

BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN KEATS

John Keats was an English Romantic poet who lived from 1795 to 1821. He was one of the most influential poets of his time, along with Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley. He wrote many famous poems, such as Ode to a Nightingale, Ode on a Grecian Urn, and To Autumn. He also developed a poetic philosophy called negative capability, which means being able to remain in uncertainty without reaching for easy answers.

He had a tragic life, losing both his parents at a young age and suffering from tuberculosis, which eventually killed him at the age of 25. He also had an unfulfilled love affair with Fanny Brawne, whom he met in 1818 but could not marry due to his poor health and finances. He died in Rome and was buried there with the epitaph:

“Here lies one whose name was writ in water”

Before we introduce the poem, let’s first discuss what an ode is.

An ode is a type of lyric poem that expresses the writer’s thoughts and feelings about a particular person or subject. It usually has an elevated style and a formal stanzaic structure. It is often written as an address or a celebration of something. Odes were originally meant to be sung in ancient Greece. John Keats was a famous English poet who wrote several odes in 1819. Some of his most well-known odes are “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, “Ode to a Nightingale”, “Ode on Melancholy”, and “To Autumn”. These odes are considered to be among his best work and showcase his mastery of imagery, language, and emotion

Now that we understand what an ode is, let us proceed to the introduction of the poem:

“ODE ON GRECIAN URN”

“Ode on a Grecian Urn” is a poem by John Keats, written in 1819 and published in 1820. It is one of his five famous odes that he composed during a period of intense creativity and emotional turmoil. The poem explores the themes of truth, beauty, art, and mortality through the speaker’s contemplation of an ancient Greek vase that depicts scenes of rural and festive life. The speaker marvels at the timeless and frozen beauty of the urn, but also questions its silence and incompleteness. The poem ends with a paradoxical statement that has puzzled and intrigued readers for centuries:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

Now let’s examine the following aspects:

- Analysis
- Theme

- Structure
- Rhyming scheme
- Literary devices
- Conclusion

Analysis of the poem

The poem is one of Keats' five odes that he wrote in 1819. It explores the idea of beauty as truth through Keats' own 'negative capability' and the strength of the imagination. The speaker addresses an ancient Greek urn that has pictures of rural and pastoral scenes on it. He marvels at the frozen moments of life and art that the urn depicts, and wonders about the stories behind them.

In stanza 1, he calls the urn a "still unravish'd bride of quietness" and a "foster-child of silence and slow time", implying that it is untouched by change and decay. He also calls it a "sylvan historian" who can express a "flowery tale" better than his own poetry. He asks what legend haunts its shape, and who are the people or gods that it shows. He mentions Tempe and Arcady, two places in ancient Greece associated with nature and pastoral life. .

In stanza 2, he contrasts the heard melodies with the unheard ones, saying that the latter are sweeter because they are eternal and not subject to loss. He tells the pipes on the urn to play on, not to his ears but to his spirit. He addresses a fair youth who is singing beneath the trees, saying that he cannot leave his song nor can the trees ever lose their leaves. He also speaks to a bold lover who is about to kiss a maiden, but never can because they are frozen in time. He tells him not to grieve because she cannot fade and he will always love her.

In stanza 3, he exclaims how happy are the boughs that cannot shed their leaves or bid farewell to spring. He also praises the happy melodist who is forever piping songs for ever new. He then envies the more happy love that is forever warm and still to be enjoyed, forever panting and forever young. He contrasts this with human passion that leaves a heart sorrowful and cloyed, a burning forehead and a parching tongue.

In stanza 4, he shifts his attention to another scene on the urn, where he sees a priest leading a heifer to a sacrifice at a green altar. He asks who are these people coming to the sacrifice, and what little town they have left behind. He imagines that the town is empty and silent, and that no one can ever return to tell why it is desolate.

