

Ode on a Grecian Urn



by John Keats

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Ode on a Grecian Urn: Introduction

In "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the speaker observes a relic of ancient Greek civilization, an urn painted with two scenes from Greek life. The first scene depicts musicians and lovers in a setting of rustic beauty. The speaker attempts to identify with the characters because to him they represent the timeless perfection only art can capture. Unlike life, which in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" is characterized by "the weariness, the fever, and the fret" brought on by humans' awareness of their own passing, the urn's characters are frozen in time. The lovers will always love, though they will never consummate their desire. The musicians will always play beneath trees that will never lose their leaves.

The speaker admires this state of existence, but in the end it leaves his "heart high-sorrowful." This is because the urn, while beautiful and seemingly eternal, is not life. The lovers, while forever young and happy in the chase, can never engage in the act of fertility that is the basis of life, and the tunes, while beautiful in the

abstract, do not play to the "sensual ear" and are in fact "of no tone." Filled with dualities—time and timelessness, silence and sound, the static and the eternal—the urn in the end is a riddle that has "teased" the speaker into believing that beauty is truth. In life, however, beauty is not necessarily truth, and the urn's message is one appropriate only in the rarefied, timeless world of art.

Ode on a Grecian Urn: Text of the Poem

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?

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!

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 forever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
 That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

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 dressed?
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.

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.

Ode on a Grecian Urn: John Keats Biography

Born in 1795, Keats, the son of a stablekeeper, was raised in Moorfields, London, and attended the Clarke School in Enfield. The death of his mother in 1810 left Keats and his three younger siblings in the care of a guardian, Richard Abbey. Although Keats was apprenticed to an apothecary, he soon realized that writing was his true talent, and he decided to become a poet. Forced to hide his ambition from Abbey, who would not have sanctioned it, Keats instead entered Guy's and St. Thomas's Hospitals in London, becoming an apothecary in 1816 and continuing his studies to become a surgeon.

When he reached the age of twenty-one, Keats was free of Abbey's jurisdiction. Supported by his small inheritance, he devoted himself to writing. Keats also began associating with artists and writers, among them Leigh Hunt, who published Keats's first poems in his journal, the *Examiner*. But within a few years the poet experienced the first symptoms of tuberculosis, the disease that had killed his mother and brother. He continued writing and reading the great works of literature. He also fell in love with Fanny Brawne, a neighbor's daughter, though his poor health and financial difficulties made marriage impossible. He published a final work, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*, which included his famous odes and the unfinished narrative, *Hyperion: A Fragment*. Keats travelled to Italy in 1820 in an effort to improve his health but died in Rome the following year at the age of 26.

Ode on a Grecian Urn: Summary

Lines 1-4:

The poem opens with three consecutive metaphors: the implied, rather than directly stated, comparisons between the urn the speaker is viewing and, respectively, a "bride of quietness," a "foster-child of silence and slow time," and a "Sylvan historian." Of these, the last is perhaps easiest for the reader to immediately comprehend. Ancient Grecian urns were commonly illustrated with scenes or subjects that varied depending on the era and style in which a given urn was created. While more ancient vessels featured paintings of war and heroic deeds, the one Keats had in mind probably came from the early free-style period. Urns of this era are characterized by scenes from religious and musical ceremonies similar to the ones described throughout "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Because of its subject matter, Keats's urn must date to before the fourth century B.C., yet the bucolic scenes it depicts have been preserved through the millennia. For this reason, the urn reveals to the viewer a "leaf-fring'd" bit of history: it is a "Sylvan historian."

More puzzling to readers are the first two metaphors. Each involves the idea of "quietness" or "silence" because the urn relates its story in pictures rather than words. But why is it a "bride of quietness" and a "foster-child of silence and slow time"? The latter may be because while the urn's creation was the result of a fertile union between an ancient artist and some experience that informed his work, the same artist is now long-forgotten and the experience long-ended. Thus the urn, his "child," has fallen into the custody of the ages—"slow time." People who look at the urn can imagine but cannot actually hear the musical sounds and the story it depicts. Moreover, while in its own day the urn was used by people in their everyday lives, it has since become an artifact, perhaps in a museum, that viewers inspect reverentially—in "silence."

The most cryptic meaning in these lines is of the word "still." Is it an adjective, suggesting the urn is "unmoving," or an adverb, meaning "not yet" deflowered or "ravished"? A dual intent seems to fit the poem best. While "unmoving" suggests the urn's static condition as an artifact, "not yet defiled" suggests that its

beauty, though still present after thousands of years, will one day be destroyed. This points directly to a major theme of the poem: the painful knowledge that all things must pass, including (and perhaps especially) beauty. Though the urn is ancient and might seem eternal, in fact it remains subject to decay and destruction—subject to time, even if, in the case of an antiquity, it seems to be "slow time." The urn's perishability is made apparent by a simple understanding: one of beauty's qualities is that it is rare. Though many urns were created, only few survive, and while this contributes to the speaker's conception that the urn is uncommon and therefore more striking, it is also evidence that even ancient relics are not immune to time.

Lines 5-10:

The poem's dualities are further expressed in the sestet. First, while the urn seems both unchanging and perishable, the questions its pictures raise suggest both the eternal and the mortal. Though the urn expresses "a flowery tale" (line 4), the tale itself is unclear in many ways. Observing the figures painted on the urn's surface, the speaker cannot tell whether they are "deities or mortals," whether they exist in Apollo's valley of Tempe or the heaven-like but mortally inhabited region of Arcady. The characters may be "men or gods"—they cannot be both—yet the speaker's repeated question demonstrates he is unsure in his interpretation. Further, though the urn is marked by its stillness and silence, the activities it depicts are filled with motion and sound: a "mad pursuit," "pipes and timbrels," "wild ecstasy." Though the speaker cannot hear the music, he can see the instruments; though he cannot see the motion, the still representations force him to imagine it. Thus the urn possesses a dual nature. On the one hand, it is itself a symbol of the static quality of art. On the other hand, however, its painted figures represent the dynamic process of life, which art distills in "slow time" and often in "silence." This is the puzzling nature of all art: its viewer responds to it both as a work, which seems eternal, and as an experience, which he knows to be fleeting. Though he pursues meaning the way the males in the painting pursue the females, the meaning is "loth" to yield itself. In such a way, the urn has a "teasing" nature that brings about more questions than answers, for if the answers were easily available then art itself would have little reason to exist.

Lines 11-14:

In the second stanza the speaker turns wholly to the sounds and activities depicted on the urn. Here he makes the distinction between ideal nature of art and the flawed, fleeting nature of life. Though he cannot physically hear the "melodies" the urn's characters play, "those unheard are sweeter" because they exist in the Platonic world of abstract forms. They are perfect precisely because they are unheard, because the "spirit" to which they appeal can grant them an imagined flawlessness impossible in songs perceived by the "sensual ear." If life forces imperfection on all things, art retains the ability to make—as Keats wrote in one of his letters—"all disagreeables evaporate." One such disagreeable is time. In life, where chronology is the rule, even the sweetest tunes must be brief. In art, however, the "soft pipes" can "play on" forever. Yet there is a paradox. What makes music both recognizable and beautiful is its tonal quality. The urn's musicians, however, play "ditties of no tone." While these songs may be ideal in their abstraction, they cannot possess the beauty of the real songs whose tones, however flawed, have at some point pleased the speaker's "sensual ear" and instilled in him the idea of musical perfection.

