

Name _____

Class _____

Date _____

Ode on a Grecian Urn

by John Keats

Grades 11–12 · Common Core RL.11–12.4, RL.11–12.2, RL.11–12.5

Keats wrote the ode in May 1819, one of several great odes he wrote that year, and it was published in 1820. It has five ten-line stanzas. The speaker addresses the urn directly, an example of apostrophe, and contrasts the frozen moments on the urn with real human life, which changes and fades.



THE POEM

- Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
5 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?
10 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:
15 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,
20 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;
25 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,
30 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?
 35 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
 40 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
 45 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
 50 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

VOCABULARY

unravish'd — untouched, pure

sylvan — of the woods or countryside

Tempe / Arcady — idealized landscapes of ancient Greece

timbrels — tambourines

unwearied — never tired

heifer — a young cow

Attic — from Athens; classical Greek

brede — an embroidered or woven pattern

Cold Pastoral — a cold, unchanging scene of country life

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does the speaker call the urn in the first two lines, and why?

2. “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter.” What does he mean?

3. What is good about the lovers being frozen on the urn? What is sad about it?

4. In stanza 4, what is strange or troubling about the little town?

5. What do you think “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” means? Do you agree?

WRITING PROMPT

Choose a photograph or painting. Write a poem of 10–14 lines speaking directly to it, imagining what happened just before and just after the moment it captured.

Ode on a Grecian Urn — Answer Key

1. “unravish’d bride of quietness,” “foster-child of silence and slow time,” “Sylvan historian.” It is old, silent, untouched, and it tells a story through pictures.
2. Imagined music is more perfect than real music, because it never ends and is never disappointing; it plays “to the spirit.”
3. Good: their love and beauty will never fade (“For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair”). Sad: the lover can never actually kiss her.
4. The town is empty because everyone has gone to the sacrifice; its streets will be silent forever, and no one can ever return to tell why.
5. Accept supported answers. The urn seems to say that beauty in art reveals a lasting truth, and that this is all humans need to know; readers debate whether the speaker agrees.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/ode-on-a-grecian-urn-john-keats/