying, linked with death; an unquestioningly Keatsian element. Keats and Moulin Rouge suggest the way to fight against death is not some kind of Christian notion, but you can fight against death with art, the art of singing as an expression of love that overcomes all boundaries, and poetry turning beauty that's there into an art form, hanging on to it with some kind of permanence, transcending the constraints of time. Keats' poetry is set in the period of Romanticism (Odes written in 1819), though the film is set after the romantic period it still possesses the very strong ideals (beauty, truth, freedom

and love) of Romanticism; being an 'attempt to escape oppression, escape reality, giving emphasis on individualism, spontaneity, freedom from rules, solitary life rather than life in society, the beliefs that imagination is superior to reason, a love of and worship of nature, and fascination with the past, especially the myths and magical experiences'² (through the world of the text - art), having very resilient links with Keats' work.

"A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity - he is continually in for - and filling some other Body - The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute - the poet has none; no identity - he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures"³.

(Letters 12/21/1817)

This necessity for infusion into all creatures and things in order to achieve some sense of the poetical and "unchangeable" permeates Keats's Odes written in 1819, particularly 'Nightingale' and 'Grecian Urn'. While Keats was writing the Odes, he could not be unaware of his own troublesome health, and at the same time, was entirely too aware of the recent passing of his brother Tom⁴. Thus troubled, he composes 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' in a dialogical attempt to find poetical existence beyond his too-short human lifetime.

As Keats tries to find some sense of permanence in an ever more apparently impermanent and fleeting world, he turns to those objects which he regards as

outside of the temporality he, as a mortal man, experiences: the perpetuating, generationless song of the nightingale and the "cold Pastoral" ageless marble scenes on the Grecian Urn.

Keats, in his attempt to perpetuate his temporal existence beyond his ability to draw breath constructs a permanent poetical existence in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' that consciously perpetuates vagaries and questionings, allowing his voice to be heard in dialogues far over-reaching his own lifetime.

'Ode on a Grecian Urn', meditates on a single urn. As you look at the scenes on the urn, you will see they represent all facets of life; the urn, this "cold pastoral", expresses Keats' belief that "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter", which epitomises the Romantic imagination: the unheard melodies are those we do not 'hear' with our ears but with our hearts, the melodies of love that will transcend time⁵. The urn speaks the last lines of the poem: "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' - that is all / ye know on earth and all ye need to know." The urn and its images have survived all that man and time could inflict on them: they remain beautiful and outside of time - preserving the best that is in and of man. The urn represents art, the unchanging and immortal perfection of the human spirit and what it can achieve. Thus it (art/beauty) is eternally present ("Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness") and eternally true - and it is all we need to know. It is in this and other poems by our dying poet that English Romanticism reaches its peak of expression and sensitivity, its "fullest realisation of the power of art outside of time and tide"⁶.

Keats questions the nature of Truth as represented by this urn and by his poem.

The origin of truth must in some way relate to whom we identify as the speaking subject in the poem. Therefore, the urn itself and the sculptor himself, both, by nature of the urn's existence, as well as its inscription, "speak" to modern viewers, allowing them a voice in a "dialogue". The sculptor, more importantly, is allowed a "quasi-animate" existence beyond his own years; he can communicate with future generations without even breathing. Keats describes youth and love without their concomitant qualities of age and melancholy, catching love just before it comes to climax and freezing it there. We become suspicious of the ideal world portrayed on the urn, "Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss, though winning near the goal". What kind of love really is this, without kisses and bliss, just frozen there forever? It is "all breathing human passion far above", but the important word there is 'breathing'. It is breathless, lifeless, like the ashes the urn contains. Life renews itself – Kiss, and then destroys itself – fading of beauty, but if it is taken out of time there is no destruction, but also no renewal either.

The relation between Keats and urn is unified because these scenes, although frozen and permanent by the hand of the sculptor, are in progress; that is, we only capture a single freeze-frame of the ongoing existence the characters experience.

'Nightingale' rides on the rhythms of the bird's song and images of richness and surfeit (the 'beaded bubbles' of wine in the south of France) contrasted with images of aging and demise, between despair and exhilaration. The bird

disappears at the end of the song, and the poet-speaker must return to "mundane" earth.

