Ode on a Grecian Urn

POEM TEXT

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 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.

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.

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."

SUMMARY

The speaker directly addresses the urn, deeming it a pure partner of quietness itself as well as the adopted child of silence and vast lengths of time. The urn is a historian of rural scenes, which it depicts better than does the poetry of the speaker's era (or perhaps language more generally). The speaker wonders what stories are being told by the images on the urn; whether the figures it depicts are human beings or gods, and which part of Greece they are in. The speaker wonders about the specific identity of the male characters and the reluctant-looking women. Do the scenes show a chase and an attempt to escape? Noting the musical instruments on the urn, the speaker questions if the scenes on display represent some kind of delirious revelry.

The speaker praises music, but claims that music that cannot be heard (like that on the urn) is even better. As such, the speaker implores the urn's pipes to keep playing—not for sensory reward, but in tribute to silence. The speaker focuses a young piper sitting under some trees; just as the piper can never stop playing his song—as he is frozen on the urn—so too the trees will never shed their leaves. The speaker then focuses on a scene that depicts two young lovers. Though they are nearly kissing, their lips can never meet. The speaker tells them not to be upset, however: though the kiss will never happen, the man and woman will always love one another (or the man will always love the woman), and the woman will always be beautiful.

The speaker now addresses the images of trees on the urn, calling their boughs happy because they will never lose their leaves, and they will never have to say goodbye to spring. The speaker then returns to the piper, whom they perceive as happy

and untiring—the piper will play new music for the rest of time. This fills the speaker with thoughts of happiness and love. The figures on the urn will always have happiness to look forward to, always be out of breath from the chase, and always be young. All the passions of the living human world are far removed from the figures on the urn—and these passions cause heartache, lovesick fevers, and thirst.

The speaker turns their attention to another scene on the urn, which appears to depict a ceremonial progression. They notice the figure of a shadowy priest leading a cow, which is mooing towards the sky and is dressed with ceremonial silks and flowers. This image causes the speaker to wonder where those in the procession have come from—which town by the river, coast, or mountain has fallen quiet because they have left on this religiously significant morning? The speaker directly addresses this unknown town, acknowledging that its streets are frozen forever in silence. There is no one left who can explain why the town is empty.

The speaker takes a more zoomed-out look at the urn, noting its shape and apparent attitude. They recap the urn's population of pictorial men and women and its depictions of nature. To the speaker, the urn seems to offer a temporary respite from thought, in the same way that eternity does. But this respite seems inhuman or false, leading the speaker to call the urn cold. Inspired by this sentiment, the speaker notes that, when everyone in their generation has died, the urn will still be around. It will become an object of contemplation for people with different problems than the speaker's generation. To them, the urn will say that beauty and truth are one and the same; this fact is all that it is possible to know, and all that anybody actually needs to know.

THEMES

MORTALITY

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a complex meditation on mortality. Death preoccupies the speaker, who responds by seeming to both celebrate and dread the fleeting nature of life. The scenes on the urn depict a Classical world that has long since passed—and yet, in being fixed on the urn itself, these scenes also evoke a sense of immortality. The urn is therefore a contradiction—its scenes speak of vibrant humanity and, because they are frozen in time, seem to represent a kind of eternal life. At the same time, everything and everyone in the urn's world is no more. Sensing this contradiction, the poem can be read as a process of response, in which the speaker tries to make sense of mortality—both that of others and their own—without ever coming to a comfortable resolution.

Importantly, one of the main purposes served by an urn was to hold the ashes of the dead. Though it can't be said definitively that this is the sort of urn Keats had in mind when writing this poem, he would no doubt have been aware of this as a possible interpretation. The urn is the sole object of contemplation in the poem, and accordingly death—and the fleeting nature of human life—is present from the beginning.

The speaker projects their anxiously shifting thoughts about mortality onto the urn, which seems to stand for both life and death at the same time. At points in the poem, the pictures on the urn seem to come alive for the speaker. Stanzas 2 and 3 are full of praise for the scenes at hand, in which the urn's figures appear blissful and carefree. Lovers at play, pipe-playing musicians, and bountiful nature all create a "happy, happy" feeling in the speaker. Here, then, the speaker celebrates life, and the scenes frozen on the urn represent a kind of victory of life over death. Indeed, the speaker praises the lovers on the urn as "For ever panting, and for ever young," and notes that the tree beneath which they sit will never "be bare."

But the pictures on the urn are ultimately just that—pictures. All the lives depicted by the urn—and the maker of the urn itself—are long gone. They only *seem* alive because they are rendered so well, performing actions that speak of vitality and humanity yet are not themselves full of life. What's more, though the maiden depicted "cannot fade," neither can her lover have "thy bliss"—that is, he can never kiss her in his frozen state. This complicates anxiety about the inevitable march of time, given that to stop time essentially stops not just death, but *life* as well. Mortality is thus presented not simply as an *end* to but also a distinct *part* of life.

This realization dawns on the speaker through the course of the poem. Arguably, this is marked when the speaker introduces their own mortality in line 8 of stanza 3: "All breathing human passion far above." This moment brings to mind the speaker's own breath settling on the object of contemplation. To breathe is to be alive—and to be reminded, in this case, of inevitable death.

From this point onwards, the poem becomes less celebratory and more anxious. The busy scenes on the urn seem to speak of an emptiness intimately linked to mortality. In stanza 4, for example, the speaker is vexed by the fact that the people depicted on the urn can never return to their "desolate" hometown.

By the poem's close, the urn becomes "cold" to the speaker—that is, its inanimate quality offers no lasting comfort to the speaker's contemplation of mortality. Ultimately, the speaker turns this realization on their own generation, which will be laid to "waste" by "old age." The speaker, then, grapples with the question of mortality throughout the poem. At first, the beauty of the urn seems to bring its characters back to life, as the stillness of the images makes their lives immortal. Eventually, though, reality sets in, and the urn makes mortality all the more present and undeniable.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 5-7
- Line 8
- Line 15
- Lines 15-20
- Lines 21-28
- Line 31
- Lines 35-40
- Lines 44-47

ART, BEAUTY, AND TRUTH

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" examines the close relationship between art, beauty, and truth. For the speaker, it is through beauty that humankind comes closest to truth—and through art that human beings can attain this beauty (though it remains a bittersweet achievement). At its heart, the poem admits the mystery of existence—but argues that good art offers humankind an essential, if temporary, way of representing and sensing this mystery.

The poem's famous ending is vital to understanding the speaker's position on art, beauty, and truth, and contextualizes the lines that have come before. The speaker's concluding sentiment—"Beauty is truth, truth beauty"—demonstrates that, in the context of this poem, beauty and truth are one and the same. Art's role is to *create* this beauty and truth, but the speaker doesn't present beauty and truth as clearly definable aspects of human existence. The speaker feels this connection *intuitively*—and the one-way conversation with the urn, and what it represents, is an attempt to make sense of these intuitions.

The speaker does, however, foreground the aesthetics of the urn throughout the poem, and matches the seductive beauty of the object with a sensuous and delicately crafted linguistic beauty of its own. Though the poem cannot—and doesn't try to—pin down the precise relationship between art, beauty, and truth, its language works hard to be beautiful and to demonstrate that beauty is something valuable and essential to humankind. As one example of this above, the way the gentle /f/ sound in "soft pipes" seems to make the /p/ sound of "pipes" itself become quieter. Just as the maker of the urn tried to give an authentic and beautiful account of the world in which it was made, the poem tries to bring "truth" and "beauty" to its rendering of the urn.

