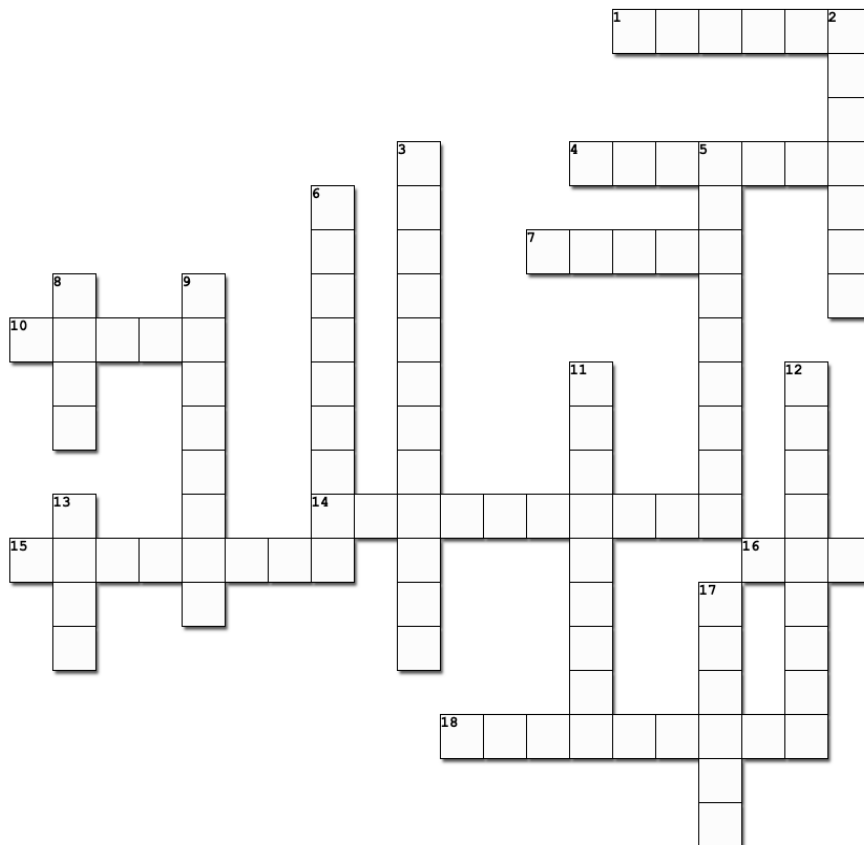


John Keats: Ode on a Grecian Urn

Ode on a Grecian Urn was written in 1819, soon after the death of Keats' mother and brother from disease. Haunted by loss, he accompanied a group of friends to the newly opened British Museum and found himself astonished by the collection of art and objects, many of them classically Greek, collected within. Among these were the Elgin Marbles, the Townley Vase, and the Sosibos Vase (Keats traced the engraving of this last piece), and the urn in his famous poem is thought to be an imaginative composite of all these influences.

His poem can be easily interpreted as a meditation on mortality. As Keats contemplates the lively scenes depicted on the urn, he calls attention to the paradox that the youth and vigour of the scene is frozen in time: the singers can never finish their songs, the lovers can never sate their desires, the trees will never shed their leaves. Unlike human reality, nobody ages, falls ill, is heartbroken, or dies. While the reader might ponder why one might long for a love with no kisses, a hunt with no capture, Keats' wish for immortality was driven by his own existential crisis. He had recently diagnosed himself with tuberculosis; his response was to lose himself in contemplation of artwork, and to discover relief from suffering through making his own piece of art.

How well do you know this poem?



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Across

1. The rhythm of the poem is which kind of regular pentameter?
4. A deliberate break in a line of poetry, or between lines of poetry.
7. O _____ shape! Fair attitude!
10. When old age shall this generation _____
14. The technique by which an absent figure or inanimate object is addressed as if it is present and alive.
15. Keats wrote much of his ode sequence in 18...?
16. How many line are in each stanza?
18. Thou still unravish'd bride of _____

Down

2. This word means a castle or fortress.
3. His mother and brother had died of which disease? - a disease that he had now contracted.
5. Who are these coming to the _____?
6. The speaker describes the urn as a Sylvan... what?
8. Do not grieve; she cannot _____
9. This word connotes isolation, despair and emptiness.
11. This technique is the repetition of the same or similar vowel sounds.
12. This type of repetition repeats the same word immediately; eg never, never.... happy, happy...
13. How many stanzas are there in this ode?
17. Keats was inspired to write this ode by a visit to the British... what?

Understanding and Interpretation

1. The way the poem opens shows a preoccupation with time. How?
2. What idealised vision does Keats imagine as he examines the images on the urn? At what point do you think his idealised and celebratory tone shifts into something melancholier? How does he manage this shift?
3. What do you think is the importance of music in the poem? Does music have a symbolic meaning?
4. In what ways does Keats' poem resemble a carefully constructed object of art (like the urn itself)?
5. The final lines of the poem – '*Beauty is truth and truth beauty*' – have befuddled readers and critics for centuries. Keats' exact meaning is deliberately vague. What is your interpretation of the poem's final lines? How might you support your interpretation through reference to the poem?