Lines 15-20:

By the sestet of the second stanza, the ode's treatment of time—the tension between the perishable and the eternal ("men or gods"), the static and the dynamic (the urn's stillness, the characters' "struggle" and "pursuit")—has resolved itself into the three central symbols of the poem: "the trees," which represent nature, "thy song," which represents art, and the "Bold Lover," who represents the most basic process of human existence, fertility. In life, time takes its toll in each of these areas. Nature changes, going through its seasonal cycles of death and regeneration. Art stems from both nature and the experience of life, but it does so in a way that, while more lasting, is actually neither. Finally, life, in all its splendor, is dictated by time: it is chronological, and its moments—such as those of love and desire—are transient, mutable, and therefore less perfect than either art or nature. On the urn, however, time is stilled. The melodist "canst not leave / Thy song," the trees can never be bare, and the lovers are fated to remain eternally as they are depicted, midway in

the process of the chase, filled with "wild ecstasy" but never able to consummate their desires. But again, there is a paradox. Though the lovers are captured forever in a moment of supreme beauty—the moment before they are apt to be disappointed—they are also abstracted from the process of life. While life depends on fertility (the reason for the chase in which they are engaged), the lovers are in fact infertile. Through apostrophe, or the direct addressing of the inanimate "Bold Lover," the speaker hints at the paradox: "Do not grieve," he says. Yet the lover, because abstract and not alive, is as incapable of grief as he is of ever "winning near the goal." Grief is the negative side life's process: the painful result of love. Only living, fertile lovers can feel the weariness, fever and fret brought on by time, and while the speaker tries to imagine that the timeless world of the urn is the perfection of life, his observations suggest it is in fact the opposite of life and that his attempt must in the end be doomed.

Lines 21-30:

While the second stanza establishes the three central symbols of the poem, there is as yet no order to them: they exist together in the same type of "wild ecstasy" as the lovers' chase. In the third stanza, however, the speaker clearly delineates a hierarchy among nature, art and life. This order is expressed in the first three couplets of the stanza, each addressing one of the three symbols. First is nature: if it is "happy," then art (here, "songs") must also be happy, since art reflects nature. If art is happy, then life (here, "love") is happy, since art also expresses experience. But what is meant by "happy"? Some readers might think the repetition of the word to be excessive—a sign that the speaker is trying too hard to believe in what he is saying. But we must turn to "Ode to a Nightingale," which similarly addresses the tension between time and experience, to understand the way in which Keats uses the word. In that poem, the speaker's heart "aches" for the nightingale's "happiness," expressed in its song. The bird's happiness is not of the human variety, however: it is the happiness that comes from lacking the ability to "think" and therefore to be aware of time, change and death. It is the happiness of nature, which the speaker, possessing human consciousness, cannot share. This is what creates his ache. Though he wishes to fully identify with the nightingale, to fade with it into nature, he is incapable of feeling the bird's sense of "immortality," the real meaning of "happiness." We must suspect the word bears the same sense in "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Like the nightingale, the urn's abstract beings, their natural world and their artistic expression exist outside of time and are therefore immortal. The speaker comes closest to identifying with their "happiness" in the third stanza—thus, his repetition of the word. Yet the identification is fleeting. As in "Ode to a Nightingale," the experience overtakes him, he realizes he is detached from the urn's world he longs to be a part of, and the poem's tone shifts from ecstasy to alienation. Thus, the lovers' passion exists "far above," in the world of ideas rather than of life. The speaker's heart aches as it does in the presence of the nightingale: it is "high-sorrowful and cloy'd." His physical presence, the reminder that he is not abstract but real, enters the poem for the first time: a "burning forehead, and a parching tongue." After approaching the world of the urn, therefore, he quickly drops away from it and is left to reflect on the significance of the experience.

Lines 31-40:

In the fourth stanza the scene on the urn changes, perhaps implying that the speaker has moved to the other side of the vessel. The shift in subject matter suggests the poem's urn may in fact be a composite of different artifacts the poet observed: free-style urns of the type Keats seems to describe generally depict only one scene, running continuously around the circumference. The new scene shows a priest leading a heifer to sacrifice at some "green altar" not portrayed. Having come to the end of his attempt to identify with the secular, bucolic bliss of the lovers in the first three stanzas—having been left, in fact, "high-sorrowful" in the process—the speaker searches the urn for a different kind of immortality. Beyond the fleeting passions of life and the abstract perfection of art exists religion, which attempts to synthesize nature, symbol, and experience within a single overriding principle. Yet the urn's religious significance offers no more comfort than its eternal lovers. Represented by a "mysterious priest" of a spiritual practice long dead, the urn's religion has itself become art, eternal but eternally abstract. Lacking the proper context to understand the meaning of the priest's sacrifice, the speaker feels as desolate as the town "emptied of this folk." Thus, the predominant mood of the poem has become melancholic, its shift embodied by the emptiness and silence of the town. This silence is really the

silence of the universe when religion becomes an antique artifact rather than a means of understanding the "high romance" Keats talks about in "When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be."

Lines 41-45:

By the final stanza, the urn has lost much of its vitality for the speaker. It is reverted from a "bride," "foster-child," and "historian"—all human personifications—to its objective identity: an "Attic shape." The characters are transformed from living beings to artistic renderings. As such, they are "overwrought"—either by the artist, who has portrayed them as larger than life, or by the speaker, who has elevated them to a significance they cannot possess. This term recalls the first stanza, where the characters were overwrought in a different way: with desire and ecstasy. This duality is part of the overall riddle the urn has become. Instead of granting meaning, it instead serves to "tease us out of thought"—thought being what divides us from nature and "eternity," what gives us the sense of our own mortality and dooms us to the world of weariness, fever and fret. But, the speaker suggests, we can be teased only briefly, and even then our deception is the product of our imaginations rather than of a "cold" piece of pottery. When the deception is ended, we return to reality disillusioned. As the speaker of "Ode to a Nightingale" concludes, "the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is famed to do, deceiving elf."

Lines 46-50:

If the urn has become a riddle to the speaker, the final two lines are equally puzzling to the reader. The urn says to man, "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty," which makes sense in terms of the urn's world. For the lovers and for the urn itself, beauty is the only measure of existence: they cannot conceive, as humans do, that in life beauty is often deceptive and truth often ugly. But for the speaker, the first five lines of the stanza seem to confirm his understanding that beauty has its false side. The "truths" of life—the sufferings of men, the atrocities of history—certainly demonstrate that what we know to be real can only occasionally be called beautiful. So what do we make of the last line-and-a-half? Some commentators insist that the words after the dash are part of the urn's message: that punctuation has been omitted, leading to easy misinterpretation. However, it seems unlikely that in a poem as controlled as "Ode on a Grecian Urn" Keats would have left such a glaring flaw in such a crucial point.

Other readers suggest the last words are the speaker's and that he is addressing the reader. Thus, the urn's message comprises "all that people need to know on earth, and all they need to know." Yet this reading seems to contradict the entire rest of the poem. The speaker recognizes, after all, that he has only been "teased" into believing that the urn's beauty is truth and that what passes for truth in the urn's rarefied world can hold also true in life. The most likely answer seems to lie in the ode's consistent use of apostrophe—its manner of directly addressing the urn, its characters and its images. "Ye," then, must be the urn itself. Though originally plural, the pronoun had come to denote the singular "you" by Keats's time, and though the urn has been addressed as "thou" previously in the poem, the use of the word here would create an unnecessary awkwardness of sound: "all thou need'st to know on earth, and all thou need'st to know." Most importantly, if the speaker in the final lines is addressing the urn, then the ending retains a meaning consistent with the rest of the ode. For the urn and its characters, beauty is truth because they do not exist beyond the unthinking state of nature. Not only is the urn "on earth," it is made of earth: it is, like the nightingale, a part of nature. But for humans, truth is not limited to beauty—it is not all we need to know. Because of human consciousness we do not exist solely on earth. We perceive the abstract—the ideas drawn from the urn by the speaker—and we perceive the greater mystery, the "high romance," which places us beyond earth. Further, our awareness of time and of death forces us to search for truth beyond beauty, which can exist as truth only in the timeless world of the urn. Thus, the tone of the final lines seems one of mild remonstrance—similar to "Cold Pastoral!"—for the urn's having attempted to "tease" the speaker into believing a truth only appropriate to the urn itself.