The poem, then, offers no easy answer to the question of the relationship between art, beauty, and truth. But it does argue unequivocally that these three *are* co-dependent, essential to one another. Furthermore, it may be that the strength of this relationship is partly *dependent* on its mystery. Perhaps "All ye need to know," then, suggests people need to be comfortable in *not knowing* too. The last lines, taken out of context, might suggest that this is a poem in praise of beauty. Yet the speaker's position is ultimately much more nuanced. The inanimateness of the urn's scenes becomes representative of humankind's desire to represent *itself* and its world.

Whether or not people can achieve lasting beauty through art, the speaker feels deeply the importance of trying. With the urn's scenes frozen in time, the melodies of the pipes cannot be heard, the trees cannot shed their leaves, and the people walking can never arrive at their ceremony. In short, everything is paused in eternity. This means that the beautiful sound of the pipes is, in fact, a kind of silence. The scenes thus become not just pictures of human life, but also abstract representations of beauty—they are *pure* beauty, untainted by having to actually exist or eventually die. If beauty is something to be aspired to, as the last lines seem to suggest, then the beauty of the urn is more absolute because it represents the idea of beauty itself—not just an attempt to make it. The poem, then, takes on a complex philosophical quality, considering beauty both as something that has to be aspired to by humans and as an abstract concept that perhaps ultimately lies out of human reach.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-4
- Lines 5-7
- Line 10
- Lines 11-16
- Lines 23-24
- Line 41
- Lines 41-45
- Line 47
- Lines 47-50

HISTORY AND THE IMAGINATION

In "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the speaker makes a powerful effort to bring history to life. The poem functions as a kind of conversation, between an early 19th century speaker on the one hand and Ancient Greece on the other. Of course, this conversation can only really happen in one direction—it is up to the speaker to imagine the lives and stories that, though once real, now only exist in the urn's pictures. Overall, the poem argues that imagination is key to understanding and sympathizing with what has come before—but that this effort can never give a full picture of the richness and detail of worlds that are long gone.

Part of the speaker's fascination with the urn is that it is a genuine historical object that was created around the time of historical moment that it depicts. The craftsmanship of the urn, combined with sheer luck, has allowed a small part of the history that it embodies to survive for millennia. The speaker

foregrounds the importance of objects in relation to history by calling the urn a "Sylvan [rural] historian," instantly drawing a link between the speaker's own historical moment and the urn's and noting that the urn has survived as a "foster-child of silence and slow time." The speaker thus emphasizes both the immense length of time in which the urn has existed but also its "silent," inanimate quality. That is, without an effort of the imagination on the part of the viewer, the urn itself says nothing about history. The poem thus partly becomes a real-time example of this effort to actively engage with the past.

Eventually, the speaker finds the urn to be "cold"; it cannot satisfy the speaker's desire to bring the ancient world back to life. That, of course, doesn't mean the effort is wasted. Just as the urn itself could never give a full account of the world at the time it was made, neither could the speaker truly hope to get a full sense of history through the urn.

Nevertheless, a feel for the world of Ancient Greece—however in complete—has been achieved. The imaginative work of the speaker brings the imagination of the reader to life, and an *atmosphere* of a particular point in history is therefore brought to life too. The cow being led to the sacrifice, for example, seems to both ground the action of the urn in Ancient Greece and bring it momentarily to life—the speaker imagines the cow lowing towards the sky, a detail that seems specifically aimed at making the scenario more vibrant and present for the reader.

The poem acknowledges that no generation can ever have a full account of the world as it was before. Objects and imagination, though, help to tell history's stories. And just as the urn allowed the speaker to explore this subject within the form of the poem, the poem itself becomes an object that allows its readers to explore both the historical atmosphere of the urn *and* get a sense for the 19th century moment in which the poem was written; the Romantic poets had a deep interest in the Classical world, and this ode shows a speaker trying to make sense of the relationship between those two distinct historical moments.

No object—whether an urn or a written account—can ever bring a historical moment into the present to be experienced in full detail. But objects together with the imagination do help to bring stories of the past to life, and it is in these stories that one generation relates to those that came before. The urn's world as described in the poem is full of human activity that felt familiar in the 19th century and still feels familiar now; history and the imagination therefore help humankind to *relate* to its past, and see what one moment has in common with the next.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 1-10
- Line 28
- Lines 31-37
- Lines 44-45
- Lines 46-48

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

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:

The opening lines of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" establish the poem as a work of ekphrasis—that is, writing about an art object. They also quickly set up the poem as a direct address between the speaker and the personified urn. Throughout the poem, the urn fascinates and confuses the speaker in equal measure.

The first four lines show the speaker at a point of relative calm, before the contemplation of the object has provoked any major intellectual dilemma. They represent the starting point of the engagement between speaker and object, and begin with three metaphorical descriptions of the urn.

The basic implication of line 1's metaphor suggests that the urn has an intimate relationship with quietness—that is, quietness is its usual companion. The urn, most likely spending most of its time sitting dormant in a museum, usually exists in a space of non-interaction. It takes on meaning when people look at it, causing them to contemplate its scenes—for this speaker, these scenes go on to bring about thoughts on a wide range of subjects: art, humanity, history, and so on.

That said, museums are often cathedral-like spaces and accordingly these observer-object interactions are often quiet too. The "still" in line 1 functions with two meanings—the urn is "still" because it is inanimate, but it is also "still"—after all this time—wedded to quietness. The use of "unravish'd" suggests that something about the urn remains unconsummated, though as yet the poem hasn't given enough to make clear what that might be—perhaps to be "ravish'd" in this situation would mean to be destroyed, and the speaker is therefore remarking on the sheer amount of time that the urn has survived (somewhere in the region of 2000 years).

The second line develops the idea of quietness by suggesting the urn is somehow parented by "silence" and "slow time." Perhaps it is suggested here that the *original* parents of the urn were the artist who made it and the contemporary experience the artist was trying to render. Now, the urn is in the care of "silence" and "slow time." The latter phrase also has suggestions of being made of the earth—if the urn is made from clay, for example, then its physical form relies on organic processes that take a long time to develop ("slow" geological time). The sibilance of lines 1-3 is also an attempt to "ssh" the inner ear of

the reader, emphasizing the slowness and silence that are being discussed.

Line 3 demonstrates that the speaker begins the poem by feeling that the urn can teach its observers something about the world in which it was made (Ancient Greece). The poem is in large part about whether this statement is true—what can people learn about the past from its objects? The speaker suggests that the urn is better equipped to tell its story than poetry.

LINES 5-10

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?

Lines 5-10 consist entirely of questions, establishing the poem as a kind of interrogation. One of Keats's key principles as a poet, that of negative capability, holds that a good artist needs to be able to operate from a position of doubt, of not knowing. Here, the speaker foregrounds the gap between what they want to know about the urn and what they actually do know. The urn clearly depicts some kind of pastoral scene—that is, the location appears to be the forest or countryside—and whatever is happening was clearly significant at the time. But the urn offers few clues to the speaker about who or what it depicting *specifically*. This sets up a tension between the contemporary moment of the speaker and the unknowability of the past.