Similarly to this, in 'Moulin Rouge' the camera pans down and follows Satine as she descends as if a divine being from the roof on a perch with feathers on her back singing like a bird, like that of a nightingale.

Contrastingly to 'Grecian Urn', Satine's song is not unheard as her voice, like that of the nightingale, is her expression. This being that of the very limited expression that Satine has, as she is restricted to do what Harold Zidler lets her do, he is in complete control. This idea of Satine's confinement is demonstrated particularly well in the scene where Christian does his poetry reading, having a shot of a bird in a cage, a metaphor for Satine, caged in, trapped. The political influence of the French Revolution developed a notion that Paris was the foundation for the ideas of revolution, freedom, and violence to allow expression (the Parisian notion of free life, where the people control power, Kings were not divinely appointed and that society could be changed; it was impermanent⁷), that which centred of the Bohemian revolutionaries fundamental ideals of Truth, Beauty, Freedom, and Love). Satine begins her journey to break out of the repression she has had to deal with in this scene with her singing, the camera giving a close up of the expression of total envelopment and love she sees for Christian, an infinite happiness where she forgets her initial purpose of having to seduce him (thinking he was the Duke), and at this moment, she is freed, taken off into a heavenly fantasy land of song. They transcend the restrictiveness of the

mere mortal to a point where we are shown they lift up above the city, free from the repressive confines of mortality. Satine announces, "I can't believe it, I'm in love" a point where love is overcoming all boundaries to transcend time.

In another scene on top on the Elephant house, the magic of love and its power to transcend are again realised, the love and joy of happiness are expressed with the loves in each others arms singing 'love lifts us up where we belong', a recognition of the power of love, love to experience joy and to free them. A recurrent motif in the film is that of a windmill, a metaphor for time, continually turning. At the close of the scene the camera moves to a close up of the faces of the lovers together and the windmill in the background then on into the night, no longer do we see the windmill feature in the film, as the love between the two is now eternal, and bypasses the ravages of time, and impermanence of human mortality.

In "Ode on Melancholy" Keats accepts the truth he sees: joy and pain are inseparable and to experience joy fully we must experience sadness or melancholy fully. This ode expresses Keats's view wholeheartedly; it differs significantly from "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in which the poet-dreamer attempts to escape from reality into the ideal and unchanging world of the nightingale and the urn. "Keats valued intensity of emotion, intensity of thought, and intensity of experience; fulfilment comes from living and thinking passionately"⁸. Keats does not shrink from the implication that feeling intensely means that grief or depression may well cause anguish and torment.

In 'Melancholy' there is a realisation that things are impermanent, and to savour the fact that they were there, don't drug yourself, don't commit suicide (copouts) "wolf's-bane, tight rooted, for its poisonous wine", these things must be savoured as they have been or are on the way, to embrace Melancholy because we have experienced the point of joy.

First of all in dealing with impermanence, we are bound to die and there is no escape. This, we all know, as did Keats. Furthermore, it is a very sad thing, very difficult to accept. Why do we bother to bring it up? Why not continue to live in the way we usually do, i.e., avoid talking about death; and when it happens, try to make it look pretty and pass it over as soon as possible. Nevertheless, in order to free ourselves from our preconceptions and attachments, we need to be aware of this fact and to reflect on our preparedness for it.

Death is just the final part of life - why do we want to spend time looking at it now? It will become a problem just at the moment of death and it will be over in an instant, so why do we have to look at it now? It is simply because if you look at it now then you will have a chance to look back and reflect on life, even though you may not really be close to the end. You will have a chance to re-evaluate your life - have I lived a truly significant life? Am I doing things that I really want to do, or am I doing them just because I need clothing and food? Is human life really just working for survival? Keats found this very fical, as he wanted something to survive on after him.

Example: It would be like a vaccination, you take a shot in advance so that when the disease comes, you are well prepared.

The other aspect of this is that usually we just think from our self-centred point of view, and consequently we never have a chance to get out of this circle of my this and my that to reflect upon it.