Ode on a Grecian Urn: Themes

Time

The main thing that captures the speaker's attention about this urn is that the figures on it are frozen in time in the middle of what they were doing and they will remain there, unchanged, for eternity. The "bold lover" will never kiss the girl he is pursuing, but then, she will never age either. The boughs will never lose their leaves. The piper will be "For ever piping songs for ever new," and the ceremonial procession will always be on its way to the sacrifice. Of course, these claims are only true in the imaginary sense, since there are no real lovers, trees, musicians, or procession but only a picture of them; so it is not that they will always be doing what they are but that they never have. In asking us to take the leap of imagination that would let us pretend that these pictures have real lives, Keats is skipping over one of the basic facts about time: time is motion. Another way to say the same thing is to point out that time is change. Age is not just a product of time, it is time. Time passes for people because their bodies wear down, but if that did not happen, time would still pass because they have done different things today than they did yesterday. When Keats presents the figures on the vase as having had life but being frozen in eternity, he is casually getting the reader to accept a bigger contradiction than it seems at first, because the figures actually do have some pull of time if they exist at all.

In stanza 4 Keats extends one half of his contradiction by speaking of a little town that is not even shown on the urn. If the ceremonial procession had moved, it would have come from this place, and if it could move, it would go home to it. The members of the procession, however, have never really existed anywhere except right where the poet sees them. By imagining another place in their world, he is imagining a change of time in their world, while also saying that everyone in their world is frozen in place.

Art and Experience

For almost two hundred years, critics have wondered what to make of this poem's last two lines. These lines sound convincing, but the ideas of "truth" and "beauty" do not really have anything to do with this frozen slice of life. In fact, Keats makes it sound a far cry from beautiful when he calls it "Cold Pastoral" in the middle of the last stanza. But the poem is not claiming that "beauty is truth" is all that we know in this world. Throughout the poem—from the very first word—the speaker is talking to the urn. This form of poetry is known as an apostrophe. There is no reason to believe that the "ye" of the last line is any different. The crucial phrase is even introduced with "to whom thou sayest" and is put in quotation marks, indicating that this is all that the urn knows or needs to know. So "truth is beauty, beauty truth" only applies in the place where all activity is stuck in one moment. We can certainly see the beauty: the lovers are in love, the music of the pipe is sweet, the trees are always full, and the people attending the sacrifice have the joy of anticipation. But where is the truth in all of this? It is a limited truth. The poem draws attention to how many questions this urn cannot answer, and those answers are therefore not part of these people's world. The urn has no answer for questions about the people and place it shows or what the sacrifice is all about. These are facts that will be no more real a thousand years from now than they were a thousand years before Keats's time. One way of looking at the "truth and beauty" statement is to consider that the scene on the urn is true and beautiful because it is self-contained: it has no need for answers, and so it will always have found its truth, unlike real life, where new details always rise up and make truth and beauty elusive. This fits with the usual idea of beauty being at least partly a mystery, but we do not usually think of truth as only being true within a sealed, narrow context. The common factor to both truth and beauty in this poem is that they both occur when you know all that you need to know, regardless of what is happening around you. What Keats does not answer in this poem is whether such fulfillment is possible for a human being or if it can only happen to an inanimate object.

Love

The vision of love that this poem presents is not one of lovers coming together, as if love is all anticipation and is only ruined when lovers have a chance to stop anticipating and reach their goal. According to this

poem, then, love is never a happy circumstance: either the lover is struggling to get what she or he wants, or else love is reached and therefore becomes less interesting. It is either untouchable or unwanted. Neither option seems very desirable, although the poem tells us that, if we were able to choose one, the eternal chase would be a "happy" state of affairs. The poem's premise that unrealized relations are the best is consistent with the idea that "unheard melodies are sweeter," making the imagination more responsible for happiness than anything that occurs outside of it. We cannot be certain, though, that this is what Keats meant, or if he was being ironic about the way society emphasized the pursuit too much. An artist with his extraordinary verbal ability might use a simple word such as "happy" once to express what is in the lovers' hearts, but there seems to be a little sarcasm involved when the same voice that has the agility to say "She cannot fade, though thou hast thy bliss" goes on to repeat with insipid insistent cheer, "More happy love! more happy, happy love!" Either the speaker is chanting this way because he is caught up in the joy of the urn-people's love or he is mocking the over-simplicity of their situation. If his tone is actually mocking, and if he actually does believe that happiness and togetherness cannot exist at the same time, then the poem's message appears to be that both youth and pursuit are overrated.

Ode on a Grecian Urn: Style

The ode is an ancient form originally written for musical accompaniment. The word itself is of Greek origin, meaning "sung." While ode-writers from antiquity adhered to rigid patterns of strophe, antistrophe, and epode, the form by Keats's time had undergone enough transformation that it really represented a manner—rather than a set method—for writing a certain type of lyric poetry. In general, the ode of the Romantic era is a poem of 30 to 200 lines that meditates progressively upon or directly addresses a single object or condition. In addition to "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Keats wrote odes about the season of autumn and the song of a nightingale as well as about indolence, melancholy, and even the poet John Milton's hair. Keats's odes are characterized by an exalted and highly lyrical tone, and while they employ specific stanza forms and rhyme schemes, these can vary from ode to ode.

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" consists of five, ten-line stanzas, each following a single rhyme scheme that combines the quatrain of a Shakespearean sonnet with the sestet of a Petrarchan sonnet. Thus, the first four lines of each stanza rhyme abab while the predominant rhyme scheme of the last six lines is cdedce. The reader will notice that the sestet's rhyme scheme varies in each of the first two stanzas: in the first, it is cdedce; in the second, it is cdeded. In these stanzas, however, the poem's order—the hierarchy of its three principle symbols—has yet to be resolved. In the third stanza, "wild ecstasy" yields to a controlled interpretation of the urn's representations, and from that point the sestets assume the traditional Petrarchan order.

Thematically, Keats attempts to compose the stanzas in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" are just as their hybrid rhyme scheme would suggest. In a Shakespearean sonnet, the three quatrains present some problem or question to be reconciled in the final couplet. In a Petrarchan sonnet, a similar concept is reconciled in the last six lines. Thus, in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the quatrain tends to present a problem or condition that is addressed, explained or elaborated in the sestet. Consider, for instance, the first stanza. While the quatrain tells us that the poet cannot adequately express the "flowery tale" depicted on the urn, the sestet reveals why. The urn's pictures raise a string of questions that language alone cannot answer.

Ode on a Grecian Urn: Historical Context

John Keats is recognized by all as a central figure in the Romantic literary movement, and "Ode On A Grecian Urn" is considered one of his greatest works, although some of its elements are pre-Romantic. This brings up one of the biggest problems modern readers have in discussing the Romantic age. We cannot avoid talking about it and using the term to put historical literary figures in context with one another, especially not when

we are discussing works of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, but the traits that we use to recognize Romanticism can appear and then disappear within any author's collected works—even within any given poem. There have been qualities of Romanticism existent since poetry was first written, and there are poets today whom we would call mainly Romantic due to their view of the world.

The period that we consider the Age of Romanticism was the time in history when most of the significant artists created works displaying these traits. If there could be a starting date put on this idea, it would have to be 1798, when *Lyrical Ballads*, a volume of poems by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was published. These poems solidified a way of thought that had already existed in the atmosphere; it placed a high value on spirituality and nature. The works in this volume, the majority of them being Wordsworth's, made the artist the main focus of a poem. They also showing a renewed interest in human individualism, after poets of the Enlightenment of the 1700s had instead valued abstract, esoteric ideas such as reason and ancient history. Historically, we can see the ascent of the individual rising as an international concern in the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789, which both promoted the idea of democracy and respect for people regardless of their social position. The French Revolution led to anarchy, which might have made the general public around the world think twice about supporting the Romantic ideal of liberty, except that the anarchy led to the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1799. Napoleon named himself emperor and started expanding his empire in the early 1800s, which gave defenders of liberty an enemy to unite against. The fact that the Napoleonic Wars altered the balance of power between the three superpowers of the time—France, England, and Russia—and disrupted lives across Europe also helped the revolution in ideas proceed, since new ideas always flourish in times of turmoil. In 1819, when Romanticism and democracy were promoting ideals of freedom throughout Western culture, Keats wrote "Ode On A Grecian Urn."