The questions in these lines are rhetorical, aimed at the urn which, of course, cannot answer. They frame some of the possible explanations as to what is happening in the urn's scenes. The alliteration and consonance of "leaf-fring'd legend," with its repetition of it /l/ and /g/ sounds creates this sense of framing. The question that runs from line 5 to line 7 shows that the speaker does not know whether the pictures are meant to represent a mythical scene or something that actually happened. Tempe is a famously beautiful part of northern Greece that was considered a favorite location of Apollo and the Muses; Arcady is in the Peloponnese and was home to the Greek god Pan, who was often associated with the countryside and sexual freedom.

The repetition of the question format—seven "whats" in the space of six lines—makes it clear that this is a poem that will not provide its readers with a clear and simple meaning. Just as the speaker searches for meaning on the urn, so too must the reader interrogate the poem for its meaning.

One interesting aspect of the form to notice here is that the stanza shape developed by Keats embodies the physical shape of the urn. While lines 1-4 are grouped together in rhyme, the second part of the stanza is longer (as shown by its rhyme scheme too). Lines 1-4 thus represent the more slender top part of the urn, and lines 5-10 the wider mid-section/bottom.

LINES 11-16

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;

The urn is a paradoxical object for the speaker, both representing stillness and human activity. Lines 11-14 draw out this contradiction, focusing on the image of a piper hinted at in line 10. The speaker praises music for its "sweet" quality, meaning it is beautiful. But unheard music, as represented by the silence of the urn's piper, is somehow "sweeter."

For the speaker, this unheard music, frozen in time by the urn's inanimateness, represents an ideal music of pure beauty—it is untarnished by actually having to exist. Of course, this is not a statement that holds true, given that music is *specifically* the organized patterning of airborne vibrations. This can be read as representing a point in the poem at which the speaker is most intoxicated by the urn—its quiet quality comes to represent an ideal beauty which all art aspires to, but perhaps can never reach. For a moment, this seems tangible to the speaker. These lines therefore embody the mystery of art, truth, and beauty. For the speaker, these three are completely inseparable—but not easy to understand.

The specific sound of the words throughout the poem is deliberately, and carefully, beautiful, mirroring the delicate craftsmanship that created the urn in the first place. Just as the maker of the urn tried to give an authentic and beautiful account of the world in which it was made, so too does the poem try to bring “truth” and “beauty” to its rendering of the urn.

In line 14, the speaker employs assonance and consonance beautifully: “pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.” Here, the vowel sounds in the first, fourth, and fifth words evoke an idea of revelry and frivolous fun, dancing on the page—as do the /t/ sounds in “spirit ditties.” “No tone” changes the vowel sound to remind the reader that these are “unheard” melodies—they are frozen within the inanimate object of the urn.

Lines 15 and 16 develop the urn's paradox and establish the link to mortality and time. For now, the speaker is enraptured by the way in which the pipe-playing youth is preserved in song, and how the trees are no longer subject to seasonality—their leaves will always be on their branches. But just as the earth's natural beauty depends on the processes of change that it undergoes, music needs temporality—a sense of time—in order to exist. Music is, essentially, a time-based event—therefore its beauty depends on its inevitable retreat into silence. Though the speaker might have this in mind already, it is not yet the dominant thought in the poem (as it becomes later on).

In terms of the poem's journey, then, these lines should be considered as part of an upward trajectory in which the speaker is increasingly intoxicated by the urn's beauty and what it seems to capture. Of course, the speaker's secure position modulates later in the poem, revising the sentiment that these lines represent.

LINES 17-20

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!

Lines 17-20 shift the speaker's attention onto the figure of two lovers, whose lips are presumably close to meeting. Like the preceding lines, this section again brings the paradox of the urn to life. The moment of intimacy between the lovers is preserved and, on the one hand, eternal. Because they are youthful figures, the speaker sees their preservation as beautiful but complicated. Though they cannot satisfy their lust, they will never lose the physical and youthful beauty that enabled it.

Lurking beneath the surface here is an anxiety about mortality: youthfulness is equated with life at its most vibrant and vivacious, reminding the reader that everybody will age and eventually die. Furthermore, though the speaker temporarily addresses the urn's figures as if they are real, they are of course representations. So, as with the representation of music that came before, the two lovers also embody an ideal—which can be interpreted as beauty, love, lust, and youthfulness.

Line 17 masterfully renders the above contradiction. The spondaic first foot emphasizes the lover's boldness by combining two strong stresses at the start of the line:

Bold Lover

This sense of vigor is immediately undercut by the forceful repetition of "never," followed by the "canst." There is a teasing quality—witnessed by the aforementioned sounds collapsing into the sibilant "kissing" quality of "canst" and "kiss"—to these lines which can be taken as embodying the poem as whole. The speaker wants to understand everything about the urn—to consummate it with knowing and remove the "un" from "unravish'd" in the first line—but can only go so far before the impossibility of doing so stands in the way.

By now, a tension is developing in the reader between the speaker's intense and intimate personification of the urn, in which they treat the figures as real, and the reader's correct assumption that they are not. This is not naiveté on the poet's part, but borne of an overall strategy to make the ode allow for complexities of thought, doubt and mystery.

LINES 21-25

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!

This stanza represents the emotional height of the poem, in terms of marking the moment when the speaker feels most positively towards the urn. The first lines present no new scene to the reader, instead recapping the pictures of the piper, trees, and lovers that have come before. The speaker projects a sense of ultimate, eternal happiness on to the urn. The implication is that music (or art more generally), the natural world, and love are the most important aspects of life—and the embrace of each in real life is unsettled by the fact that before too long they have to come to an end. In its inanimate silence, the urn momentarily gives the speaker a world in which the things that make people happy need never be overshadowed by impending death.

"Happy" counts for 6 out of 42 words in these lines. This happiness could be taken at face value, an expression of naive joy brought about by this interaction with the urn. But perhaps more interestingly, the repetition could be read as an effort by the poet to gradually diminish the meaning of the word. As the repetitions beat onwards, the incessant "happys" sound increasingly desperate and out of reach. Furthermore, the content between them talks about impossible ideas: there is no eternal Spring; no musician can play forever "unwearied"; and ultimately, no love can keep increasing in happiness forever more. In such a carefully constructed poem, it seems unlikely that the repetition of "happy" would not have an intention beyond conveying happiness.

LINES 26-30

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.

These lines are a continuation of the peak of positive emotion in the speaker. Lines 26-27 use anaphora (chiming with line 24) to emphasize the sense of eternity that the urn is conjuring for the speaker. They underscore the idea of youthful vivacity safe from death's clutches.

Lines 28-30 have been subject to much critical debate over the centuries since the poem's composition. The speaker is undoubtedly drawing a distinction between two worlds. They could either be the *idealized* form of love and passion as represented by the urn as opposed to the *realities* of love and passion. Or, more generally, the speaker could be dividing the urn's immortalized world from the speaker's world itself. That is, "breathing human passion" could be interpreted as the breath of the urn's observer as they look upon it.

