

Ode on a Grecian Urn

The poem is about an imaginary marble Grecian urn, with figures carved in relief, probably inspired by a vase which Keats saw in the British Museum in London.

The ode celebrates the immortality of the urn, seen as a perfect work of art, and the immortality to be acquired through art.

Although consisting of five stanzas, the Ode is ideally divided into three parts, two describing two separate scenes on the two sides of the urn, and a conclusion. The first part includes stanzas 1,2,3; the second part stanza 4 and the third, or conclusion, stanza 5.

PART 1

Stanza 1 opens with the Poet's address to the urn as if to a living creature. He in fact calls it bride, foster-child, historian.

The personification of the urn is emphasised by the adjective “unravished”, which suggests a sexual connotation. The urn is outside Time: to underline this concept, attention is focused on three abstract words: quietness, silence, slow time (because the process of time has been much slower with a marble urn than it is with human beings). The urn is so beautiful that, although wrapped in silence, it communicates something better than words and verse. The lines which suggest this concept are lines 3-4. Lines 5-10 of the first stanza contain the description of one side of the urn, a description which is made indirectly through a series of questions.

The following questions/sentences make up the following scenes:

| | |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| The tale is decorated with leaves | What leaf-fringed legend |
| And is about some people, maybe men or gods; | Of deities or mortals |
| The scene is set in certain valleys of Greece; | In Temple or the dales of Arcady? |
| There are some reluctant girls; | What maidens loth? |
| One of the young men is pursuing one of the girls, | What mad pursuit? |
| But the girl is trying to escape; | What struggle to escape? |
| Some people are playing instruments, | What pipes and timbrels? |
| And the atmosphere is full of joy. | What wild ecstasy? |

The description is mostly based on contrasts: deities/mortals; men/gods; pursuit/escape.

Stanza 2 repropose the same concept as Stanza 1: unheard harmony is sweeter than audible harmony “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/Are sweeter”. It means that the urn, with the power of art, can go beyond the senses and lead us to a deeper level of perception. To underline this concept, the poet uses contrasts: heard melodies/unheard and ditties of no tone; sensual ear/the spirit (notice that the word “sensual”, which conveys an idea of physical pleasure opposed to the spiritual one caused by the “unheard” melodies). Now the poet addresses two single figures on this side of the urn: the “fair youth” playing beneath the trees, the “bold lover” pursuing the girl.

Lines 15-20 constitute **the first key point** for understanding Keats's conception of Art, especially plastic art which, in his opinion, is the only kind of art that can hold a moment of happiness, fix it and make it eternal. In fact the fair youth will never stop playing; the trees will never be bare; the bold lover will love her for ever; the girl will for ever be fair.

Stanza 3 stresses the positive consequence of immutability, which makes the anticipation of pleasure more exquisite and sweet. Moreover, it makes it last for ever, unlike consummated pleasure. This effect is achieved by the repetition of the two words “happy” and “(for)ever”. The

same effect is also obtained by an escalation upwards from inanimate objects to the concept itself of love: boughs→melodist→love

The differences between human physical love and the love anticipated and wished for on the urn are:

| | |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| The Love on the urn is | Human love leaves |
| For ever warm | A heart high-sorrowful and cloyed |
| For ever panting | A burning forehead |
| For ever young | A parching tongue |

Therefore anticipation of love is “far above” consummation of love.

PART 2

Stanza 4 portrays a new, different scene, and is structurally based on the same technique as Stanza 1. There are some more questions to describe the second side of the urn: the people going to the sacrifice are the inhabitants of a small town; a priest leads them to a green altar, where they will sacrifice a heifer to the god. While the scene on side one is set in a Greek valley, this one is set outside a little town, located either by a river, or by a sea shore, or on a mountain. The stanza opens in an idyllic serenity emphasised by the images of the green altar and of the peaceful citadel. But soon the scene changes and attention focused on such words as “emptied” (deserted), “silent” (mute), “desolate” (forlorn), which suggest an image of sadness.

PART 3

Stanza 5 The poet once more returns to the urn as a complete and unified work of art. No longer personified as in Stanza 1, it has now become an inanimate object, as is evident from the use of abstract words such as shape, attitude, form. Far from looking like living beings as in Stanza 1, the figures are now merely seen as a marble decoration (brede of marble), and the urn now looks impassive and indifferent (silent form). Lines 44-45 send us back to the opening lines of the poem. We feel confused and puzzled in front of the urn as we are by the idea of eternity; like eternity, the urn is outside time, and we are unable to violate the secret of its beauty: the urn, in fact, is still unravished.

The word “Pastoral” also sends us back to Stanza 1, where the urn is defined as “sylvan” historian, since both words refer to a rural environment.

As to the word “cold”, it may have more than one meaning: a. the urn is made of marble; b. it remains indifferent to the anguish of those who try to solve its mystery and the mystery of eternity; c. art makes everything immortal, but also static and lifeless. Art, however, with its beauty, will always offer consolation: “in midst of” other generations and pains it will always remain a friend to man.

Lines 49-50 constitute **the second key point** of Keats’s conception of beauty. The statement sounds a little ambiguous and mysterious, and seems to lent itself to various interpretations:

- a work of art can give that condition of serenity and inner peace which is usually connected with the revelation of truth; the contemplation of beauty therefore leads to truth;
- truth is the essential goal of knowledge, in the same way as beauty is the essential goal of art, so they both tend to the same result;
- it is only through beauty, which is revealed through an intense spiritual experience, that we can come to know truth;
- both truth and beauty are immortal;

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- imagination is not only beauty but truth, since the inner meaning of the world can reveal itself only through a moment of ecstasy;
- truth has a permanent and everlasting value; so beauty, which can achieve an equally permanent value in a work of art, can only be compared to truth.

The urn then symbolizes art and beauty, which provide an escape from eternity, decay and time into eternity.

What is also striking in the poem is the repeated use of paradoxes and contrasts, some explicit, others implicit, all justified by the poetic intent of the author.

Unravished – bride

Foster-child of silence(2), silent form (44) – sylvan historian

The urn is a rigid, static object – yet it gives us dynamic pictures

The people carved are motionless – but they are portrayed in a moment of activity

The beauty and love portrayed are deathless – but they are at the same time lifeless

Heard melodies are sweet (11) – but those unheard are sweeter

The urn, as a work of art, transcends time by fixing a fleeting moment and making it eternal – so that the moment (a unit of time) becomes timeless.

Source: Analysis based on the book “Mirror of the Times” by Marinoni and Salmoiraghi.