They Know Not What They Do

JOANNE VIELLEU

Before time and space and mortality, the Almighty looked down upon his newly created world, barren and cold. Into it He put light and heat, vegetation and animal matter. Then he created a being of purely animal existence, and into it He breathed a soul that was like unto Himself. This soul, this tiny bit of immortality elevated the being to a status between animal and divine life. This, then, is God's creation, dependent upon Him for sustenance. This is His property, worthless though it may seem, that owes Him a debt unable to be repaid by its merely human capabilities. But God has infused it with enough of divinity that it may attain heights unachieved by any other type of being. And God is proud of His handiwork, and calls His creation Man, and gives him the earth for a plaything.

Now that God has given Man this beautiful, unsullied earth, what will Man do with it? He has within his power the ability to make of it a monument to its Creator, or he can destroy and degrade the work of God. What will become of Man and Earth?

Looking down through the ages, we see what has become of Man and Earth. We see Earth rocked and tossed upon the waves of Man's selfish will. We see the perpetual madness into which Man has thrown God's earth. We see the wars of all times — wars of avarice and greed, wars of revolt and religion, wars of punishment and peril. Finally we see the last three wars, each more horrible than the preceding one . . . . .

The time—1865—the end of the Civil War

The huge, gaunt figure of the spectre Time holds silent vigil over a battle field strewn with dead of white and black in uniforms of blue and gray, though the color of both men and uniforms is obliterated by the same mud and blood.

Time ponders,

"Men say that I have done this—that I have littered this field with the bodies of their kind, that I have covered many more such fields with many more such mangled corpses. Men say that the pressure of Time is overbearing, unendurable, that I drive them to such murder and suicide. Men say that I am the overpowering cause of the mass slaughters which they call wars. 'If only we had more time,' they cry. 'If it weren't that time is driving and crowding us, we wouldn't need to be rushing into this war!' That is their mocking cry that echoes and reechoes from mouth to mouth.

"Yet, I am he who 'heals all wounds.' I could have bridged their gap of racial prejudice, had they but let me. Slowly, but surely, I could have taken this country, torn asunder, and welded its pieces into one beautiful union of mankind. But, no! men must fight and rage and seek for excuses to destroy themselves—and then they say that I have caused all this carnage."

The time—1919—the end of World War I

The shadowy, unsubstantial figure of Fate looms over a bloody mass of flesh
and barbed wire. Slowly he extends a long, bony finger.

"Men accuse me of this bitter, futile struggle for life. Everything inexplicable is accredited to me because I myself am inexplicable. 'It is Fate,' they cry at life and death, joy and sorrow, pain and happiness. Then into my face they hurl the taunt. 'This world has been thrown into mortal chaos because it is Fate. Fate decrees that I must torture and kill my fellow beings. Fate drives me on and on in blind and savage lust for power and possession. It is Destiny!' This is how men mock and degrade the name of Fate. True, I am unyielding, and for this men have stormed and cursed me bitterly. I am inexorable, but I am not cruel or blood-thirsty. I am everything that will be because it must be, because it is inevitable, but I am not death or destruction. Those few men who have resigned themselves to Fate have found me a firm but gracious master. I can bring peace to the aged, comfort to the sorrowing, and solace to the bereaved. But I am Fate and men blame me for this brutal, callous massacre."

The time—the present

The tiny, insignificant figure of Man rises out of a charred and blackened world, a world that is a mass of tortured, twisted machinery, covered with dead and decaying bodies of his own kind. Man gloats and shouts for all to hear...

"I am the greatest reaper of them all. I am Man in all my vulgar, crude, and uncouth glory! I am Man exulting in my selfishness and pride, rejoicing in my insolence and defiance. I have torn out the hearts of many and the souls of millions. I stand here and face the Almighty one, the Omnipotent one—God, in all His splendor and majesty—I stand here in my pettiness and triviality and I laugh—from the shallow depths of my small, mean heart, I laugh! Here am I, supposedly the human likeness of this Divinity. When I should be humble and grateful, I laugh and mock and defy Him. Then I build weapons, feverishly. I build weapons of destruction to cut, to burn, to tear, to maim, to torture, and to slaughter my fellow beings. And going still further I connive and contrive deceptions with which to corrupt and wither the pure hearts and souls of these few men who seek to express the pattern of the Almighty.

"God, I call you now to hear me. Here is your masterpiece, a world bleeding and dying, a world merciless and cruel, a world corrupt and crushed. I have done this with my own avarice and lust. And I hurl this battered, shattered cosmos back into the face of its Creator and I mock—'Here is your dream of peace and love. Here is your trust and belief in mankind! I toss it back to you now, besmirched and sullied, and I, I am the greatest reaper of them all!'"

And God from His heaven looks down upon this creeping, crawling Worm called Man, His creation. Why should He not destroy this puny creature who dares defy Him, who pits his futile wits against the wisdom of Eternity itself? Why should He not blast this wretched being from the face of the earth? Why not destroy this entire, rotten earth, this earth that was meant to be a tribute to its Creator? But wait, perhaps there is some decent corner of Man's soul worthy of forgiveness.

Search, O God, and search blindly for one single part of the soul of Man to love and cherish!

Is a faint glimmer there, amongst so
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