Romanticism is a movement that we generally associate with literature, although traces of it exist in all arts and, to some degree, in all manners of thought. The Romantic frame of mind is chiefly emotional, not intellectual. In this poem, for instance, the interest in the urn is not expressed in an intellectual way, such as trying to determine its date or history, but the speaker is writing about his direct experience concerning the vase. Concerns of Romantics included love, of course, since it is one of the most personal emotions the individual can have, and nature, since it is nature that individuals actually experience in the world. The abstract idea of God is not the direct focus of most Romantic works, but it is related to what Nature tells us about the spirit that runs through all things. One more theme that occurs often in Romanticism is the retelling of ancient tales, such as Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, which is presented through a mist of heroism and emotion, or Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Lady of Shallott," which includes Sir Lancelot of the Arthurian legends. Most often, Romantic stories draw on their own country's history for sources. Focusing on subject matter from ancient Greece is a trait that we generally associate with the intellectual concerns of the Enlightenment, although it could be argued that this poem is about something that existed in Keats's modern time—that even though the urn was made in ancient Greece, the poem is not antiquity.

Writers that are included in the Romantic age include, of course, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats. Also included are Walter Scott, Lord Byron, Tennyson, and both Percy and Mary Shelley. In America, traits identified as Romantic show up in the works of Washington Irving, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Edgar Allan Poe, and Emily Dickinson. Worldwide, we consider Victor Hugo, Henri Stendahl, Goethe, and Alexandre Dumas to be Romantics.

Romanticism did not die, but after Queen Victoria ascended to the throne of England in 1836, the mood of the country gradually shifted from individual self-expression to social formality. American Romanticism lived slightly longer, probably because formal society was not yet established well enough in the early 1800s to overtake it, and because the Transcendental movement, a subcategory of Romanticism, gained popularity with writers here, and the catastrophe of the Civil War in 1861-1865 distracted the nation away from lofty Romantic thoughts.

Ode on a Grecian Urn: Essays and Criticism

Meditating on the Urn

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" was written in May of 1819 when Keats was 23 years old and his life was in emotional turmoil. In the previous six months his brother Tom had died, and he had met and fallen in love with Fanny Brawne who, at the time the poem was written, lived next door to him in Hamstead. It was a period of intense creativity during which Keats wrote his great odes; in them, he explored his emotions by addressing, describing, and questioning some idea or symbol that he celebrated. Keats's odes are a form of meditative poetry. In meditation, a person thinks intensely upon and draws conclusions from a subject. The subject may be imagined in detail as if it were actually present. During a time when ancient Greece was being rediscovered through archeological excavations and travel, as well as in books and exhibitions of Greek cultural artifacts, Keats projected his concerns about living fully, love, art, religion, death, and eternity upon a Grecian urn.

Because the urn Keats describes has been shown by scholars, including Claude Lee Finney, to be a composite of details from various sources, the poem is a commentary upon an imagined work of art. By writing an ode, originally a Greek poetic form, Keats is making his own claim to permanence. The "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is Keats's own "silent form" meant to perform a similar function— "tease us out of thought"—as that of the original Greek urn, that, ironically, does not exist (unlike Keats's poem about it).

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" concludes with the urn saying "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," and the poet commenting "—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." In themselves, such statements are close to nonsense. Truth and beauty belong to radically different realms, and there is nothing especially true about, say, a beautiful automobile or dog. We can test a scientific truth, but there is little to make us agree about the beauty of a car or animal. We say beauty is in the eye of beholder. Keats is using paradoxical language to make a claim for an alternative kind of truth. This claim makes sense within the logic of the poem, but it is also meant to have a wider application to how we view reality. The poem makes claims about the value and uses of art (and poetry) as represented by the urn, in contrast to other kinds of truth. These other kinds of truth might be scientific, religious, or philosophical, but the poem says clearly that "on earth" we can not know anything more true than what we will learn from art and that such knowledge is sufficient. There might be other forms of knowledge after death or in some "other" realm, but they do not concern us and we are unlikely to know much about them while "on earth."

These are large claims for art, but what has been claimed? Stanza five says the urn "dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity." "Tease," with its variety of meanings ranging from tempt to mock, suggests that, like thinking about eternity, the seductiveness of the topic and impossibility of coming to any conclusion mean we shouldn't worry about it. The urn itself, however, has its own kind of eternity. It remains after "old age shall this generation waste." A concern of the poem then is aging, the passing of time, and death. "Waste" is a powerful word made even more powerful by being in rhyme position at the end of a line and being the last word of an introductory clause. The basic meaning of waste is consume, finish, or use up, but the range extends from ruin to turn into refuse or trash. Our lives not only pass, but at the end we become waste. The urn, however, remains—a work of art that speaks to others "in midst of other woe." As each life and generation suffers from pain and fears, the urn is "a friend to man" by offering its religion of art, its own kind of truth, and its own permanent portrait of human desires and activities.

We might say that the poem shows how in the nineteenth century some people were losing faith in Christian revelation. These people had become agnostic toward any "truth" and were seeking in art a substitute for the comforts of religion. It is significant that the work of art that offers such comfort is a painted Grecian urn. The vase (like a poem) has a shape or form, and it has a narrative (like a poem) that needs interpretation. The end

result is the knowledge that art gives permanence to our feelings and desires. That the subject is a Grecian urn might well remind us that the early nineteenth century was a time of archeology, the collecting of the past, the rediscovering of Greece and the Mediterranean, and the high evaluation of Greece, along with Egypt, Rome and Israel as the origins of Western civilization.

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" is itself a well-formed work of art. It consists of five rhymed stanzas; each stanza has ten lines, and each line consists of ten syllables, usually of iambic pentameter. The feel of the rhythm is established in the first line: Thou still / unrav / ish'd bride / of qui / etness. The unusual stanzaic form seems to be derived from the structure of the sonnet that Keats had used earlier in such poems as "When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be." Instead of fourteen lines divided into an octave of two quatrains and a sestet of two tercets, each stanza of the ode consists of one quatrain of alternate rhymes (abab) and two tercets, printed as a single stanza. This speeds up the movement, in comparison to the sonnet, from the exposition of theme during the quatrain of each stanza to its exploration and development in the tercets. The quatrain is balanced by the tercets, the first of which introduces rhymes cde followed by a tercet that closes the cde rhymes in an unpredictable order. The structure can be seen clearly in stanza one where the quatrain concludes with the idea that the urn expresses "A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:", a statement clearly concluded by a full colon. This is followed by two tercets beginning "What leaf-fring'd" and "What men," in which "what" is used as a short refrain. The tercets here describe what is depicted on the vase. If Keats wanted structural contrasts, he also wanted the stanza to have unity and to flow without the thought and rhythm being halted—except at the end of stanzas where the space between stanzas allows for the next stanza to start on a new note. Within each stanza, excitement builds up as certain words or phrases are repeated and develop an accumulative force.

The following stanzas are less obviously divided into contrasting sections, but stanza two has a colon after the quatrain, stanza three a semicolon, and stanza four a question mark. Artists work within, against, or adapt previous artistic conventions, forms and styles. English poets have often tried to find some equivalent of the mixture of passion, seeming freedom, and control found in the classical Greek ode. Keats's stanzas may be read as single sentences, with various clauses, exclamations, and interjections, and the entire poem may be read as five sentences.

In the first stanza, Keats addresses the silent urn and asks it the significance of its decorations. In the second stanza, Keats addresses the decorations; their actions remain incomplete but, unlike those of flesh and blood, are permanent. The third stanza celebrates such permanence as a continual time of youth, strength, enjoyment, passion, happiness, and love, unlike the unfulfilled and passing desires and pleasures of the flesh. The center of the poem brings to a climax this celebration of an idealized life: "More happy love! more happy, happy love! / For ever panting, and for ever young." An unusual intensity is created by the repetition of such words as "more," "happy," and "for ever" and by the suggestion of a continuing activity in "piping," "panting," "Breathing," "burning," and even "parching." There is a change in mood in stanza four, as the past is found to include disturbingly strange rituals, blood sacrifices, and ways of life we do not understand. The town is desolate in being empty, but it also seems dismally silent after the activity and joys of the previous stanzas. Keats does not indicate what we are to think of this, but our thoughts might range from interest in other customs, frustration at not knowing more, to feeling that the past is no more a source of constant pleasure than the present.