In stanza 5, he addresses the urn itself as an "Attic shape" (a reference to Athens) and a "fair attitude" (a pose or posture). He admires its marble figures and its forest branches and weeds. He says that the urn teases him out of thought as eternity does, because it is beyond his comprehension. He calls it a "Cold Pastoral", meaning a poem about rural life that is devoid of emotion. He then acknowledges that when his generation grows old and dies, the urn will remain unchanged, in the midst of other woe than theirs. He says that the urn is a friend to

man, because it tells them one thing: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”. This is the most famous line of the poem, and also the most controversial. It can be interpreted in different ways: as Keats’ own statement of his aesthetic philosophy; as the speaker’s attempt to reconcile himself with the ideal world of art; as the message of the urn itself; or as an ironic contrast between the beauty of art and the truth of life.

Themes of the poem

Some of the themes of the poem are:

Time: The urn is frozen in time, and the figures on it will never change or age. They are immortalized in their moments of joy or sorrow, while the speaker and his world are subject to decay and death.

Time: *“She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,/ For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!” (lines 19-20)*

Art and experience: The urn is beautiful and true because it is self-contained and has no need for answers. It creates its own world that transcends reality and invites imagination. The speaker contrasts the idealized art of the urn with the imperfect experience of life, where beauty fades, love ends, and happiness is fleeting.

Art and experience: *“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’ – that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” (lines 49-50)*

Love: The urn’s vision of love is one of unrealized relations and eternal anticipation. The lovers on the urn will never kiss, but they will also never lose their passion or desire. The speaker wonders if this is better than human love, which can be fulfilled but also disappointed.

Love: *“Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,/ Though winning near the goal – yet do not grieve;/ She cannot fade...” (lines 17-19)*

Structure of the poem

- **Rhyming scheme:** the rhyme scheme of the poem is ABAB CDE DCE in each stanza. This means that the first and third lines rhyme with each other, the second and fourth lines rhyme with each other, and so on.

- **Literary devices:** *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is a poem by John Keats that uses various literary devices to convey the themes of beauty, timelessness, and the enduring nature of art. Some of the literary devices used in this poem are:
 - ✓ **Apostrophe:** This is when the speaker directly addresses someone or something that is absent or non-living. Keats uses apostrophe to invoke the urn at the beginning and throughout the poem. For example, he says “Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness” and “Thou foster-child of silence and slow time”.
 - ✓ **Metaphor:** This is when two things are compared without using like or as. Keats uses metaphor to compare the urn to various objects and concepts, such as a bride, a child, a historian, and a friend. For example, he says “Sylvan historian” and “Attic shape”.
 - ✓ **Paradox:** This is when two contradictory statements are true at the same time. Keats uses paradox to describe the paradoxical nature of art, which is both alive and dead. For example, he says “Cold pastoral”, “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter”, and “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”.
 - ✓ **Alliteration:** This is when words that start with the same sound are repeated close together. Keats uses alliteration to create musicality and rhythm in his poem. For example, he says “leaf-fring’d legend”, “happy melodist”, and “bold lover”.
 - ✓ **Symbolism:** This is when an object or idea represents something else beyond its literal meaning. Keats uses symbolism to represent different aspects of life through the images on the urn. For example, he uses trees to symbolize nature, pipes to symbolize music, lovers to symbolize romance, sacrifice to symbolize religion, and town to symbolize society.
 - ✓ **Personification:** This is when non-human things are given human qualities or actions. Keats uses personification to give life and emotion to the urn and its scenes. For example, he says “Fair youth...who canst not leave / Thy song”, “Ah happy boughs! That cannot shed / Your leaves”, and “And little town thy streets for evermore / Will silent be”.

Conclusion to the poem

In this poem, Keats explores the beauty and mystery of art through his admiration of an ancient Greek urn. He uses various literary devices, such as apostrophe, metaphor, paradox, alliteration, symbolism, and personification, to create vivid and contrasting images of life and death on the urn. He also questions the nature of truth and beauty in relation to art and reality. He concludes by stating that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”, implying that art is both a reflection and a creation of reality. He also leaves us with a haunting image of the urn as “a friend to man”, suggesting that art can offer comfort and companionship in a changing world.