Either way, these lines present a contrast between an ideal and

reality. The reality of love, in the first interpretation, or of life itself, in the second interpretation, causes the undesirable effects in 29-30 (namely sadness, longing, lovesickness, and insatiability). Again, these can be mapped onto the idea of mortality—each of these effects is linked with the certain knowledge that nothing lasts forever, which is precisely the illusion conjured by the urn's depictions.

LINES 31-34

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?

The beginning of stanza 4 marks an important shift in the poem. The certainty from stanzas 2 and 3 is beginning to evaporate and the questioning tone returns to the forefront of the poem. Lines 31-34 introduce a new scene, which appears to be a procession or religious ceremony. Here, the unknowability of the characters on the urn starts to take place. This is possibly because the 19th century speaker can relate more easily to the scenes of music and passion that have come earlier, and feels more of a distance between their own contemporary moment and the religious practices of Ancient Greece.

This shift is marked by a change in the poem's use of pronouns and possessives. Stanza 1 began with "thou," stanza 2 directly addressed the piper and the lovers, and stanza 3 employed "your"—all of these suggested intimacy and knowability. Stanza 4 is more distant: the speaker wonders who are "these," as opposed to who are "you" or "thou" (though there is a "thou" in line 33, the rest of the stanza increases this sense of distance).

The speaker has by this point reached their imaginative peak. That is, their incursion into the world of the urn is being brought back into line with reality. This is suggested by the word "mysterious." The speaker knows that this scene depicts a significant event—the figures are heading somewhere with purpose (though will never arrive). The heifer (cow) is dressed in ceremonial garb, her posturing towards the sky suggestive of imminent sacrifice. The speaker cannot find a way into this scene and begins to feel themselves to be an outsider, kept apart from the ceremony's significance by physical and temporal distance.

This doesn't stop the language from being precisely and delicately beautiful—an attempt to do justice to the beauty of the object of contemplation. The assonance between "O," "thou," and "lowing" lends a strong emphasis to the heifer's mooing action, and the precision of the /l/ sounds in "all her silken flanks" suggests the care and consideration that has gone into the scene depicted.

LINES 35-40

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.

Here, the speaker notes that there is a kind of photographic negative implied by the crowd heading to the sacrifice—the empty place they have left behind. The unknowability of the past intensifies here—the speaker doesn't know who these people are or from whence they came. Their stillness is not celebrated by the speaker in the way that the lovers' stillness preserved them in their moment of passion in the poem's previous stanzas. Instead, stillness now makes the speaker think of emptiness, mirroring the emotional climbdown of the poem towards an anxious conclusion.

Furthermore, the emptiness suggested by the town is made physical by the emptiness of the urn itself. The urn would once have contained something—be it food, wine, or ashes—but is now divorced from its original purpose. Likewise, the speaker imagines a town permanently emptied of its people by virtue of both their being pictorially frozen in time *and* the inescapably simple fact that those depicted on the urn—and the world they represent—have ceased to exist; they are all dead and gone.

The idea of eternity in the poem thus subtly shifts from being one about preserving the best of human life to the fundamental mystery of what it means to be alive. The "folk" on the urn stand for all people and their mortality. As lines 39-40 indicate, none of them can return to explain just what is going on in this scene, and therefore the scene's significance is lost (and can only be imagined). These lines set the course of travel for the poem's conclusion.

LINES 41-45

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!

Here the speaker's pitch suggests an element of desperation. Lines 41-45 represent a reappraisal of the urn as the speaker's perspective zooms out from the imaginative immersion that has come before.

The urn here returns to its original inanimate form; the speaker is no longer placed within its world. The apostrophe of line 41 demonstrates that the speaker has come out of their trance-like state, and sees the "shape" of the urn once again (the Attic peninsula is another region in Greece). The materiality of the urn comes back with force—its scenes are now "marble" and its surface is "cold." Likewise, the urn is once more described as "silent," linking back to the first stanza. In other words, this has been a one-way conversation in that the urn cannot truly answer the speakers' questions.

In line 44, the speaker likens this quality in the urn to eternity itself—both, according to the speaker, can "tease" people "out of thought." That is, contemplation of art—which brings with it thoughts about the history of humankind—can change the way people think. For a moment, it can take them out of themselves and into something else—but into *what* precisely is hard to define.

The apostrophe in line 45 has an accusatory tone—"Cold Pastoral!" The urn no longer seems to offer the speaker the glimpse of humanity that it did earlier on, and instead offers no easy answers to the mysteries of life.

LINES 46-50

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 speaker is brought back to the reality of their present moment, no longer immersed in the imagined historical world that the urn portrays. In lines 46 and 47, the subtle atmosphere of mortality running throughout the poem is made explicit. The speaker is conscious of different timescales—on the one hand, that of their own life and others alive at the same time, and on the other, that of the urn.

The urn has already survived multiple generations of people since it was made, and therefore is as much a depiction of death as it is of the life that created it. The speaker sees this as something fundamentally melancholic, imagining that the "woe" of their own generation will only be replaced by a different kind of sadness—most likely linked directly to mortality. The speaker acknowledges that, given how long the urn has survived, it is more than likely that it will survive them too.

But the poem has one more twist in store which insists that, though the urn cannot provide a total account of the past, it still has something to teach to each generation that looks upon it. As a friend to man, the urn has one consistent lesson to teach (according to the speaker): that beauty and truth are one and the same, and that knowing this is all there is that is worth knowing. Theses lines—49 and 50—are among the most hotly contested in all of English literature.

The end of line 48 sets up the final two lines as spoken by the urn itself (though there is some debate about whether the quotation marks should end after the second "beauty"). This is a radical moment in the poem—at no point has the urn spoken back. Instead, it has been the passive site of the speaker's thoughts. Now, albeit through the prism of the speaker, it offers up a mysterious epigram—"beauty is truth, truth beauty."

Some critics have seen these lines as a blemish on an otherwise expertly crafted poem, believing it offers a conclusion that is too easy and neat. Though beauty and the truth are one and the same here, the reader is not given any development in terms of the actual *definition* of either of these concepts. Given that the idea of silence has been so important to the poem so far, perhaps it is appropriate that these lines are shrouded in mystery—in fact, in their grammatically contained formulation, perhaps they are a *deliberate* expression of mystery. Beauty is something that is felt, not something that can be easily defined—and perhaps this stands as an analogy for life itself. Acceptance of the mystery of life allows people to view at as beautiful, and to feel comfortable in a state of not-knowing.

SYMBOLS

MUSIC

Music is a symbol of human activity and creativity that occurs throughout the poem. It is first gestured to in line 10, and then occupies a prominent position in the second and third stanzas.

As with the other symbols of human life present on the urn, the music here is a paradox. Because the urn is a silent, inanimate object, the music depicted by it can never be heard. Initially, the speaker takes this as a representation of the potential of art and its central role in creating a meaningful world. The piper in stanza 2 is frozen in a state of ultimate potential—both playing and not playing—that both stand for the idea of perfection in art *and* the impossibility of attaining this perfection. This isn't to do with a musician playing badly or well; it's the fact that the piper's song is locked in eternity that evokes such strong feeling in the speaker.

