

## Ode on a Grecian Urn

John Keats is perhaps most famous for his odes such as this one, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. As well as [\*Ode to a Nightingale\*](#), in which the poet deals with the expressive nature of music, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is another attempt to engage with the beauty of art and nature, this time addressing a piece of pottery from ancient Greece.

The urn itself is ancient. It's been passed down over the millennia to finally reach Keats's presence and, to him, seems to exist outside of the traditional sense of time. Ageless, immortal, it's almost alien in its distance from the current age.

This allows the poet (or at least, the speaker in the poem) to mull over the strange idea of the human figures carved into the urn. They're paradoxical figures, free from the constraints and influences of time but at the same time, imprisoned in an exact moment. For all that they don't have to worry about growing old or dying, they cannot experience life as it is for rest of humanity.

Keats believed that spontaneous sensations of the heart held the truth, as opposed to the dry, reasoning mind. In a letter to a friend Benjamin Bailey on 22 November 1817 he wrote:

*What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth - whether it existed before or not - for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty -*

It's important to note that Keats likened the poetic imagination to a religious edifice. In another letter to fellow poet Shelley he wrote:

*My Imagination is a Monastery (sic) and I am its Monk.*

This metaphorical approach to the artistic life of the imagination helped him create some of the best known romantic poems of his time. In his letters to various friends and relatives he also developed ideas relating to the role of the poet.

Out of these correspondences came Keats' famous term 'negative capability', (the opposite to 'consequitive reasoning'), whereby the poet's character is completely absent from the poem's content.

In an earlier letter to his brothers George and Thomas in December 1817 he explained:

*I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in Uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'*

Some scholars think this means that the poet has to be receptive, passive, which allows the imagination to do the work of the heart, transforming the initial feelings into poetry.

This is what John Keats lived for, to escape the confines of 'barren' reality by trusting in his 'sensations of the heart', letting go of the self, becoming a receptor, guided by passion and spontaneous feeling. Of course, he still had to discipline himself and form a coherent poem out of those initial stirrings.

*Ode On A Grecian Urn* was inspired by numerous visits of Keats to the British Museum in London. There he studied ancient artefacts from Greece, including the Elgin Marbles, and was enthused enough by his friend the artist Benjamin Haydon, to draw one of these antique vases.

Many researchers have sought for the one specific Greek urn described in the poem, but no one has found it - it is thought that Keats used several sources for the various scenes, so creating an ideal urn for the ode.

The poem is one of several "Great Odes of 1819", which includes "Ode on Indolence", "Ode on Melancholy", "Ode to a Nightingale", and "Ode to Psyche". Keats found earlier forms of poetry unsatisfactory for his purpose, and the collection represented a new development of the ode form. He was inspired to write the poem after reading two articles by English artist and writer Benjamin Haydon. Keats was aware of other works on classical Greek art, and had first-hand exposure to the Elgin Marbles, all of which reinforced his belief that classical Greek art was idealistic and captured Greek virtues, which forms the basis of the poem.

*Ode on a Grecian Urn* represents three attempts at engaging with the urn and its scenes. Across the stanzas, Keats tries to wonder about who the figures are, what they're doing, what they represent, and what the underlying meaning of their images might be. But by the end of the poem, he realises that the entire process of questioning is fairly redundant.

## Analysis of the poem:

Like other entries in Keats's series of odes, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* builds on a specific structure. Its closest formal cousin is probably *Ode on Melancholy*, though it contains a slightly different rhyme scheme. Split into five verses (stanzas) of ten lines each, and making use of fairly rigid iambic pentameter, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is very carefully put together.

The rhyme scheme is split into two parts, with the final three lines of each stanza varying slightly. For the first seven lines, a rhyme scheme of ABABCDE is used, though the instance of the CDE part is not always as strict. In verse one, the final three lines are DCE; in the second verse, they're CED; stanzas three and four both use CDE, while the fifth and final stanza uses DCE. This gives the piece a ponderous feel, adding a sense of deliberation to the final lines of each verse while still adhering to the form.