A second point about impermanence of life is that we do not know when life will come to an end. We always make plans: "Oh, this semester I am going to do this, and next semester I am going to do that". We very rarely ever stop to think - What if today is the last day of my life? How would I have lived today? It would be very, very different. Many things that you are worrying about and many things that you are fighting for become nothing – due to the fact of a knowingness of death, Keats poetry holds a wondrous beauty "forever wilt thou love, and she be fair", a beautiful line demonstrating that love is eternal, and even in death it shall not fade. Similarly, in 'Moulin Rouge' the song 'Come what may' is introduced so the lovers can remember each other in times of need, though the song has a focus on the perceptive that death is coming as may is Autumn, nearing the time of death in the cycle of flux in relation to impermanence. If you don't reflect upon your life, as generally you don't know when it will come to an end, "all of your life will be wasted with things that are, in the final desertion, just nothing"⁹. Hence, it is so very important to think about it in this way. This is not just talk; unexpected death happens all the time.

A third point about impermanence of life is for us to understand what counts at that time. Usually we think in terms of fame, money and other worldly things, but at the moment of death none of these things really count; there is nothing we can take with us. The only thing that we have to face at that moment, and it comes naturally, it simply falls upon us, is – “What are our regrets, and what have we done to help others? Have I really cared for and loved others? Have I seen and heard the beauty in the world, or did I forget it?”¹⁰ This is what counts. This is the only thing that counts. If you want to have peace at that moment, this is the only thing that can give you peace, and nothing else can. Part of us transcending time is one thing, but the real aim is to have our realisation of beauty and love through art captured and lifted out of and above a mundane transitory existence to transcend the limitations of time and illustrate to those in the future what the joys of life really are; such as Keats' appreciation of beauty in 'Grecian Urn', “Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all ye know on earth, and all ya need to know”, and the boundless escape into the metaphysical of Satine and Christian through their love in 'Moulin Rouge'.

When we reflect upon all of these three points related to impermanence, then we will sense how lonely each one of us really is. Each one of us has to face death alone and no one can face it for us. This is very true in 'Moulin Rouge' as Satine has to face death alone, but in death she can have the satisfaction that she loved, and the love will live on eternally. All of us have the same situation, so what shall we do? We don't know when it will be our time to go. What happens after someone passes away in an accident? All those who are close to that

person say, "Oh, I wish I had done that"; "Oh, I wish I had said that". So we have to appreciate whatever others are doing for us, because whenever someone is doing something for us they cannot be helping anyone else. Once we realise that life is so fragile and impermanent, we can then appreciate others' love much more. Besides, we will realise at once that all those small fights were nonsense, and it will be clear that any barriers can be overcome.

Keats poetry exemplifies the nature of things; the still image grows in its connotation, and expands into a metaphor for reality. It becomes transmuted into symbol and myth unifying the worlds of change and permanence, of life and immortality, and of the artifice of eternity. There is a continuing preoccupation with the problem of pain, mutability and death (aggravated by Tom's death), and the premonitions and symptoms of his own end also an undivided imaginative concentration on the nature of the soul and of death exists, as a stage on its road to immortality, transcending the changing nature of time. These trends are aspects of the same deepening quest for a still and timeless reality beyond the world of flux, and they also run through 'Moulin Rouge', in that the quest for a timeless reality is reached through love. Through the realisation of Truth and Beauty in the world there comes a deep and meaningful love and joy for life (in true with the Bohemian ideals), a love that enables one be lifted out of the impermanent, transient world into one of intellectual ecstasy, *Jouissance*. In this way Keats' Odes and Lurhmann's 'Moulin Rouge' seek and find entry into the world of the immortal, the limitless bounds of time, able, though their immortality

they gain in their art to pertain to the future generations a sense of love and enjoyment of the beauty and freedom around them.

Thesis Bibliography

- 1) Harrison, P. Sept 6th 1996, 'Heraclitus - the fire priest', <http://members.aol.com/Heraklit1/heraklit>, acc 15-5-2002.
- 2) Wu, D. (1996), 'Romanticism: A Critical Reader', Blackwell, Cambridge (USA).
- 3) Earnshaw, M.A. (1957), 'Selections From Keats (Poetry and Prose)', Methuen and Co, London.
- 4) Fraser, G.S. (1971), 'John Keats Odes', Macmillan, London.
- 5) Allott, M. (1970), 'The Poems of John Keats', Longman, London.
- 6) Wu, D. (1996), 'Romanticism: A Critical Reader', Blackwell, Cambridge (USA).
- 7) Wu, D. (1996), 'Romanticism: A Critical Reader', Blackwell, Cambridge (USA).
- 8) Alexander, Dr P. [p.alexander@unsw.edu.au], Private talks about the texts and definitions.
- 9) Ford, G. H. (1962), 'Keats and the Victorians' (A study of his rise to fame), Archon books, London.
- 10) Jones, Mr A. [alex.jones@english.usyd.edu.au], Private talks about the texts.