Throughout the poem, as the speaker becomes increasingly vexed by thoughts about mortality, the musician functions as a kind of stand-in for the speaker—both figures are engaged in the act of creation (the speaker is creating the poem, the piper is creating music). The speaker senses that contained within their act of creation, however, is that same creation's destruction: whatever meaning they create will eventually turn to "waste." The musician, frozen in time and able to produce only silent "music," embodies this contradiction.

Furthermore, the discussion of music contrasts with the presence of silence that begins in the first line of the poem and continues throughout. Music is the organized patterning of sound, a way of physically writing on the air waves—the urn cannot answer the questions posed by the speaker, remaining quiet in a way that is at odds with the function of music.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "pipes and timbrels"
- **Line 11:** "Heard melodies"
- **Line 12:** "pipes"

- **Line 14:** " Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone"
- **Line 16:** "song"
- **Line 23:** "melodist"
- **Line 24:** "songs"

NATURE

The scenes on the urn are "pastoral"—that is, they are specifically situated within nature as opposed to a city. The natural world ties the speaker to the ancient Greek world they observe on the urn's surface: though these are two very different times, the earth's natural environment in which they are both situated is largely the same (allowing for the differences in population and city sizes, etc.). This suggests nature, in part, as symbolic of "slow time" itself, of the passage of time beyond human life spans and comprehension.

The speaker introduces natural imagery in lines 3 to 5 of stanza 1, and expands on it during stanzas 2, 3 and 4. As with the musical activity portrayed on the urn, the natural world is depicted in a moment of stasis that contrasts with the vitality of nature itself. The trees never being able to shed their leaves is both a symbol of eternity and of transience. In the world of the urn, the trees are frozen in a particular season—but the speaker, and the reader, know that this is not how the natural world functions. Seasonality is a marker of time, and representative of the ever-changing nature of life itself. The particular season in question here, spring, is associated with new life and the bountiful overflow of natural growth. Likewise, it has connotations of love and lust. The natural world is thus a cyclical space wherein change—and, implicitly, death—are essential to the creation of new life. The presence of frozen natural imagery on the urn underscores that while death and time are absent from the urn, so too is the potential for genuine life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Sylvan"
- **Line 4:** "flowery"
- **Line 5:** "leaf-fring'd"
- **Line 15:** "trees"
- **Line 16:** "trees"
- **Line 21:** "boughs"
- **Line 22:** "leaves," "Spring"
- **Line 33:** "skies"
- **Line 34:** "garlands"
- **Line 35:** "river or sea shore"
- **Line 36:** "mountain"
- **Line 43:** "forest branches and the trodden weed"
- **Line 45:** "Cold Pastoral"

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe is present in the poem from its very first line. The speaker directly addresses the urn, calling it "thou," and continues to do so throughout. This sets the poem up as a kind of interrogation, in this case of an inanimate object. Generally speaking, the *entire* poem is in this mode. The apostrophe is also a traditional function of the ode form.

The use of apostrophe throughout the poem emphasizes the one-way nature of the conversation taking place. Setting aside the last two lines, the poem is populated by direct, unanswered (and unanswerable) questions and concerns. Apostrophe often gives the reader a guide to the speaker's mood as they go about this interrogation. "Bold Lover," for example, presents a moment in which the speaker views the urn's figures as possessing a certain kind of strength by virtue of their permanent stillness. By the end, however, the poet calls the urn "Cold Pastoral!" This shows the shift in mood, with the speaker growing frustrated that the urn cannot respond to their investigations.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-7:** "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?"
- **Line 12:** "ye soft pipes, play on"
- **Line 14:** " Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave / Thy song"
- **Lines 17-20:** "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!"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed / Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;"
- **Lines 32-33:** " To what green altar, O mysterious priest, / Lead'st thou that heifer"
- **Line 41:** "O Attic shape!"
- **Lines 44-45:** " Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!"
- **Lines 46-48:** " 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"

ALLITERATION

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a meticulously constructed poem in terms of its sound, in part an effort to match the craftsmanship

that went into making the urn. As such, the poet primarily opts for assonance and consonance as the primary vehicles for creating sonic effects, but there are some key examples of alliteration too.

In stanza 2, for example, /p/ sounds are employed to conjure a sense of melody and music befitting of the speaker's discussion of the piper. The /p/s of "pipes" chimes with "play" and then, delayed for effect, the "pipe" of line 14 and the /p/ sound in "spirit." This creates a sense of playfulness, which is precisely the spirit that the speaker sees in the figure of the piper.

In the poem's final stanza, alliteration is used to demonstrate the artifice of the urn as part of the speaker's overall accusation that it refuses to answer their questions. The three /m/s in line 42 are deliberately unsubtle—they are, themselves, "overwrought."

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "s," "s"
- **Line 3:** "S"
- **Line 5:** "l," "l"
- **Line 8:** "m," "m"
- **Line 9:** "m"
- **Line 10:** "Wh," "Wh," "w"
- **Line 11:** "sw"
- **Line 12:** "sw," "s," "p," "p"
- **Line 13:** "s"
- **Line 14:** "P," "sp"
- **Line 15:** "th"
- **Line 16:** "Th," "th," "b"
- **Line 17:** "B," "c," "k"
- **Line 18:** "g," "g"
- **Line 19:** "th," "th," "th"
- **Line 29:** "h," "h"
- **Line 33:** "L," "th," "th," "l"
- **Line 34:** "A," "a"
- **Line 38:** "s"
- **Line 39:** "s," "s," "t," "t"
- **Line 41:** "At," "at"
- **Line 42:** "m," "m," "m"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora occurs throughout the poem, and often functions to emphasize the way in which the speaker is interrogating the urn for meaning and answers. Lines 5 and 8-10, for example, repeat the word "what" as their beginning. This establishes the poem as a kind of question, or series of questions—to which ultimately there can be no definitive answer. Just as the anaphora emphasizes the questioning mode, so too does it foreground the lack of reply.

In stanza 3, anaphora is used to lend weight to the discussion of eternity, repeating the phrase "for ever." Like the repeated uses of "happy" in the stanza, it starts to take on a desperate quality that hints at the fact that, in fact, nothing can last forever.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Thou"
- **Line 2:** "Thou"
- **Line 5:** "What"
- **Line 8:** "What," "What"
- **Line 9:** "What," "What"
- **Line 10:** "What," "What"
- **Line 20:** "For ever "
- **Line 24:** "For ever"
- **Line 26:** " For ever"
- **Line 27:** "For ever," "for ever"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is employed to brilliant effect throughout the poem. In general, this is in an attempt to match the aesthetic beauty of the urn with a deliberate linguistic beauty in the text. In general, it seems the speaker prefers this sound device over alliteration because it is more subtle and conceals the craftsmanship behind it.

Almost every line in the poem contains assonance, sustaining this sense of craftsmanship from start to finish. Notable examples in stanza 1 are the way the vowel sounds of "bride" and the /i/ "quietness" literally marry the two together, and the /a/ sounds of "Sylvan historian."

In line 14 in stanza 2, the speaker employs assonance beautifully: "pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone." Here, the vowel sounds in the first, fourth, and fifth words evoke an idea of revelry and frivolous fun, dancing on the page. "No tone" changes the vowel sound to remind the reader that these are "unheard" melodies—they are frozen within the inanimate object of the urn.