No reading of a poem is complete; there is always something more to be said. Because the appreciation of beauty is subjective (in the eyes of the beholder) and shaped by conventions (what others teach us to recognize as beautiful), the criticism of works of art changes as a result of kinds of awareness, information, or assumptions. There is an old problem about the concluding two lines. Does the urn speak the two lines or, as is usually accepted, only "Truth is beauty, beauty truth." If the urn also said "that is all / Ye know on earth, all ye need to know," it would not necessarily mean the poet agreed with what the urn said. Indeed, he could be ironic in giving the urn such a limited vision in which the only truth was artistic beauty. In his book *John Keats*, Walter Jackson Bate claims that the final two lines are similar to inscriptions addressed to passersby on

Greek monuments.

While the ode celebrates the survival of the past it may also remind us of the limitations of the aesthetic in contrast to actual sensual experience. Many critics see the poem as filled with ironies (suggesting the opposite of what is said). How can Keats or the urn so praise beauty when desire on the urn is unsatisfied by sexual pleasure and when the world it depicts reminds us of death and destruction? Moreover the language of the poem seems excessive: "Ah, happy, happy boughs!.... More happy love! more happy, happy love!" If Keats indicates a distance between the serene, silent beauty of art and the pains, anguish, passions, and pleasures of the world in which we live, are the former necessarily superior as thinking about the art on the urn might at first suggest? As we read with more sensitivity and with more familiarity, we wonder whether Keats might possibly be suggesting that his poetry is superior to the urn which, remember, is also a product of his own imagination.

Opinion has surprisingly varied among critics concerning "Ode on A Grecian Urn." T. S. Eliot, Allen Tate, and others have argued that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" does not make sense. *John Keats: Odes*, edited by G.S. Fraser, offers a useful, brief introduction concerning the place of this poem among Keats's other odes and addresses problems of interpretation. One problem concerns who says what in the final two lines. Critics now usually agree that the 1820 version of the poem is correct; here the urn only says "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," and the rest of the two lines is Keats's commentary. Does Keats agree with the urn, or might he be ironically implying a limitation to the urn's vision of the world? Is it enough to turn the acts and passions of life into permanence through art? Is it enough that "she can not fade, though thou hast not thy bliss"? Even the "still unravish'd bride of quietness" in line one raises questions. Might it eventually be ravished, might Keats's poem about it be a kind of ravishing of quietness and silence?

Source: Bruce King, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

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Soul-Making in Ode on a Grecian Urn

Interpreting the beauty-truth identification in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" has become virtually an industry unto itself in the past century and a half; yet, with all of the sensitive, brilliant, and sometimes ingeniously inventive readings the poem has received, the equation that has been its most attractive problem remains an unresolved mystery. Some have seen the closing epigram as an artistic blemish in an otherwise masterful poem; others have modified that stand by calling the last lines a "brilliant failure" that is a statement of faith in an ideal, made against persistent doubts from the real world. More recently, critics have tended to agree that the identification is not a weakness of the poem, but have differed in explaining its significance. Is the poem ultimately a poetic expression of Keats's idea that the happiness we know on earth will be "repeated in a finer tone" in a spiritual life hereafter, or is it a rejection of too exclusive a trust in the permanence of the visionary or spiritual world and a consequent affirmation of process in the actual world? Certainly, no commentator can hope to settle the question once and for all, but perhaps a fresh look will add some useful complexity to our understanding of the poem.

In this essay, I shall join with those who agree that the beauty-truth identification is a consistent, meaningful conclusion to the poem and with those who believe that Keats is, in his greatest poetry, less yearning after an ideal than recognizing and affirming the value of the real world in which he and we all live. The poet's progress toward this conclusion can be described as an attempt to penetrate the hard surface of the urn and to reach and understand its essence. The urn is clearly more than a marble vase: the poet is, at first, concerned mainly with its legend, and the essence he seeks is spiritual rather than substantial. The urn is to him a supernatural object, because it is removed from time and its tale is immutable and imperishable. It is, moreover, a "foster-child" rather than a natural one, and its haunting, leaf-fringed legend is "All breathing

human passion far above." Its figures are deities or mortals, but, even if they are only mortals, their residence in Tempe or Arcady gives them a mythological status that is reinforced by their inclusion in the urn's "legend." The absence of a comma where one might be expected—and, indeed, where one appears in the *Annals of the Fine Arts* version of the poem—offers another suggestion that the urn, for the poet, is removed from a natural context. In the first line, "still," not followed by a comma, can function as an adverb as well as an adjective, and adverbial "still" underscores the unnatural state of the bride whose marriage has never been consummated.

"Unnatural" is not, of course, generally taken as synonymous with "supernatural," but in this poem the two are deliberately brought together. The apprehension of the timeless urn is couched in natural terms. In his mind, the poet animates the figures and tries to understand their existence by relating it to real life and the natural world. But, in so doing, he uses repeatedly the language of negation. The bride is "unravish'd"; the music of the urn is "unheard" and has "no tone"; the "Fair youth" can never leave his song, nor can the trees ever be bare. The "Bold Lover" can never kiss his beloved, and she, in turn, can never fade. Therefore, the lover, who has not his bliss, should not grieve. The "happy, happy boughs ... cannot shed / [their] leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu," and the "happy melodist" is "unwearied" of piping his songs. Other negations of sorts are the paradoxes, observed by Cleanth Brooks, of the "Sylvan historian" who tells a "tale" rather than records history and the silent urn that can express itself "more sweetly than our rhyme." The supernatural and the natural are, thus, brought together of necessity. The poet's best expression—perhaps his only comprehension—of the world of supernature is to attempt to naturalize it, and, when he does, he finds that it is unnatural and something apart from the actual world in which he lives.

At the same time, the supernatural world of the urn is attractive. Its tale is "flowery" and sweeter than the poet's rhyme; the figures' lives are lived in a "wild ecstasy"; and their music is sweeter than any known to the sensual ear. Love and the fairness of beauty are everlasting, and the second and third stanzas of the poem ring with words of joy: "fair," "kiss," "bliss," "love" (three times), "happy" (six times), "new," and "warm." Despite the poet's awareness of the unnaturalness of supernature, he sees its beauty and feels its lure.

At this point, one might jump ahead to the beauty-truth equation and conclude that Keats is expressing the same thoughts he had related in a letter to Benjamin Bailey:

What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not... We shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated... Adam's dream will do here and seems to be a conviction that Imagination and its empyreal reflection is the same as human Life and its spiritual repetition.

In perceiving the beauty of the urn, the poet, according to this interpretation, is also perceiving truth, and the truth is that the ideal, permanent world he sees in the urn is a preview of a better world in the afterlife. But one should not fail to note that in his letter Keats calls these thoughts "favorite Speculation[s]" and, in looking back some three years later, likened his state of mind in 1817 to "a pack of scattered cards." As Jack Stillinger warns persistently in his writings on Keats, neither the poet's theory of life nor his theory of art was fixed in 1817. More to the point, if only because closer in time, is the "vale of Soul-making" letter to George and Georgiana Keats written between February and May 1819 and completed possibly just weeks or days before the composition of the "Ode." There Keats says:

The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is "a vale of tears" from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven—What a little circumscribe[d] straightened notion! Call the world if you Please "The vale of Soul-making" Then you will find out the use of the world...how then are Souls to be made?... How, but by the medium of a world like this?... Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul?

To be sure, Keats also says, "I can scarcely express what I but dimly perceive," but these are, nevertheless, his working thoughts at the time he was writing the "Ode." The point is that in this letter Keats is turning to the natural world as the essential reality of life, as the only place wherein his basic intelligence can be fulfilled and grow into a soul.

Returning to the poem, one can see as it develops the same leaning that Keats describes in the Soul-making letter, away from the empyreal world and toward the natural world. Despite the poem's negations and ambivalence, the emphasis of the first three stanzas is on the joy and beauty of the supernatural world of the urn. At the end of the third stanza, however, there is a sharp turn. From the ideal world's lover "For ever panting, and for ever young," the poet takes a further and firmer step toward the natural world than simply the negations applied to his earlier images of supernature. Although the love displayed on the urn is

All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue,

these painful sensations are the undeniable and inescapable conditions that follow the experience of human love, and the man who would avoid them must perforce forego human love. Abstinence would, of course, be desirable if one could share in the love of the ideal world, but, as the poet implies with his negative descriptions of supernature, the ideal world is unnatural and, therefore, beyond human achievement.

