



Ode on a Grecian Urn

John Keats
(1819)

Many readers of this poem have wondered about the actual Grecian urn that inspired it; although scenes like those described in this poem can be found on several examples of Greek pottery surviving in museums, all the details combined together seem to have existed only in Keats's imagination. The ode celebrates the immortality of the urn, seen as a perfect work of art, and the immortality to be acquired through art.

Thou¹ still unravish'd² bride of quietness,
 Thou foster-child³ of silence and slow time,
 Sylvan historian, who canst⁴ thus express
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
 5 What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape⁵
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady⁶?
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loth⁷?
 What mad pursuit⁸? What struggle to escape⁹?
 10 What pipes and timbrels¹⁰? What wild ecstasy?

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye¹¹ soft pipes, play on;
 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd¹²,
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone¹³:
 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 goal¹⁴ – yet, do not grieve¹⁵;
 She cannot fade¹⁶, though thou hast¹⁷ not thy bliss,
 20 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Ah, happy, happy boughs¹⁸! that cannot shed¹⁹
 Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu²⁰;
 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 panting²¹, and for ever young;
 All breathing human passion far above,
 That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd²²,
 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 skies²³,
 And all her silken flanks with garlands drest²⁴?
 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.

- 1 Thou. (Arc.) You.
- 2 unravish'd. Inviolata.
- 3 foster-child. Figlia adottiva.
- 4 canst. (Arc.) Can.
- 5 haunts about thy shape. Lett.: ossessiona, perseguita; qui: ricopre la tua forma.
- 6 In Tempe ... Arcady. Nella valle di Tempe (in Tessaglia) o in Arcadia (ritenuta la patria della poesia pastorale).
- 7 maidens loth. Vergini restie.
- 8 mad pursuit. Folle proposito.
- 9 What ... escape. Quale lotta da fuggire.
- 10 timbrels. Tamburelli.
- 11 ye. (Arc.) You.
- 12 Not ... endear'd. Non all'orecchio, più care.
- 13 Pipe ... no tone. Suonate all'anima arie prive di suono.
- 14 the goal. La meta.
- 15 do not grieve. Non addolorarti.
- 16 fade. Avvizzire.
- 17 hast. (Arc.) Have.
- 18 boughs. Rami.
- 19 shed. Perdere.
- 20 nor ever ... adieu. Né dire mai addio alla primavera.
- 21 panting. Anelante.
- 22 That leaves ... and cloy'd. Che lascia il cuore in grande affanno e sazio.
- 23 that heifer ... skies. Quella giovenca che muggisce al cielo.
- 24 drest. Adorni.



O Attic shape! Fair attitude²⁵! with brede²⁶
 Of marble men and maidens overwrought²⁷,
 With forest branches and the trodden weed²⁸;
 Thou, silent form, dost²⁹ tease us out of thought
 45 As doth eternity³⁰: Cold Pastoral!
 When old age shall this generation waste,
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
 Than ours³¹, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st³²,
 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty³³' – that is all
 50 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

- 25 **Fair attitude.** Leggiadra forma (*lett.*: atteggiamento).
- 26 **with brede.** Con fregio.
- 27 **Of marble ... overwrought.** Scolpita con uomini e fanciulle di marmo.
- 28 **trodden weed.** Erba calpestata.
- 29 **dost.** (*Arc.*) *Do*.
- 30 **tease ... eternity.** Ci sconcerti come l'eternità.
- 31 **in midst ... ours.** In mezzo a dolori diversi dai nostri.
- 32 **say'st.** (*Arc.*) *Say*.
- 33 **truth beauty.** La verità (è) bellezza.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the poem and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.

- | | |
|----------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 fianchi | 6 secca, inaridita |
| 2 sciupare | 7 felicità, gioia |
| 3 instancabile | 8 studiosa di storia |
| 4 dei boschi | 9 viva |
| 5 cornamuse | 10 bordata di foglie |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the poem again and explain what is represented on the surface of the urn.