Lines 41-46 dial up the assonance in order to foreground the urn's artificiality, in line with the speaker's frustration at its inability to provide an answer to its mysteries. "O," "overwrought," "forest," "trodden," "Thou," "form," "dost," "out," "thought," "doth," "Cold Pastoral," and "old" create a chain of /o/ sounds that makes the constructed quality of the poem more evident, which represents the constructed quality of the urn itself.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "i," "i"
- **Line 2:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 3:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 4:** "ow," "ou"
- **Line 7:** "a," "a"
- **Line 8:** "o," "o"

- **Line 12:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 13:** “ea,” “ea”
- **Line 14:** “i,” “i,” “i,” “i,” “o,” “o”
- **Line 15:** “ea,” “ee,” “ea”
- **Line 17:** “o,” “o,” “e,” “e,” “e”
- **Line 19:** “ou,” “ou”
- **Line 21:** “A,” “a,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 28:** “A,” “a,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 32:** “O ”
- **Line 33:** “ou,” “ow”
- **Line 37:** “o,” “ou,” “o”
- **Line 38:** “o”
- **Line 39:** “ou”
- **Line 40:** “ou,” “o”
- **Line 41:** “O,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 42:** “o”
- **Line 43:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 44:** “ou,” “o,” “o,” “ou,” “ou”
- **Line 45:** “o,” “o,” “o”
- **Line 46:** “o”
- **Line 47:** “oe”
- **Line 48:** “ou,” “o,” “o,” “o,” “ou”

CAESURA

Caesura is used to represent the searching and doubtful thoughts of the speaker throughout the poem. The last three lines of stanza 1 use it to squeeze more questions into the formal space, emphasizing the lack of certainty provided by the urn.

It is also used to create emotional peaks and dips throughout. "Ah happy, happy boughs!" in stanza 3 lingers because of the pause created by the caesura, both adding strength and doubt to the idea of happiness that the stanza contains. This is mirrored by line 25.

The semi-colon in line 39 emphasizes the silence of the deserted town, whose people have left to join the religious procession.

Line 45 sets up the peak of anxiety in the poem, with "eternity" being interrupted to allow for the accusatory "Cold Pastoral!" The caesura creates space around this statement to make it stronger.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “,”
- **Line 6:** “,”
- **Line 8:** “?”
- **Line 9:** “?”
- **Line 10:** “?”
- **Line 11:** “,”
- **Line 12:** “;,” “,”
- **Line 13:** “,” “,”
- **Line 15:** “,” “,”
- **Line 16:** “,”
- **Line 17:** “,” “,”
- **Line 18:** “,”
- **Line 19:** “,”
- **Line 20:** “,”
- **Line 21:** “,” “,” “!”
- **Line 22:** “,”
- **Line 23:** “,” “,”
- **Line 25:** “!,” “,”
- **Line 27:** “,”
- **Line 30:** “,”
- **Line 32:** “,”
- **Line 37:** “,”
- **Line 38:** “,”
- **Line 39:** “;”
- **Line 40:** “,”
- **Line 41:** “!,” “!”
- **Line 44:** “,”
- **Line 45:** “:”
- **Line 47:** “,”
- **Line 48:** “,” “,”
- **Line 49:** “,” “,—”
- **Line 50:** “,”

CHIASMUS

Chiasmus occurs at only one point in the poem, but its importance cannot be overstated. Line 49 states that "beauty is truth, truth beauty." Here, the chiasmus creates a sense of grammatical equivalence—the speaker (or the urn itself) is saying that truth and beauty are one and the same, and this is mirrored in the construction of the phrase. In terms of literal meaning, merely stating "beauty is truth" would say the same thing. But restructuring this statement by reversing "truth" and "beauty" hammers home the point that they are literally interchangeable.

This line has been notoriously difficult for critics to interpret. Some see its construction as being overly simple, naive even, while others judge it to be appropriately mysterious given the overall sense of mystery that the urn engenders in the speaker (and the reader).

The chiasmus consists of two sections: "beauty is truth" and "truth beauty." The second contains a moment of asyndeton. It borrows the verb—"is"—from the first, and by doing so brings truth and beauty into as close a proximity as is linguistically possible.

If the lines are attributed to the urn (another contested point), then they are the expression of the idea that it is through art that humankind can get closest to the "truth" of life. But neither truth nor beauty is neatly defined in the poem, leaving it up to

the reader to bring their own interpretation—just as the speaker has attempted to do with the urn itself.

Where Chiasmus appears in the poem:

- **Line 49:** "Beauty is truth, truth beauty"

CONSONANCE

As with assonance, consonance is used by the poet to linguistically mirror the beauty of the urn with beauty in the text. These sound devices—with alliteration too—often overlap and shouldn't be taken as isolated elements but part of an overall effort to create a beautiful linguistic effect.

A great example of consonance comes in lines 11-14. The /t/ sounds in "sweet" and "sweeter" are picked up by "soft" and "spirit ditties," creating a sense of playful melody that stretches across four lines. This matches the literal content, which is a focus on the pipe-playing musician depicted on the urn's surface. There is a lightness of touch that seems to match the moment shown on the urn with a degree of responsive spontaneity.

In stanza 4, the speaker discusses emptiness and silence in the context of a religious procession. They wonder which town is now "emptied of this folk." The entire stanza uses the repetition of /t/ sounds to give this emptiness sonic form. When the human mouth makes a /t/ sound, the attack of the consonant dies away instantly as the tongue returns to its natural position. The sound thus hints at the emptiness being discussed.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "d," "d," "ss"
- **Line 2:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 3:** "S," "st," "st," "s," "x," "ss"
- **Line 4:** "t," "l," "s," "t," "l"
- **Line 5:** "l," "g'd," "l," "g," "d"
- **Line 7:** "d," "d"
- **Line 8:** "m," "d," "th," "d," "th"
- **Line 9:** "m," "d," "t," "s," "t," "s"
- **Line 10:** "Wh," "w," "s," "s"
- **Line 11:** "d," "d," "sw," "t," "d"
- **Line 12:** "sw," "t," "s," "t," "p," "p," "s," "p"
- **Line 13:** "s," "s," "r," "r'," "d"
- **Line 14:** "P," "p," "t," "sp," "t," "d," "tt," "s ," "t"
- **Line 15:** "th," "th," "th," "t," "s," "th," "st," "t"
- **Line 16:** " Th," "s," "t," "s," "b," "b"
- **Line 17:** " B," "l," "L," "v," "r," "n," "v," "r," "n," "v," "r," "c," "s," "th," "k," "ss"
- **Line 18:** "Th," "th," "g," "g"
- **Line 19:** "th," "th," "th"
- **Line 20:** "th"
- **Line 22:** "v," "v," "d," "d"
- **Line 23:** "d," "d"
- **Line 24:** "p," "p"
- **Line 25:** "v"
- **Line 26:** "v"
- **Line 28:** "v"
- **Line 29:** "v," "h," "h"
- **Line 32:** "st," "st"
- **Line 33:** "L," "st," "th," "th," "l," "th," "s," "k," "s"
- **Line 34:** "ll," "s," "lk," "l," "k," "s ," "l," "s," "s," "t"
- **Line 35:** "tt," "t," "r," "r," "s," "sh," "r"
- **Line 36:** "l," "c," "l," "c," "l"
- **Line 38:** "l," "tt," "l," "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 39:** "ll," "s," "l," "t," "t ," "s," "l," "t," "t," "ll"
- **Line 40:** "t," "s," "l," "t," "t"
- **Line 41:** "tt," "tt," "t," "d," "d"
- **Line 42:** "m," "m," "n," "nd," "m," "d," "n"
- **Line 43:** "ch," "tr," "dd," "d"
- **Line 44:** "Th," "s," "t," "st," "t," "s," "s," "th," "t"
- **Line 45:** "d," "th," "t," "t," "l," "d," "st," "l"
- **Line 46:** "ld"

PARADOX

The poem is full of paradox—in fact, it *is* a paradox. The speaker addresses the urn as though it can speak back, treating an inanimate object as though it were living. This creates a conflict in the reader's experience of the poem, as they have to reconcile the conversation with the fact that it is one-sided.