In the fourth stanza, while the attempted naturalization of supernature continues, the emphasis clearly shifts from the beauty of the urn's world to the truth of the real world. The poet is still lured by the legend: he now sees a "green altar" and a lowing heifer with its "silken flanks" dressed in "garlands." But the priest who is leading the procession is "mysterious," and the lowing becomes ominous when one realizes that the procession is part of a sacrificial ritual and that the animal is doomed. The poet's focus is moving from the urn's ideal world and its joy and beauty to the ironic implications of the legend and the pain and truth of reality. And his next vision is not on the urn at all. Rather, it imaginatively extends the marble legend to include the unseen town from which the figures on the urn have come. The town is "emptied," "silent," and, finally, "desolate." But it is also a necessary addition to the supernatural world naturalized, for, in referring the ideal to real life, the poet must recognize the town's existence. Its desolation is the inescapable, painful price for the happiness and "wild ecstasy" of the legend.

Like "forlorn" in "Ode to a Nightingale," "desolate" rings through the poet's visionary flight to toll him back to his earthly humanness, and his return is marked by an altered perception of the urn. No longer personified as a "bride," "foster-child," and "historian," the urn that reveals only the joy of an idyllic world becomes an "Attic shape," a "Fair attitude," and a "silent form." The world of the urn is beautiful, certainly, as these last three adjectives suggest. But the nouns that they modify are lifeless, and the legend becomes a "Cold Pastoral" for those who allow its beauty to "tease [them] out of thought." To accept the urn's beauty alone, to use it as an escape from the real world and its sorrows and suffering, is to be drawn into the urn's marble coldness and left there without a soul. "Thought" here is consciousness of the "World of Pains and troubles," attention to what Keats called "the Minds Bible." And, indeed, the last sentence in the poem begins with a reminder that the human condition, unlike the urn's, is bound to time and comes at last to waste and woe.

In what sense then, one must ask, is this lifeless and ultimately deceitful urn "a friend to man"? The answer lies in what the urn says to man at the end of the poem. Various readers have given differing interpretations of who says what to whom in these final two lines, and the textual evidence is strong for several views. The present reading of the poem, however, takes the lines as a unified statement, interpreted by the poet, made to man by the urn. As a "silent form," the urn can, after all, speak only through the poet's imagination. The message, therefore, draws its meaning and value from what the poet has learned in his attempts to penetrate the urn's hard surface or, to put it another way, to naturalize supernature.

And the poet has learned much from his efforts. To begin with, he recognizes that the urn is an alluring thing of beauty. Its happy pastoral scene is rich and inviting. But the poet's attempts to enter this idyllic, supernatural world are frustrated by his humanness and his unbreakable ties to the natural world. He can try to understand the urn's legend only by relating it to the world of his experience, and, when he does, he discovers that the atmosphere of the ideal world is too rare for him and finally too cold. This is not to say that the poet rejects the urn and its beauty. Rather, he rejects them as an absolute that can exist in isolation. Set in the context of real life, the idea of beauty demands the completion provided by a contrary, and, in this case, the contrary is desolation, waste, and woe. The urn is a friend to man, then, because of its totality—not its beauty alone, but also its implicit truth that a human being cannot live by beauty alone and still develop a soul. The beauty-truth equation is not mathematically exact. It is an equation of completion. Beauty does not equal truth, but the one cannot exist on earth without the other. Where there is beauty, there is also truth; where there is warmth, there is also cold; where there is joy, there is also pain and sorrow.

It is significant that the poet reverses the equation as well, and the repetition is not wasted. If beauty is truth, if joy requires pain, then so is truth beauty and so does pain require joy. If passion in real life "leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd," it is because the earthly lover has known a joy of fulfillment, or at least its possibility, that the figures on the urn will never know. The poem, therefore, does not end with equivocation or with mere longing after an unattainable ideal. The meaning of the beauty-truth equation goes much deeper. Ultimately, the urn's message is a validation of the miseries of human life and an assertion that these miseries are necessary for attaining what Keats called "Soul." The equation may not be all that man needs to know on earth, but, properly understood, it is a great deal, and perhaps all that is necessary to make inevitable the process of Soul-making.

Source: James Shokoff, "Soul-Making in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,'" in *Keats-Shelley Journal*, Vol. XXIV, 1975, pp. 102-7.

The Pious Frauds of Art: A Reading of "The Ode on a Grecian Urn"

A poem of symbolic debate which ends on an explicit abstract statement, the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" raises a special critical problem. The poem is at once too limited and too rich a context to define what Keats meant by "beauty" and "truth," abstractions with a wide range of possible references. Scrupulous readers, who take care not to view the final aphorism in the light of their own preconceptions, who decline—in the interest of austere critical purity—the help which they might receive from Keats's other writings, run the risk of finding the Urn's message "meaningless," as T. S. Eliot illustrates by his famous throwing up of hands. A recent example may be found in John Jones's admirable book where the close of the poem is described as an "opaque and almost featureless assertion," "gummed hopefully onto an alien substance." In view of these difficulties, the only way of restoring the integrity of the Ode is to place its concluding statement within the broader context of Keats's poems and letters... The present reading is proposed in the hope that it helps to elucidate the complex meaning of a stanza whose obscurity is largely due to the extreme condensation of Keats's thought.

There are three main difficulties in stanza V. Who says what to whom in the last two lines? What do "beauty" and "truth" mean? What connections should be established between the final statement and the rest of the poem? In the absence of autograph evidence, and since none of the various readings can be conclusively proved to be Keats's own, the punctuation of lines 49-50 can only result from an interpretive decision based on a critical analysis of the poem's overall meaning. The view adopted here is that the two lines are addressed to "man" by the urn, an opinion which has been steadily gaining ground in recent years. Additional arguments in its favor will be found in the answers offered here to the last two questions.

This essay would contend that the Ode presents a retrospective of Keats's thought, submitting early beliefs to the test of mature reflections. The figures depicted on the urn at first suggest to the poet that man's ability to idealize earthly beauty is the intimation of a form of immortality consonant with the heart's desires. In stanzas II and III, Keats's imagination rediscovers, with mounting enthusiasm, the possibility of believing in its own secret dream of an "immortality of passion." While the imaginative trance lasts, beauty and truth appear to be no farther apart than the temporal and eternal aspects of the same ultimate reality. Stanza IV then reveals that this belief, on which Keats based his most ambitious conception of art, will not stand the test of human logic. Stanza V first acknowledges the impossibility of asserting the absolute equivalence of beauty and truth, then controls the anguish resulting from this admission by turning to a greatly enriched form of Keats's creed in *Endymion*. Imaginative experience, more openly than in the "Ode to a Nightingale," is recognized as an illusion devoid of metaphysical validity. But, in an abrupt turn, balancing the wish to believe against an awareness of the limitations of belief, the poet finds grounds for accepting the "pious frauds" of art in the very unknowableness of truth.

Thus the final stanza of the Ode brings together two of Keats's early justifications of art: the conception, which may have been part of Keats's Wordsworthian heritage, that beauty is the sensuous form of truth, and the notion that beauty is a consolation for life's sufferings. By presenting, in the Ode, the former as the point of view of art, whose validity is limited to the aesthetic realm, Keats turns it into a poetic faith in favor of which the urn begs us to suspend our disbelief. The aestheticism of *Endymion* is thus placed on a basis compatible with Keats's mature skepticism and acquires seriousness from its being confronted with a lucid realism. But the transcendental vindication of art is renounced with melancholy reluctance.

It has often been remarked that the very ambiguity of the urn makes it peculiarly appropriate to serve as a focus for Keats's reflections on the meaning of imaginative experience. Indeed it would seem that its ambiguity is that of the poetic trance, leaving the mind in doubt whether it has been moved by a meaningless emotion or granted a glimpse of heaven. A temporal object which in a way is independent of time, the urn objectifies the ambiguity of Keats's "sensations." In stanza I it is seen as a messenger from eternity, as an "ethereal thing," to borrow Keats's paradoxical phrase, that is, a thing impregnated by spirit. Because the spiritual is engraved in its flanks, the urn is one of the objects which mysteriously transcend earthly limits, and which, in the language of *Endymion*, "Can make a ladder of the eternal wind." It hovers, that is, between heaven and earth, moving from the sensual to the spiritual with the nimble ease of angels on Jacob's ladder. At the time of *Endymion*, the existence of such mediators was one of the tenets of Keats's religion of beauty; in May 1819, his faith was shaken by doubts...