Just like in his other odes, the splitting of the verses into rhymes of four lines and six lines creates a distinct sense of there being two parts to each verse. As it is, this typically means that the first four lines (ABAB) are used to set out the verse's subject, while the final six lines mull over what it means.

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,  
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,  
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express  
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:  
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape  
Of deities or mortals, or of both,  
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?

During this first verse, we see the narrator announcing that he is standing before a very old urn from Greece. The urn becomes the subject of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, so all of the ideas

and thoughts are addressed towards it. On the urn, we are told there are images of people who have been frozen in place for all of time, as the “foster-child of silence and slow time.”

The narrator also explains to us that he is discussing the matter in his role as a “historian” and that he’s wondering just what legend or story the figures stuck on the side of the pottery are trying to convey. One such picture, seemingly showing a gang of men as they chase some women, is described as a “mad pursuit” but the narrator wants to know more about the “struggle to escape” or the “wild ecstasy.” The juxtaposition between these two ideas gives an insight into how he is projecting different narratives onto one scene, unsure of which one is true.

Keats begins with a feminine and rather demure image of the still, quiet urn, which literally can make no noise on its own and is therefore metaphorically married to quietness.

The word choices in the first line convey an undertone of sensuality. “Ravish” means to seize or carry off someone/something by force, yet it also has the sort of highly sexual and passionate connotation that romance novelists adore. Because the urn is “unravish’d,” the marriage in this metaphor has yet to be consummated, giving the urn a quality of innocence despite its age. Indeed, through this negation of “ravished” Keats implies that everything in nature must be ravished—lose its freshness and “purity”—at some point.

The purity of the urn plays an important role throughout the poem as Keats explores why he is so drawn to it.

Note that “still” in this phrase could mean both “unmoving” and “yet,” as in “yet unravished.”

Keats switches to a different metaphor, in which the urn has been adopted by “silence” and “slow time.”

It no longer exists in the original circumstances in which it was created, by some artist in ancient Greece. Because it is made of stone, the urn is essentially an eternal piece of art, exempt from the effects of time. Or at least it is the child of “slow time,” meaning it decays at a different rate than the rest of the human world.

By transcending this limitation, the urn has the ability to tell its story at any point in time, though it has been tucked away in “silence” (perhaps in a museum or some private collection, unable to tell its story) until now. Keats' is obsessed by these links between the mortal man and the immortal universe.

Keats addresses the urn as the “sylvan historian.”

“Sylvan” means an association with the forest, and sometimes deities or spirits associated with trees, such as the dryads of Greek mythology. So perhaps, evocative of the woods, the urn is dignified and rustic, but it also tells stories about the history of the forest.

A border of leaves encircle the vase, and the scene depicted is set in the woods.

In this sense, the urn is a historian in its own right. Keats could have called it a “Roman historian” for example for that same effect, but would miss the woodland connotations which are also valuable to this image he creates. Though silent, it is carved with designs that depict the “flowery” story (both metaphorically in that it’s complicated and literally in that there are floral illustrations) that follows even better than the “rhymes” of the poem itself. The beauty of the urn transcends time and keeps this history intact.

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;  
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,  
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:  
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave  
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;  
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;  
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,  
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

During the second verse, the reader is introduced to another image on the Grecian urn. In this scene, a young man is sat with a lover, seemingly playing a song on a pipe as they are surrounded by trees. Again, the narrator's interest is piqued, but he decides that the "melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter." Unaffected by growing old or changing fashions, the notes the narrator imagines the man playing offer unlimited potential for beauty. While the figures will never grow old, the music also contains an immortal quality, one much "sweeter" than regular music. The narrator comforts the man, who he acknowledges will never be able to kiss his companion, with the fact that she will never lose her beauty as she is frozen in time.

In the second stanza we find a young man playing a pipe, lying with his lover beneath a glade of trees. The speaker here says that the piper's "unheard" melodies are sweeter than mortal melodies because they are unaffected by time.

The reference to 'ditties of no tone' is complex and open to interpretation. These 'ditties' or gentle, light songs, have no 'tone' or sound that can be heard, because they belong to the spirit. The music remains in the ear of the listener, something personal to each individual. The phrase 'but more endear'd' suggests that the non-sensual music, that which can only be heard 'inside one's head', is more precious.