More specifically, the poem's opening lines create a paradox by declaring that the "silent" urn can nevertheless "express" its story better than do poets themselves. A specific moment of paradox arises again at the start of the second stanza: the speaker praises "unheard" melodies—which technically cannot exist, given that melody is, by definition, based on sound—and commands the piper depicted on the urn to "play" its silent "ditties."

The speaker, of course, is fully aware of the poem's central paradox, which is the fact that the urn depicts scenes that at once seem to preserve life while robbing it of all genuine vitality. This tension between inanimateness and life plays out in a number of ways. At times, the stillness of the urn intensifies the scenes it depicts. The music is more beautiful, the lovers more passionate, the trees more full of life—all, paradoxically, *because* they are frozen still.

The poem's final two lines are a paradox in and of themselves. The speaker grants agency to the urn, suggesting that the words belong to the urn. Yet the urn is not capable of speech—so its words are either unreliable or a projection of the speaker. The reader is told that beauty and truth are the same thing, and that this is all there is to know—but this statement is rendered paradoxical by what has come before. The poem is a series of searching questions, undermining the idea of ultimate knowledge that the final two lines seem to present.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "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:"
- **Lines 11-14:** "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:"
- **Lines 49-50:** ""Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.""

PERSONIFICATION

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a famous example of ekphrasis—writing about an art object. But its approach is markedly different from many other types of ekphrasis in that seeks not only to describe and meditate on the object, but also to bring it to life through personification. The poem starts with "thou"—addressed to the urn, not the reader—and ends with lines often attributed to the urn itself. The urn is thus treated as an agent in a conversation with the speaker, despite the literal impossibility of the urn having agency.

In part, this is because the urn *does* have a lot to do with people: it was obviously made by a human being, and each scene depicted shows human activity. For the speaker, then, the urn almost *should* be able to answer back, and tell the observer about the world in which it was made.

Not only is the urn personified on a general level, but its individual pictures are too. The speaker directly addresses the piper, the lovers, and the "mysterious priest"—all of these are pictures, not people. By doing so, the speaker demonstrates a desire to learn about human life—to cross the historical divide between an ancient world and the world in which the speaker writes.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "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:"
- **Line 12:** "therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;"
- **Lines 15-20:** "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!"
- **Lines 21-24:** "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;"
- **Lines 32-33:** " To what green altar, O mysterious priest, / Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,"
- **Lines 38-40:** "And, little town, thy streets for evermore / Will silent be; and not a soul to tell / Why thou art desolate, can e'er return."
- **Lines 44-48:** "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,"

ASYNDETON

Again, the important chiasmus of line 49 consists of two sections: "beauty is truth" and "truth beauty." It is within this second phrase that the speaker creates a moment of asyndeton, dropping the verb "is" from between the words "truth" and "beauty." This brings truth and beauty into as close a proximity as is linguistically possible, further underscoring their interchangeability.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 49:** "Beauty is truth, truth beauty"

EPIZEUXIS

Keats employs epizeuxis multiple times throughout the poem. As with the other repetitive figures of speech employed, this is meant to emphasize the words at hand. In line 17, the immediate repetition of "never" serves as an immediate counter to the "boldness" of the lover; however bold he may be, he cannot ever actually kiss his beloved. The repetition of never, then, underscores the frozen nature of all the pictures on the urn. They are at once vivacious and utterly devoid of actual life.

This is echoed by the repetition of "happy" in lines 21 and 25. The trees will forever be "happy" in the sense that they will not shed their leaves, and the musician will forever be playing his song; yet, as with the bold lover, this happiness is defined by the fact that it is frozen in time. These pictures cannot die, but neither can they actually live.

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "never, never"
- **Line 21:** "happy, happy"
- **Line 25:** "happy, happy"

VOCABULARY

Thou (Line 1, Line 2, Line 15, Line 17, Line 19, Line 20, Line 33, Line 40, Line 44, Line 47, Line 48) - Thou is an archaic form of

"you," the second person pronoun.

Unravish'd (Line 1) - Unravish'd is a contraction of the word unravished, meaning unconsummated. The speaker is saying that the urn is a bride, but something about its position as a bride has not been completely fulfilled.

Sylvan (Line 3) - Sylvan is an adjective that associates something with the woods/woodland, or more generally rural nature.

Canst (Line 3, Line 15, Line 17) - Canst is an archaic form of "can."

Thy (Line 5, Line 16, Line 19, Line 38) - An archaic form of "your."

Tempe (Line 7) - Tempe is a region in northern Greece, associated with ancient Greek gods.

Dales (Line 7) - A dale is an open valley.

Arcady (Line 7) - Arcady was a region in ancient Greece associated with great natural beauty.

Loth (Line 8) - Loth means reluctant or unwilling.

Mad (Line 9) - Mad here is used to mean frantic or manic, rather than angry.

Pipes (Line 10, Line 12, Line 14, Line 24) - Pipes is used in reference to a hand-held pan flute, a handheld wind instrument common in Ancient Greece.

Timbrels (Line 10) - A timbrel is an ancient instrument very similar to the tambourine.

Ditties (Line 14) - Ditties are simple songs.

Fair (Line 15, Line 20, Line 41) - Fair in its usage throughout the poem means beautiful and/or young.

Bliss (Line 19) - Keats uses bliss to signal that the young lover will never be able to kiss his beloved—he will never attain the moment of pure happiness such a union would entail.

Wilt (Line 20) - Wilt is an archaic form of "will."

Adieu (Line 22) - Adieu is a French word for "goodbye," though it was once quite common in English too.

High-sorrowful (Line 29) - Keats uses this contraction of "high" and "sorrowful" to mean simply that something is filled with despair.

Cloy'd (Line 29) - Cloy'd is an adjective to describe something that is overly sweet or pleasant to the point of sickliness.

Parching (Line 30) - Parching is an adjective that means causing dryness. The speaker is saying that human passion causes metaphorical thirst.

Heifer (Line 33) - A heifer is a young female cow.

Drest (Line 34) - Drest is an archaic form of "dressed."

Citadel (Line 36) - A citadel is a fortress.

Attic (Line 41) - Attic is a historical region of Greece that includes the capital, Athens.

Brede (Line 41) - A brede is an interwoven pattern (like a braid).

Dost (Line 44) - Dost is the archaic second person present tense form of "do."

Doth (Line 45) - Doth is the archaic third person present tense form of "do."