The initial question in stanza I is an invocation to the "Cherub Contemplation," an incantation designed to induce the trance-like mood which will enable the poet to hear the music in the urn's silence. Keats is creating in himself the imaginative receptiveness...as the first step on the way to "happiness." Since imaginary scenes can be visualized with the vividness of actuality, the mind can extend its scope to embrace experiences which bodily limitations would preclude it from knowing; its condition then becomes that of a "floating spirit". The first stanza of the Ode moves toward the depersonalization of imaginative ecstasy... Keats was both aware of the psychological nature of this momentary transcendence and tempted to grant it metaphysical validity. Analysis reveals that such phrases as "our state / Is like a floating spirit's" can be read in a psychological, as distinguished from a metaphysical, sense. But their value for Keats was that they left the matter...

In the Ode, as in the letter to Bailey of 22 November 1817, the praise of "essential Beauty" is what allows Keats to elaborate the representation of eternity which lies at the center of the Ode and indeed of his whole poetic universe. The recurrence of this mental process is not fortuitous: the meaning of the beauty-truth equation can best be approached by bringing to light the relation which it bears to Keats's eternity myth...

The implicit starting-point of Keats's reflections in the letter is that the human mind uses natural beauty "as materials to form greater things— that is to say ethereal things." Out of the raw material of sensation, the

imagination creates a quintessential abstract, purified from its grosser material aspects, comparatively independent of space and time, and refined into greater intensity. Keats, as we have seen, uses the adjective "ethereal" to qualify these productions of man's spirit, creations which combine the actual and the ideal. Indeed it seems that in Keats's usage the "ethereal" often refers to what we can know of the ideal here and now. The spiritual nature of the human mind is proved by this mental alchemy which is an "intimation of immortality." Since the imagination is able to subtilize sensation, to put it "into ethereal existence," since it can endow sensuous delights with a degree of permanence, earthly life must be the reflection of a finer world which we shall know in the hereafter. This first hypothesis is used to support "another favorite Speculation" of the poet's: eternal bliss will be the repetition of our earthly joys "in a finer tone..."

As far as it can be reconstructed, Keats's argument in the letter runs briefly like this: if "essential Beauty" is a transient apprehension of heavenly bliss, logic has it, it seems, that eternal life must be "the redigestion of our most ethereal Musings on Earth"; one cannot turn beauty into a spiritual principle without postulating at the same time that eternal life is the quintessential continuation of natural existence. With such premises in mind, truth, that is, the ultimate meaning of life, cannot be essentially different from beauty; it is rather the transposition of earthly beauty into "a finer tone." In November 1817 Keats rejoiced to find that each of his "favorite Speculation[s]" seemed to be complementary to the other; moreover, their reciprocal fitness justified his conception of a paradoxical reconciliation of time and eternity. In the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" the poet's analogical imagination attempts to conceive images of such a nature as would substantiate his eternity myth. The last two stanzas express the disenchantment of a mind discovering that it had enclosed itself within the magic circle of a paralogism.

As it contemplates the figures on the urn, Keats's imagination gradually conjures up a vision of eternity which is consistent with his speculations of 1817, of whose validity the urn seems to afford objective proof. The artist's skill has included poised motion within the fixity of marble; the urn has reconciled changelessness with life. The figures on its flanks appear to know the "eternal Happiness" of sensuous delights etherealized into suspended imminence. "For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd," their sensations unite the full-blooded feel of life with freedom from change and satiety. Intensity knows no decay in this timeless world. "An immortality of passion," Keats's most cherished dream in *Endymion*, seems no illusion within the limits of stanza III.

This is a "fine isolated verisimilitude," one of the "halfseeing[s]" which Keats was ready to accept in his "negative capability" mood. But at the end of stanza III, as every reader knows, the "disagreeables" of human experience claim to be taken into account. The explicit opposition between "human passion" and its artistic representation breaks the spell of imaginative reverie.

Stanza IV is the result of a lapse into "consequitive reasoning." As in the preceding stanzas, the poet's imagination conceives an act eternally about to happen, thus miraculously poised between eternity and time. The figures are seen "coming to the sacrifice," but then the imagination leaps from arrival to departure in an act which seems to repeat the process of stanza II. To create a past for the pictured scene at first appears to animate the figures, to infuse temporal blood into their arteries. In fact, the imagination has broken the isolation of the timeless moment and, in doing so, has subjected the mind to the processes of temporal logic. The implications of arrested motion are then followed to their logical conclusion: if the flow of time is suspended at any given instant, moments of desolation must co-exist side by side with moments of plenitude for all eternity. Eternal fullness forces upon the mind the possibility of an eternal void. Discursive logic forbids the poet to suspend the townsfolk forever in the "happy pieties" of sacrificial rites without freezing the "little town" they have left in an eternity of death. The realization of this inescapable necessity destroys the vision which the urn for a while had seemed able to substantiate, and the urn's value for the poet suffers a sudden reversal.

The "undertone of depreciation" of the "jarring apostrophe 'Cold Pastoral'" which H. W. Garrod was the first to analyze is by no means "accidental." The implications of this change of heart in the poet must be explored

to guard against the risk of misinterpreting the close of the Ode. This depreciatory tone is perceptible not only in the punning alliteration of "Attic ... attitude" but even in the noun's suggestion of attitudinizing, which makes of "Fair attitude!" a melancholy sigh: fair as you are, nonetheless a fraud...

A similar disenchantment prevails in the first half of stanza V. The urn had allowed the poet to imagine a world where earthly beauty would find absolute existence, a form of eternity giving meaning to life; the intrusion of logic into this dream has destroyed it by exposing the ambivalence of the urn, able to symbolize an eternity of death as well as an immortality of passion. The urn, which has both suggested and denied the possibility of life out of time, like the "fogborn elf" of *Endymion* has cheated the poet "Into the bosom of a hated thing." Like the idea of eternity, the urn has aroused, and then defeated the wish to believe; it has teased the mind into activity only to lead it into the swamp of contradiction: the shadows of imagination can give the mind no help in elucidating the meaning of life:

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity.

These lines, which resignedly acknowledge the failure of imagination, express just the reverse of Keats's creed in the letter to Bailey: what the imagination seizes as beauty is not truth.

The meaning of stanza V rests on two antitheses: that which distinguishes the realm of art from the world of human experience, and that which balances the avowal of a radical agnosticism by the affirmation of the consolatory value of art. In the first half of the stanza, Keats relinquishes what had been the major tenet of his early poetic creed; that part of it which can meet the demands of his mature thinking is preserved in the second half...

The first half of stanza V shows, we have seen, that Keats finds it difficult to suspend his disbelief in the myths of imagination; beauty cannot be, after all, the earthly promise of "an immortality of passion":

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!

With their tone of cool summation, these words veil the poet's intense disappointment and control the "Agony...of ignorance" by understating it. The Ode, we remember, was written just a few weeks after the sonnet "Why did I laugh tonight?" which records a moment of despair at the eternal silence of Heaven and Hell. Though he has also questioned the urn in vain, Keats makes its silence bearable by turning to the "pious frauds" of art.

The economy and skill of Keats's transition from line 45 to 46 has perhaps not been properly recognized. The exclamation "Cold Pastoral!" springs from the poet's realization that he has been led into an impasse: beauty is not truth; poetry cannot serve the one without betraying the other. In reaffirming the reality of human transience and suffering, line 46 both emphasizes the illusory character of the world of the urn, thus explicitly dissociating human experience from art, and, thanks to this overt severance, releases the poet from the deadlock of lines 44-45. The final resolution thus arises from a dialectical opposition between two justifications of art which Keats is trying to reconcile. The Ode has shown that to demand absolute truth from art is to crush it under a responsibility which it cannot bear; to regard art as a beautiful semblance of truth is at once to recognize the limitations which it shares with other forms of human knowledge and to re-establish its dignity, though admittedly on a less exalted footing.