Note the neat rhyme of 'ear' and 'more endear'd', a concise way of expression a complex idea.

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed  
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;  
And, happy melodist, unwearied,  
For ever piping songs for ever new;  
More happy love! more happy, happy love!  
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,  
For ever panting, and for ever young;  
All breathing human passion far above,  
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,

A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

The third stanza again focuses on the same two lovers but turns its attention to the rest of the scene. The trees behind the pipe player will never grow old and their leaves will never fall, an idea which pleases the narrator. Just like the leaves, the love shared between the two is equally as immortal and won't have the chance to grow old and stale. Normal love between humans can languish into a "breathing human passion" and becomes a "burning forehead and a parching tongue," a problem that the young lovers will not face.

In attempting to identify with the couple and their scene, the narrator reveals that he covets their ability to escape from the temporary nature of life. The piper's song remains new forever while his lover remains young and beautiful. This love, he believes, is "far above" the standard human bond which can grow tired and weary. The parched tongue he references seems to indicate that he's worried about the flame of passion diminishing as time passes, something that won't worry the young couple. On viewing the figures, the narrator is reminded of the inevitability of his own diminishing passions and regrets that he doesn't have the same chance at immortality as the two figures on the urn.

Here, the narrator laments over the struggles over normal human life. The lovers on the urn might not have "breathing human passion," but they also do not have to deal with sickness, sorrow, thirst, or any other trials and tribulations of the living and breathing.

The description of the heart, the compound adjective 'high-sorrowful', is particularly effective and memorable.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?

To what green altar, O mysterious priest,

Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,

And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?

What little town by river or sea shore,

Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,

Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

And, little town, thy streets for evermore

Will silent be; and not a soul to tell

Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

The fourth stanza of *Ode on a Grecian Urn* really begins to develop the ideas. Turning to another image on the urn, this time a group of people bringing a cow to be sacrificed, the narrator begins to wonder about the individuals' lives. We also see the speaker in *Ode on a Grecian Urn* attempt to think about the people on the urn as though they were functioning in regular time. This means that he imagines them to have had a starting point – the “little town” – and an end point – the “green altar.” In turn, he imagines the “little town” they come from, now deserted because its inhabitants are frozen in the image on the side of the urn “for evermore.” This hints at what he sees as the limitations of the static piece of art, in that the viewer can never discern the human motivations of the people, the “real story” that makes them interesting as people.

This stanza continues the idea of loss that underlies all events in the most surprising way: looking at the procession of people and animals around the urn, Keats suddenly turns his gaze to the places they came from. He pictures places that might have lost them, imagining abandoned towns left at the waters edge, or deserted mountain homes. These places, too, like the urn's revelers, are frozen in silence, and none of their former inhabitants can ever return to explain their desolation.

The fourth stanza opens with the sacrifice of a virgin cow, an image that appeared in the Elgin Marbles, Claude Lorrain's *Sacrifice to Apollo*, and Raphael's *The Sacrifice at Lystra*.

It is interesting that the poet expresses this procession in the form of rhetorical questions. The entire poem is an intellectual exploration, expressing perhaps Keats' youthful uncertainty.

The narrator's attempts to engage with the figures on the urn do change. Here, his curiosity from the first stanza evolves into deeper kind of identification with the young lovers, before thinking of the town and community as a whole in the fourth. Each time, the reach of his empathy expands from one figure, to two, and then to a whole town. But once he encounters



the idea of an empty town, there's little else to say. This is the limit of the urn as a piece of art, as it's not able to provide him with any more information.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede  
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,  
With forest branches and the trodden weed;  
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!  
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."

