

Ode on a Grecian Urn

by John Keats (1820)



- British Romantic Poet
- Part of the Fab Five: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lord Byron, Shelley, Keats
- Romantic tradition: *love of classical forms, elevating the common man (very influenced by the French Revolution), anti-establishment, highly philosophical by nature, considered quite avant-garde*

**Composed after viewing the Elgin Marbles on exhibition at the British Museum in London. This is a picture of the one he supposedly reflected on.*

A variety of paradoxes that compare the urn's art form and the poet's own art. The speaker is just an observer--periodically speaks to the urn and also to the reader.

- *works of art and real life*
- *truth and beauty*
- *frozen images and dynamic emotions*
- *mortality and immortality*
- *the transient/human and the eternal/unchangeable*
- *ancient/classical Greece and contemporary society*
- *the art of poetry and the art of stonework and painting, etc.*

Stanza I

Does “still” modify “unravished” or “bride”? How would it change the meaning?

1. still/quiet/unmoving/frozen

2. virgin/in tact/pure/untouched

to the urn →

Thou **still unravished bride** of quietness,

3. married to quietness? Why quiet? Silent? Unemotional? Frozen in time?

Thou **foster child** of silence and slow time,

4. Foster child/adopted/created for

the urn →

Sylvan historian, who canst thus express

A flowery tale more sweetly than **our** rhyme:

5. Not a question: a statement.

What leaf-fringed legend haunts about **thy** shape

Of deities or mortals, or of both,

In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?

What consonant sounds are repeated both alliteratively and as consonance?

What men or gods are these? What maidens loath?

5. Why are they loath?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What is the purpose of the questions?

What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Rhyme scheme: ababcdedce
Meter: Iambic pentameter

Caesuras?
Enjambment? Note the hard stop with colons and question marks.

What consonant sounds are repeated both aliteratively and as consonance?

Stanza 2

What are the “heard melodies”? The sweeter “unheard” melodies? Why are they sweeter?

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard

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

Who has the sensual ear?

Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,

Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.

Pipe to the spirit/soul/art lover--little silent songs

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave

A young man on the urn

Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;

trees on the urn will always be leafy...always spring

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,

Though winning near the goal--yet, do not grieve;

trees on the urn will always be leafy...always spring

She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss

Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Rhyme scheme: ababcdec
Meter: Iambic pentameter

The young man will always be leaning in longing for a kiss, but will never attain “bliss.” He will never have her--never consummate their love, YET she will never grow old and unattractive and your love will always be the young love--undefiled by life and hardship. Is the speaker envious or is he being sarcastic? Can you make a case for both?

Stanza 3

Ok, this is where the tone seems to either be mocking...or tragically envious...Make a case for either.

Ah, **happy, happy** boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;

And, **happy** melodist, unweari-ed,
Forever piping songs **forever** new;

More happy love! more happy, happy love!

Forever warm and still to be enjoyed,
Forever panting, and **forever** young;

All breathing human passion **far above**,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

***continued use of caesuras and line enjambment.**
***Consonance: "t" "p" "d" this is different how? and why? To what effect?**

Seriously! This guy has had some bad love experiences.

above/elevated/higher/
more valuable/spiritual

Heat--passion--leaves humans burning and thirsty for more, but never satisfied. Could he be envying the lovers on the urn?

How does the repetition used in this stanza affect your reading of it?

Rhyme scheme: ababcdecde
Meter: Iambic pentameter

Stanza 4

A switch in characters...religious/pagan rituals

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.

*continued use of caesuras and line enjambment.

*Consonance: "S" much softer sound. Some "T" as well. To what effect?

Assonance: "or" sound

Town will always be emptied--no one there ever--all at the pagan ritual.

Is there a shift of tone yet?

Rhyme scheme: ababcdecde

Meter: Iambic pentameter

Cow is lucky-- never will be sacrificed--just always anticipating the sacrifice...

Stanza 5

braid

*continued use of caesuras and line enjambment.
*Consonance: "T" and "d"
To what effect? Assonance:

And back to talking to the urn!

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede

antique

Of marble men and maidens overwrought,

With forest branches and the trodden weed;
notice the commas offsetting "silent form"

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought

Distract us and toy with us like thoughts of death?

As doth eternity. Cold Pastoral!

Unfeeling, frozen pastoral scene of bliss...

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.

Rhyme scheme: ababcdedce

Meter: Iambic pentameter

Who is "ye"? This is one of the most debated lines in poetry...is the speaker being sarcastic? Is the statement true for the urn? For man?