- Stanza 1
- Stanza 2
- Stanza 3
- Stanza 4
- Stanza 5

3 CONSIDER the second stanza and decide whether the following statements are true or false.

- | | |
|--|------------|
| 1 Unheard melodies are enjoyed through the ear. | T F |
| 2 Unheard melodies are a creation of the mind. | T F |
| 3 The boy will never stop playing his music. | T F |
| 4 The boy will never be able to kiss the girl. | T F |
| 5 He will love her forever. | T F |
| 6 She will not be beautiful forever. | T F |

4 CONCENTRATE on the third stanza. How does passion affect human beings?

5 SAY why the city is 'desolate' (line 40).

6 FOCUS on the fifth stanza.

- 1 Why does Keats refer to the vase as 'Cold' (line 45)?
- 2 Why is the urn 'a friend to man' (line 48)?



> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

7 FOCUS on the musical devices.

- 1 Work out the rhyme scheme. Is it regular?
- 2 Each stanza is made up of two parts: what are they?
- 3 Find the most significant examples of alliteration and assonance.

8 READ the first stanza again carefully.

- 1 Note down the metaphors used by the poet to address the urn; then point out the common ground of each metaphor.
- 2 Say what kind of world is introduced through the poet's questions. What is the key word in lines 5-10? What state of mind does it imply?

9 FOCUS on the second stanza, which opens with a paradox.

- 1 Underline the paradox and explain how expectation and fulfilment are related. What theme is therefore introduced?
- 2 Who is the poet addressing in the remaining lines of the stanza? What do these figures symbolise? Why?

10 CONSIDER the third stanza.

- 1 Highlight the repeated words and say what they refer to.
- 2 Lines 28-30 contain the climax of the whole ode: the description of human passion. Say how it contrasts with the eternal love of the 'Bold Lover' and complete the sentences below.
 - A The love on the urn is,, and
 - B Human passion brings only and

11 GROUP words and phrases in the first three stanzas of the poem under these three headings: sight, hearing, touch. Then answer the question below.

Sense	Expressions
Sight	
Hearing	
Touch	

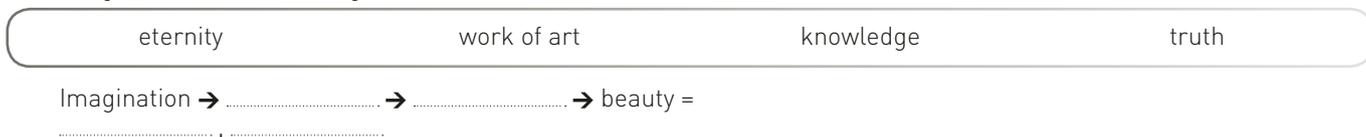
Which is the most privileged sense in each stanza?

12 FOCUS on the fourth stanza.

- 1 Underline all the words belonging to the semantic area of sadness and desolation.
- 2 Some scenes described are really observed by the poet, others imagined. Circle the former and square the latter. What do these sentences stress?

13 ANALYSE the last stanza. It can be divided into two parts: the quatrain, which contains the poet's coming back from his journey of imagination to real life, and the sestet, which sums up the result of the poet's experience with an aesthetic consideration.

- 1 What has changed in the poet's attitude to the urn?
- 2 The sestet starts with the contrast between the urn and mankind and ends with Keats's concept of art and imagination. Fill in the diagram below with the words from the box.





➤ COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS

14 COMPARE the concept of love expressed in this poem and in the other poem by Keats you have analysed. Write no more than 10-12 lines.

15 REFER to the Romantic poets of the second generation and analyse the similarities and differences regarding: their lives, the importance given to nature and imagination, their language and themes.

➤ COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

16 CONSIDER the phrase 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'. What does it mean to you? Do you agree with it as a way to judge art? Give examples to justify your point of view.