Poetic Device: Apostrophe

Apostrophe is a literary term meaning: ‘an address to a dead or absent person as if he or she were present, or the personification of an inanimate object, or abstract idea, as if it were alive’. Apostrophe abounds in *Ode to a Grecian Urn*. The very first word is a direct address to the urn: ‘*thou*’ and this is repeated throughout. The poem is set up as a questioning of the urn, an inanimate object, as if it can answer back to the speaker – which he imagines it doing at the end! However, until this moment, the poem is populated by frequent, direct and unanswered questions, creating the impression that the conversation is ‘one-way’ and the urn is unable to provide an answer to the all of the speaker’s many concerns. And even at the end, when the urn finally speaks, the ‘truth’ it tells is vague and ambiguous.

Activity

Apostrophe can give some guide as to the speaker’s thoughts, concerns, and even mood as the poem progresses. Trace these throughout the poem by making brief comment about the examples of apostrophe in this table:

Apostrophe	Comment
‘still unravish’d bride of quietness’	<i>This apostrophe suggests that the urn is like a person with secrets to tell – but is not ready to divulge them yet. ‘Still’ and ‘quietness’ suggest the urn is unmoving and has no voice to answer the poet’s repeated questions. The phrase ‘still unravish’d’ connotes the act of sexual consummation after a wedding. The language is strong and sexual, as if Keats wants to ‘penetrate’ the urn and discover the secrets hidden inside – there’s an eagerness or even desperation to his tone.</i>
‘foster-child of silence and slow time’	
‘Sylvan historian, who canst thus express a flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme’	
‘Fair youth... Bold Lover...	

*'Attic shape! Fair
attitude!'*

'Cold pastoral'

Poetic Devices: *Rhythm and Rhyme*

The **ode** is a verse form that dates back to Ancient Greece, so Keats chose to write about an object in the same era using this form. Keats' ode consists of five stanzas, each with ten lines. In the classical era, odes were often sung or accompanied by music. Ironically, Keats' urn is characterised by silence, so there's a gentle paradox in his choice of form which expresses quietness rather than noise.

The **meter** of the poem is a gently consistent **iambic pentameter**, where each stress falls on the second beat of the foot (an **iamb** is a measure of two syllables patterned unstressed-stressed). The controlled patterning of rhythm calls attention to the fact that the poem is 'wrought' or 'made' in the same way that the urn itself is finely crafted by an artisan. There are occasional variations to the regular *de-dum, de-dum* rhythm. For example, some lines begin with a pattern of two stresses: a foot of two stressed syllables is called a **spondee**. This occurs noticeably in the line: 'Bold lover, never, never, canst thou kiss' where the opening spondee is used to emphasise the depicted lover's 'boldness' – a boldness that is undercut by the rest of the line. After all, however vivid the lover may seem, he's still frozen in time on the surface of the vase, so will never consummate his lascivious desires.

The **rhyme scheme** is similarly consistent. Each stanza begins with the pattern ABAB in the first four lines, followed by a variation of the pattern CDECDE in the final six lines. The division of each stanza into four and six can be interpreted as a rhyming representation of the urn's shape – narrower at the top than at the bottom. Once again, Keats uses structural and formal methods to call attention to the fact that his poem is a 'crafted' object. You might like to ask why this was important to him?

Activity

Practise **scansion** (this is the act of discovering a poem's rhythmic patterns and rhyme scheme) by marking feet (measures), stresses, and the rhyme scheme on the reproduction of the first stanza given below:

Where the poem deviates from the regular patterns you have come to expect, can you offer a suggestion as to why?

Thou still/ unra/ vish'd bride/ of qui/etness,/ A

Thou foster-child of silence and slow time, B

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?

Important Theme: *Mortality*

'For ever panting, and for ever young; All breathing human passion far above...'

As a symbol of death and the fleeting quickness of human life, the urn stands as the sole object of contemplation from the beginning of the poem to the end. The purpose of an urn was to hold ashes of the dead, and this simple observation opens the doorway to the interpretation of the poem as a meditation by Keats on mortality. In terms of context, it is important to remember that he had suffered family tragedy just before the composition of this poem; both his mother and younger brother had succumbed to disease, and he could feel his own health deteriorating by the day.

The speaker, who many readers accept is an avatar of Keats himself, uses the urn as a receptacle for his own thoughts which anxiously shift from line to line and stanza to stanza. At certain moments the pictures almost seem to come alive for the speaker. The poem is characterised by lively play, piping music, and blissful abandon. Stanzas two and three celebrate life, movement, and an evergreen scene of nature. Indeed the trees themselves will never 'be bare' and the youthful lovers are imagined to be 'for ever young'.

Yet these scenes only seem to be alive because of the skill of the urn's crafter. Therefore, other moments in the poem suggest that the life depicted by the artist is long dead and gone. Where one reader might interpret the scenes frozen on the urn as representing the victory of life over death, another might equally suggest that by stopping death the urn has stopped life as well. While the maiden's beauty '*cannot fade*,' neither will she ever experience the '*bliss*' of a lover's kiss. Logically, then, life is only given meaning by the mortality of existence. This idealised, frozen world may have escaped the passage of time, but it is also empty, desolate, and cold. At first the beauty of the urn brought its characters and stories to life; eventually, though, reality sets in and the stillness of the figures serves as a reminder that mortality is an undeniable part of the human condition.