Reflection Statement

The nature of my investigation is a critical response, which enables the aims of my thesis to be met. The critical response provides for the exploration of the themes of Impermanence, Transcendence and Jouissance.

Perhaps the best way to explain each in the way that I wish to explore them is by giving a definition of each of the terms; **Impermanence**: Nothing remains the same for two consecutive moments. Heraclitus (Greek Philosopher) said 'we can never bathe twice in the same river. If you suffer, it is not because things are impermanent. It is because you believe things are permanent. When a flower dies, you don't suffer much, because you understand that flowers are impermanent'¹. But you cannot accept the impermanence of your beloved one, and you suffer deeply when they (or in the case of 'Moulin Rouge' she) pass (es) away. If you look deeply into impermanence, you will do your best to make them happy right now. Aware of impermanence, you become positive, loving and wise. Impermanence is good news. Without impermanence, nothing would be possible. With impermanence, every door is open for change. Impermanence is an instrument for our liberation.

Transcendence: 'An escape from the physical, linked with some notion of spiritual, or that beyond the physical; the metaphysical'².

Jouissance: 'A theme incorporating each of the fundamental terms of Beauty, Truth, Freedom and Love. Jouissance is achieved from each of these concepts, pertaining to an orgasmic bliss or to be more formal, intellectual ecstasy'³.

It is looking at preserving the moment, the quest and desire for transcendence through John Keats's Odes and Baz Lurhman's film 'Moulin Rouge' (escaping the revenges of time), the timelessness of the themes that come to make up Jouissance (Truth, Beauty, Freedom, Love). Also, in researching these ideas and their part in the poems and film, I also examined the period of Keats's writing⁴ and that of romanticism⁵, as these played a major role and had a large impact on Keats writing as well as in the film 'Moulin Rouge'.

The intention of the major work is to explore the themes of Transcendence, Impermanence and Jouissance present in John Keats Ode, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' also touching on 'Ode on Melancholy' and 'Ode to a Nightingale' and in Baz Lurhmann's film 'Moulin Rouge' in relation to the statement 'Preserving the moment; a quest for Transcendence'. This has been a major focus in the independent investigative process. My independent investigation started out with research at the university library into Keats's life⁶ to find out influences that impacted on his writing and also on romanticism⁷. In this I found some major contributors to be the very tragic circumstances that Keats had grown up in; being the early death of his father, and his mother being taken after a few long years with T.B. with Keats having to look after her. Keats then faced with knowing that he to had the disease, and this knowingness of death comes through in his writings of 'Grecian Urn' and 'Nightingale'. Also, one of the investigative processes employed in the development of the critical response was researching various past and present critiques of Keats's work, looking at

earlier responses to it and also at postmodernist responses, with the barriers of social control and restriction now having been broken down. Moreover, this process provided a broader academic perspective from those who have engaged in considerable research in the field of Keats's works rather than just my own views on what his meanings are, from my very limited life experience. The romantic period held great significance as I found out in relation to Keats's writings, as this period in history was a time of immense social repression⁸. Another method of my investigation was to contact various academics from the universities in Sydney. Dr Peter Alexander, University of New South Wales; and Mr Alex Jones, University of Sydney. Each gave me a very positive response. I travelled to Sydney to engage in a discussion with them on the issues explored in Keats's work as well as how the structure of language contributed to the impact of the poetry on the audience, which I had originally intended to include in the thesis. Likewise, when I was in Sydney I held talks with academic Dr Devika Brendon, a Sydney private tutor, on 'Moulin Rouge' and how it relates to the themes of Transcendence, Impermanence and Jouissance, as this was the new direction I decided to head in relation to the thesis. A final method used to investigate was my own concentrated critical investigation into the poems and the film (involving a large component of deconstruction and analysis). Issues found in the texts through the investigations; in "Ode on Melancholy" Keats accepts the truth he sees: joy and pain are inseparable and to experience joy fully we must experience sadness or melancholy fully. This ode expresses Keats's view wholeheartedly; it differs significantly from "Ode to a Nightingale"

and "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in which the poet-dreamer attempts to escape from reality into the ideal and unchanging world of the nightingale and the urn.