The figurative exchange between lyric speaker and urn is no verbal jugglery but what makes the final resolution possible. The poem has established that the urn is objectively a "silent form," that the "wondrous lesson" which the poet had hoped to read "in [its] silent face" was a subjective dream. There should then be no

doubt that the urn's final "message" is nothing but a figurative device used by the poet to present what the urn teases the beholder into thinking. The device finds its justification in that it enables the poet to blend two voices: that of the urn expressing what the imaginative experience, within its own limits, allows man to believe, and that of the lyric speaker stating what can be believed in the world of ordinary human experience.

In their figurative guise of a mute dialogue between the poet and the urn, the two views are not merely juxtaposed but brought into a relationship in which each sustains the other. Keats's early conception of poetry as a form of transcendental knowledge is saved from skeptical rejection by being presented as a consolatory illusion; his other, less ambitious, justification of poetry as a "soothing" compensation for life's sufferings derives seriousness from its presentation, not as an escape from life, but as the creation of admittedly relative values. Art is not life but can give meaning to life, provided we remember that it has no meaning apart from life, provided we do not attempt to turn it into some transcendental absolute. Such is the complex reconciliation attempted in the close of the Ode.

Art, or imaginative activity, cannot lead to absolute knowledge in the world of experience where truth and beauty are distinct; but it can offer to man the consoling image of a world where truth and beauty would be one. The urn, a product of human art, owes its existence to the attitude of aesthetic detachment which is able to perceive beauty even in the midst of pain. In the imaginary world whose spokesman it becomes, "the sense of Beauty...obliterates all consideration." What it offers to man, to help him to accept his woe suffered "in the midst of a great darkness," is the contemplation of beauty—beauty which contains a measure of truth provided one does not stray out of the magic circle of aesthetic detachment. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty": the circular form of the aphorism recalls the pattern of Keats's reasonings in the letter to Bailey; but now this circularity has a restrictive value. The equation is valid only within the limits of the imaginary world of art. That is why the aphorism is qualified by a fresh restriction: "that is all / Ye know on earth." This clause would of course be meaningless if Keats had regarded the urn's message as a final lightening of "the burthen of the mystery." "All / Ye know" refers back to lines 44-45: the poet tried to reach truth through beauty, and was led, in the attempt, to confess the incapacity of thought to discover the meaning of life, its inability to conceive a satisfactory connection between time and eternity. The only truth we may hope to reach on earth is that which is offered by the urn, the truth in beauty, the beauty which may yet be a substitute for truth.

"All ye need to know" is Keats's answer to his own anxiety, the resignation of an agnostic taking refuge in time to silence his yearning for eternity...

But though beauty and art have kept their consolatory function, they no longer provide an answer to the mystery of life. What the urn expresses is rather the position of the "negative capability" letter: let us accept, since we must, the limitations of human knowledge. One of the ironies of literary fame is that the Ode should so often have been read as a manifesto of unqualified Aestheticism: for it does not say that beauty is the refuge of those who do not think, but the comfort of those whom thought has bruised.

The Ode, then, criticizes the "pious frauds" of art, but the illusion is killed with kindness. Though he subordinates "sensation" to "thought," Keats tries to transcend the contradiction which he always found so teasing. Beauty is not truth; truth we shall never know on earth; let the partial truth of art reconcile us to our ignorance.

Source: Jean-Claude Salle, "The Pious Frauds of Art: A Reading of The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,'" in *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Spring, 1972, pp. 79-92.

Ode on a Grecian Urn: Compare and Contrast

1819: Parliament passed a series of repressive laws known as the Six Acts to stop angry farmers who had been staging violent protests against the Corn Laws. The Six Acts put limits on public meetings and on journalistic reporting and gave police greater authority to search people and seize their property.

1846: The Corn Laws were repealed; they had kept corn prices low, which impoverished many farmers and made them move to the city. As a result of this surplus of labor, England became a main force on the Industrial Revolution.

1854: Charles Dickens's book *Hard Times* was published. The novel exposed inhumane treatment of employees in London factories, including child labor, and new labor guidelines were passed because of the book's impact.

1945: Destitute because of the damage incurred during World War II, Britain elected a Labor Party government, which nationalized banks, utilities, and industries and implemented a welfare state.

1979: Margaret Thatcher was elected English Prime Minister. In the next 11 years she cut inflation by 20 percent and privatized many of the industries that the government had owned since 1945.

Today: England's healthy economy has made it a central force in the European Economic Community.

1819: The first paddle-wheel steamship, the Savannah, crossed the Atlantic Ocean in only 39 days. The ship carried no passengers because people were afraid that the pressurized steam engine would explode.

1825: An English inventor developed the first steam-powered locomotive.

1843: The first propeller-driven, iron-hulled ship crossed the Atlantic.

1903: Orville and Wilbur Wright flew the first successful airplane at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

1939: The first helicopter designed for mass production was invented.

1957: The first satellite, *Sputnik I*, was launched into space.

1969: The first man walked on the moon.

Today: NASA's Pathfinder Mission is successful as the rover Sojourner explores the surface of Mars and sends live video back to Earth.

Ode on a Grecian Urn: Topics for Further Study

Consider a painting that you know, and write a list of questions about what is going on in the scene. What do your questions tell you about the artist? What do they tell you about the nature of art?

Compare Keats's ideas about the scene painted on the vase with the ideas in W. H. Auden's poem "Musee des Beaux Arts," also included in *Poetry for Students*. What might Auden's speaker have to say about the person who painted the vase?

Give an example of an instance in which you think Beauty and Truth are not the same. Write what you think might be Keats's response to your example.

Ode on a Grecian Urn: Media Adaptations

Both an audio cassette and a compact disc titled "Great Poets of the Romantic Age" is available from Audiobooks.

An audio cassette titled "The Poetry of John Keats" is available from Audiobooks.

Ode on a Grecian Urn: What Do I Read Next?

Keats's poetry is collected in a definitive edition printed by the Oxford University Press called *The Poetry of John Keats*. The first edition was published in 1939 and it was updated for the 1958 second edition (minor corrections are noted in the preface by H.W. Garrod).

Well-known British critic John D. Jump published a short volume in 1974 called *The Ode*, which traces the history of the poetic form from ancient Greece to the twentieth century, telling readers just about everything anyone would want to know about odes.

Another famous critic, this one American, is Cleanth Brooks, who published a book about poetic forms in 1947 called *The Well-Wrought Urn*. The title, of course, refers to this poem, although the author's study of Keats is only one out of eleven chapters. This book is invaluable to any student of formal poetry.

For readers who are interested in both Greek mythology and modern literature, Lilian Feder's 1971 *Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry* looks mostly at twentieth-century authors, starting with Freud and Jung, and at how ancient stories are probably more "alive" now than they were for Keats. Poets studied include Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and Auden.

The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism, a 1933 collection of essays by brilliant modern poet T.S. Eliot, has a chapter about Shelley and Keats that gives a smart contemporary perspective to the two Romantic writers.

Ode on a Grecian Urn: Bibliography and Further Reading

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Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963.

For Further Study

Frye, Northrup, *A Study of English Romanticism*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Frye, one of the most respected and influential literary critics of this century, takes the study of Romanticism back to ancient times and probes into obscure aspects of nineteenth-century life in this thorough examination.

Jordan, John E., *Why the "Lyrical Ballads?"* Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976.

This entire, short volume is focused on one influential book published in 1798; it was the spark that began England's Romantic period.

Reeves, James, *A Short History of English Poetry, 1340-1940*, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1962.

Despite the great deal of information that he has to cover in 228 pages, Reeves manages to do a tremendous job, remaining interesting and informative due to the clarity of his style.

Ward, Aileen, *John Keats; The Making of a Poet*, New York: The Viking Press, 1963.

This prize-winning biography, written by an American scholar, tells all the facts about the poet's life and examines his writings with a sharp eye.

Ode on a Grecian Urn: Pictures

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