The final stanza is perhaps the most famous piece of poetry Keats ever wrote. This time, he is talking directly to the urn itself, which he believes "doth tease us out of thought." Even after everyone has died, the urn will remain, still providing hints at humanity but no real answers. This is where we come to the conclusions he draws. There is a sense that the narrator finds the lack of change imposed upon the figures to be overwhelming. The urn teases him with its immortal existence, feeding off the "hungry generations" (a line from [Ode to a Nightingale](#)) and their intrigue without ever really providing answers. The urn is almost its own little world, living by its own rules. While it might be interesting and intriguing, it will never be mortal. It's a purely aesthetic piece of art, something the speaker finds to be unsatisfying when compared to the richness of everyday human life.

The last lines in the piece have become incredibly well known. They can be read as an attempt to sum up the entire through process of *Ode on a Grecian Urn* in one couplet. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" as an idea has proved very difficult to dissect, however, due to its mysteriousness. It's unclear whether the sentiment is spoken by the narrator, the urn, or by Keats himself, thanks to the enigmatic use of quotation marks. The source of the speech matters. If it's the narrator, then it could mean that he has become aware of the limitations of such a static piece of artwork. If it's the urn, then the idea that one piece of art (or self-contained phrase) could encompass humanity in any kind of complete fashion is nonsensical,

and the line deliberately plays off this. There's a futility to trying to sum up the true nature of beauty in just twenty syllables, a fact which might actually be the point of the couplet. Thanks to the dense, complicated nature of the final two lines, the opening remains open to interpretation.

It's still a matter of intense critical debate as to whether or not these lines are intended ironically. (Is beauty truth, and vice versa? Is that really ALL we need to know?) There's even disagreement as to how much of these lines the urn is "saying," i.e., whether the quotation marks should go around both lines or just "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." These are the kind of questions that keep the world steadily supplied with English Ph.D. dissertations.

Marjorie Garber, in her book *Quotation Marks* (2002), documents well the long history of differing views regarding the final four lines. She notes the actual manuscript in Keats' hand didn't contain the quotation marks and queries whether scholars then and now, embarrassed by the ending's seeming whimsy, add these marks in order to downplay the possible intentionality of the last two lines, thus "rescuing" Keats by making him ironic (in their eyes). Garber, being of the postmodern mentality, suggests "that all ye need to know" is that we will never be able to rescue the text from ambivalence.

Many compare these line to Keats's assertion in his letter to Benjamin Bailey on November 22, 1817:

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of the Imagination—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not—for I have the same Idea of all our Passions of Love they are all in the sublime, creative of essential Beauty [...] The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth.

## **Literary devices in the poem:**

### **Alliteration**

When two words close together in a line start with the similar sounding consonants, they are alliterative, which adds texture and phonetic interest to the poem. For example:

*silence and slow time.....leaf-fringed legend.....ye soft pipes, pay on....though thou hast not thy....heart high-sorrowful....Lead'st thou that heifer lowing...Of marble men and maidens.*

### **Assonance**

When two words close together in a line have similar sounding vowels. Again, the sounds combine to produce echo and resonance:

The second line is a classic:

*Thou foster child of silence and slow time,*

As is line thirteen:

*Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,*

### **Caesura**

A caesura is a pause in a line caused usually by punctuation in a short or medium length line. The reader has to pause for a fraction. In this poem, the second stanza has fifteen, which means the rhythm is broken up, fragmented, so the reader is slowed down and the lines become quite naturally more complex.

This line, 12, is a good example:

*Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;*

Two semi-colons and two commas are effective and break up the natural flow.

### **Chiasmus**

Is a device where two or more clauses are up-ended or flipped to produce an artistic effect with regards meaning, as in line 49:

*"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"*

### **Enjambment**

When a line is not punctuated and runs on into the next it is said to be enjambed. It allows the poem to flow in certain parts and challenges the reader to move swiftly on from one line to the next with the meaning intact.

There are several lines with enjambment in Keats' ode, each stanza having at least one line. In stanza four for example lines 38 and 39 flow on into the last:

*And, little town, thy streets forevermore*

*Will silent be; and not a soul to tell*

*Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.*

### **Personification**

The first three lines use personification, giving human attributes to the urn. So:

unravished bride (virgin bride 'married' to the urn's quietness)

foster child (wrought from the earth by the Greek artist, long dead)

Sylvan historian (able to tell the ancient tale).