Satine in 'Moulin Rouge' (researched after the change in direction), is magnificently beautiful but also dying, linked with death; unquestioningly Keatsian element. Transcendence – if what is beautiful is dying, how can one try and hold onto it? What do you do to fight back against death? Keats and Moulin Rouge suggest the way to fight against death is not some kind of Christian notion, but you can fight against death with art. Turn beauty that's there into an art form, hang on to it with some kind of permanence.

After liberal investigation into Keats's work I decided on a change of direction in the thesis, one to include the Baz Lurhmann's film 'Moulin Rouge', investigating the relationship of the film to the Keats poems (in relation to the themes as mentioned above), varying from the original idea of just a critical analysis of the poems.

The purpose of the change in direction of the thesis was to enable a more original insight and interpretation of the texts, as there has been such extensive criticism on John Keats' work. 'Moulin Rouge' as a recent film text has had little critical analysis written on it, especially from the approach I am taking on themes such as Transcendence, Impermanence and Jouissance, thus drawing a focus on Romanticism (an attempt to escape the oppression of the society at the time through the world of the text). This is clearly evident in Keats' works (written in the Romantic period), and is also seen in the film 'Moulin Rouge', written from a

post-modernist perspective, however set late 19th Century France. Though the film is set after the romantic period it still possesses the very strong ideals (beauty, truth, freedom and love), being an attempt to escape oppression, escape reality (through the world of the text - art) having very resilient links with Keats' work.

The impact of my independent investigation has led me to the conclusion that there are so many varied interpretations of the poems it was necessary to focus on only some of the issues explored within them, also to stay within the word limit. The word limit was also the main reason now for not making structure a very prominent feature in the thesis now.

The form of the critical investigation I have taken has proved, I believe, to be very sufficient and satisfying. It has met the needs of the thesis very well, and being able to get outside, expert opinions was a great asset to the major work. From starting out as a critical response to examine and bring forth the poems deepest meaning and influences behind the works to now having a cross critical study of Keats's poems and the Lurhman film, the research methods, and information obtained from these processes has lead to the reshaping and development of the thesis, to something now with new, insightful meanings shedding a different light on the texts.

Reflection Statement Bibliography

- 1) Harrison, P. Sept 6th 1996, 'Heraclitus - the fire priest',
<http://members.aol.com/Heraklit1/heraklit>, acc 15-5-2002.
- 2) Alexander, Dr P. [p.alexander@unsw.edu.au], Private talks about the texts and definitions.
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- 8) Wu, D. (1996), 'Romanticism: A Critical Reader', Blackwell, Cambridge (USA).

ENGLISH EXTENSION 2 — Critical Response

Band E1/2

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Sample 3

Title: Preserving The Moment – A Quest for Transcendence

This Critical Response is a discussion of transcendence, which is grounded in a comparison of Keats's poetry and Baz Lurhmann's *Moulin Rouge*. The candidate demonstrates developing insights on the links between texts. The independent investigation is limited and it detracts from the integrity of the response and the complexity of the candidate's assertions.

The major work is original in its subject matter but the shift to a personal, didactic voice towards the end of the response, marked by rhetorical questions and musings on life and death, also detracts from this major work. It is not, in this sense, sustained. The structure is loose and the argument lacks substance.

Claims are made in the Reflection Statement about 'liberal investigation' but the nature of this investigation appears to be generalised and more about the circumstances of Keats's early death than about the poetry. Textual/critical analysis of either the poetry or the film is scant.

The identified purpose, articulated in the Reflection Statement 'to explore the themes of Transcendence, Impermanence and Jouissance present in Keats's Odes... and... *Moulin Range*...' in relation to the statement 'Preserving The Moment; a Quest For Transcendence' is only superficially achieved.