Pastoral (Line 45) - Pastoral relates to a countryside scene. It can be used as an adjective, but also here has connotations relating to a particular artistic form in which an artist/poet tries to render an idealized natural scene. It also has secondary connotations relating to the role of a pastor in religion—perhaps pointing to the urn's unwillingness to give spiritual guidance (because it is "cold").

Say'st (Line 48) - This is an archaic form of the verb "say."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

As the title suggests, this poem is an ode. The ode is a verse form which dates back to Ancient Greece. Keats's choice of form, then, fits perfectly with the object of contemplation—a verse form that harks back to an ancient world to match with an object made in the same era. Keats's poem consists of five stanzas, each with 10 lines.

In its original form, the ode was often celebratory; this ode is markedly different in tone, however. Likewise, Keats's poem does not fit into the more traditional formats originally established for odes (the Homeric and Pindaric). Keats developed his ode form because he felt that the other established forms did not quite fit what he wanted his poems to do. This poem is an inquiry and interrogation which the sonnet, for example, would not be able to accommodate. The ode form allows for a more prolonged examination of the urn, and gives space to raise doubts and questions.

One other point worth noting is that odes, in the classical era, were generally sung and/or accompanied by music and dance. Music features in the images of the urn, but the poem is characterized by the "quietness" and "silence" with which the urn responds to the speaker. There is therefore a kind of gentle irony at play in Keats's choice of form—a musical tradition here expressing a kind of noiselessness.

METER

The meter in the poem is generally a finely-wrought iambic pentameter. The stresses are well-controlled throughout, establishing a refinement of craft that deliberately mirrors the craftsmanship that went into making the urn itself. Just as the skill that went into the urn is disappeared by its immediate beauty, so too the poem hides its metrical form by virtue of the

careful attention with which it is rendered.

Line 8 is an example of perfect iambic pentameter:

> What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?

There are, of course, some deliberate variations of the iambic pentameter throughout. Line 11, for example, can be scanned as a spondaic first foot:

> Heard melodies

This emphasizes the audibility of the melodies in question, turning up the metrical volume. Likewise, the spondee at the start of line 17 emphasizes the lover's boldness.

> Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss

To be sure, this sense of boldness is then undercut in the same line as the speaker forcefully repeats "never," followed by "canst." The meter in this moment reflects the contradiction between vitality and mortality in the poem; however vivacious the lover may *seem*, he is, in fact, still frozen in time on the urn, and thus not really alive at all.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme keeps a generally consistent shape throughout "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Each stanza can be divide into two parts in terms of its rhymes. They all begin with ABAB in the first 4 lines, though the subsequent 6 lines of the stanzas differ as follows:

Stanzas 1 and 5:

ABABCDEDCE

Stanza 2:

ABABCDECED

Stanzas 3 and 4:

ABABCDECDE

This general division into 4 lines and 6 lines can be interpreted as textual representation of the shape of a Greek urn, which is generally narrower/smaller at the top than it is at the bottom:

Another point of note is the way in which the variations in the 6-line sections of the rhyme scheme are resolved in the fifth and final stanza. In this concluding stanza, the poem returns to the exact same format as the first stanza, suggesting the somewhat cyclical nature of the poem. The speaker started on a point of mystery and longing for knowledge, and ends on a similar note.

SPEAKER

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" doesn't explicitly state who its speaker is, though it is often taken to be John Keats himself. There isn't enough evidence to equate the thoughts in the poem with those of Keats, but that isn't to say that there aren't some clues along the way. The inquisitive speaker uses a telling phrase in line 4—"our rhyme"—to express the idea that the urn captures its "flowery tale" better than the poets of the day. It therefore makes sense to think of the speaker as especially interested in the comparison between ancient Greek art and the poetry of the 19th century (and readers might well take this as evidence of Keats as the speaker).

After the speaker has imaginatively entered into the urn's world, stanza 5, particularly lines 45 to 46, brings a dose of reality. Here, the urn appears suddenly cold and indifferent, and reminds the speaker of the mortality of their own generation.

SETTING

The setting in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is not explicitly stated, but it's clear that the speaker is looking at an urn. This might suggest a museum context, which would fit with the idea of "silence" that surrounds the urn and makes sense given that Keats was known to spend time inside the British Museum, where many items from antiquity are stored and displayed.

That said, the main setting of the poem is the urn itself. The speaker is enchanted and entranced by the urn, and for a few brief moments enters into its world. The urn itself depicts a bucolic countryside scene, or series of scenes, which contrast with the presumably metropolitan location in which it is stored. Part of the poem's philosophical dilemma is the fact that the setting is hard to quantify—the speaker wants to know the who, what, and especially the *where* of the urn's pictures, but can only bring them to life through the imagination. The other main facet of the setting, then, is the speaker's own mind.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Keats is now one of the most celebrated poets in the English language, and this one of his most celebrated poems. In his own lifetime, however, Keats struggled for recognition, overshadowed by more successful poets like William Wordsworth. This poem was written in an astonishing burst of creativity during the spring of 1819, during which Keats also wrote his other odes (except for "To Autumn," written in September of the same year).

Keats is generally considered a key member of the Romantic poets, in particular of the second generation which included writers like Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Romanticism doesn't mean the same thing as "romantic"—instead, it is

characterized, loosely speaking, by a deep-rooted belief in the power of the imagination, the prophetic role of poetry in society, the importance of nature, and political engagement. Keats's writing was not well received during his lifetime, and he was the victim of snobbery from those who considered him to be an intellectual and artistic imposter. However, his reputation quickly rose in the centuries after his death in 1821 from tuberculosis at the age of just 25.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Keats wrote this poem not long after the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789, which facilitated Napoleon's rise to power. The early 19th century can be considered a period of reappraisal in terms of the way the individual relates to society. The influential poet/critic William Wordsworth was particularly interested in the idea of civil liberties, though became more conservative as he grew older.

Perhaps what's most interesting about this poem historically speaking is the very deliberate attempt by the poet to reengage with the ancient past in the hope of learning from it. This was part of an overall resurgence in interest in the history and artifacts from classical antiquity (ancient Greece and Rome). Keats's poem was notably written less than a century after the opening of the British Museum. The observation and contemplation of objects from other cultures was becoming an increasing popular activity, and was founded on the far-reaching power of the British Empire. The ethical debate about the practice of institutions like the British Museum continues to day, with the Greek government still trying to find a way to return the Elgin Marbles—a collection of classical sculptures—to their country of origin.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- More by Keats — A link to more poems by Keats, including his other odes. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-keats)
- Portrait of John Keats by Joseph Severn — A painting done of Keats by his friend and contemporary, Joseph Severn. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw03558/John-Keats)
- Sketch of an Urn by Keats — A sketch by John Keats of the Sosibios urn, which is thought to have partially inspired the poem. (https://findery.com/donald/notes/the-sosibios-vase)
- A Contemporary Review of Keats — A link to John Gibson Lockhart's review of Keats's poetry in 1818. (http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu/TextRecord.php?textsid=36160)
- Other Ekphrastic Poems — A collection of poems that also use an ekphrastic approach. (http://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/titlepage.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN KEATS POEMS

- Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art
- La Belle Dame sans Merci
- Ode on Melancholy
- Ode to a Nightingale
- On First Looking into Chapman's Homer
- To Autumn
- When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be

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