

John Keats is perhaps one of the most famous poet writing odes. As *Ode to a Nightingale*, in which the poet deals with the expressive nature of music, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is another attempt to engage with the beauty of art and nature, this time addressing to a piece of pottery from ancient Greece. The urn itself is very old, it is ancient and it has passed down over the millennia until Keats's hands. This appears ageless, immortal and almost strange if it's considered its distance from the current age. The Urn helps the poet, or the speaker in the poem, to reflect over the strange idea of the human figures carved into it. They seem to be imprisoned on this pottery in the exact moment of their time. Using the ode, Keats tries to wonder about who the figures are, what they're doing, what they represent, and what the fundamental meaning of their images might be. But, by the end of the poem he realises that the entire process of questioning is quite useless.

### ***Ode on a Grecian Urn: Analysis***

Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* has a specific structure, its closest formal "cousin" is probably *Ode on Melancholy*, though it contains a slightly different rhyme scheme. Split into five verses (stanzas) of ten lines each, and making use of fairly rigid iambic pentameter, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is very carefully put together. The rhyme scheme is split into two parts, with the final three lines of each stanza varying slightly. For the first seven lines, a rhyme scheme of ABABCDE is used, though the instance of the CDE part is not always as strict. In verse one, the final three lines are DCE; in the second verse, they're CED; stanzas three and four both use CDE, while the fifth and final stanza uses DCE.

	1	Rhyme Scheme
	<i>Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness</i>	A
	<i>Thou foster-child of silence and slow time</i>	B
	<i>Sylvan historian, who canst thus express</i>	A
	<i>A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:</i>	B
5	<i>What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape</i>	C
	<i>Of deities or mortals, or of both,</i>	D
	<i>In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?</i>	E
	<i>What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?</i>	D
	<i>What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?</i>	C
10	<i>What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?</i>	E

During this **first verse**, we see the narrator announcing that he is standing before a very old urn from Greece. The urn becomes the subject of the poem, so all of the ideas and thoughts are addressed towards it. On the urn, we are told there are images of people who have been frozen and immortalized in place for all of time, as the "*foster-child of silence and slow time*" (vv 2) The narrator also explains us that he is discussing the matter as a scholar does, or as a "*historian*" (vv 3) who is "simply" wondering what legend or story the figures hides. One of **the picture seems to show a group of men who are chasing some women** and this is described as a "mad pursuit" (vv 9), here the poet wants to understand more about this "*struggle to escape*" (vv 9) or the "*wild ecstasy*" (vv 10).

	2	Rhyme Scheme
	<i>Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard</i>	A
	<i>Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;</i>	B
	<i>Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,</i>	A
	<i>Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:</i>	B
15	<i>Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave</i>	C
	<i>Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;</i>	D
	<i>Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,</i>	E
	<i>Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;</i>	C
	<i>She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,</i>	E
20	<i>For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!</i>	D

During the **second verse**, the reader is introduced to another image on the Grecian urn. In this scene, a **young man is sat with a lover, seemingly playing a song on a pipe as they are surrounded by trees**. Again, the narrator's interest is stimulated, but he decides that the "melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter" (vv 11-12). The figures that the poets describes, seen pictured upon the urn, will never grow old and even the music contains an immortal quality . The narrator comforts the man, who he knows that will never be able to kiss his companion, with the fact that she will never lose her beauty as she is frozen in time.

	3	Rhyme Scheme
	<i>Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed</i>	A
	<i>Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;</i>	B

	<i>And, happy melodist, unwearied,</i>	<i>A</i>
	<i>For ever piping songs for ever new;</i>	<i>B</i>
25	<i>More happy love! more happy, happy love!</i>	<i>C</i>
	<i>For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,</i>	<i>D</i>
	<i>For ever panting, and for ever young;</i>	<i>E</i>
	<i>All breathing human passion far above,</i>	<i>C</i>
	<i>That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,</i>	<i>D</i>
30	<i>A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.</i>	<i>E</i>

The **third stanza** again focuses on the same **two lovers** but turns its attention to the rest of the scene. The **trees behind the pipe player** will never grow old and their leaves will never fall, an idea which pleases the narrator. Just like the leaves, the love shared between the two is equally as immortal and won't have the chance to grow old. Normal love between humans can languish into a "*breathing human passion*" (vv 28) and becomes a "*burning forehead and a parching tongue*," (vv 30) a problem that the young lovers will not face.

#### 4

#### Rhyme Scheme

	<i>Who are these coming to the sacrifice?</i>	<i>A</i>
	<i>To what green altar, O mysterious priest,</i>	<i>B</i>
	<i>Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,</i>	<i>A</i>
	<i>And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?</i>	<i>B</i>
35	<i>What little town by river or sea shore,</i>	<i>C</i>
	<i>Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,</i>	<i>D</i>
	<i>Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?</i>	<i>E</i>
	<i>And, little town, thy streets for evermore</i>	<i>C</i>
	<i>Will silent be; and not a soul to tell</i>	<i>D</i>
40	<i>Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.</i>	<i>E</i>

In the **fourth stanza** the poet turns to another image on the urn, this time a **group of people bringing a cow to be sacrificed**. Here the narrator begins to wonder about the individuals' lives as though they were acting and living in regular time. This means that he imagines them to have had a starting point – the "*little town*" (vv 35) – and an end point – the "*green altar*" (vv 32). In turn, he imagines the "little town" they come from, now deserted because its inhabitants are frozen in the image on the side of the urn

#### 5

#### Rhyme Scheme

	<i>O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede</i>	<i>A</i>
	<i>Of marble men and maidens overwrought,</i>	<i>B</i>
	<i>With forest branches and the trodden weed;</i>	<i>A</i>
	<i>Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought</i>	<i>B</i>
45	<i>As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!</i>	<i>C</i>
	<i>When old age shall this generation waste,</i>	<i>D</i>
	<i>Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe</i>	<i>E</i>
	<i>Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,</i>	<i>D</i>
"	<i>Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all</i>	<i>C</i>
50	<i>Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."</i>	<i>E</i>

The **final stanza** is perhaps the most famous piece of poetry Keats ever wrote. This time, **he is talking directly to the urn itself**, which he believes "dost tease us out of thought" (vv 43). Even after everyone has died, the urn will remain, still providing indications at humanity but no real answers. The urn is almost its own little world, living by its own rules. While it might be interesting and intriguing, it will never be mortal. It's a purely aesthetic piece of art, something the speaker finds to be unsatisfying when compared to the richness of everyday human life. The last lines in the piece have become incredibly well known. They can be read as an attempt to sum up the entire through process of the poem in one couplet. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" (vv 49) as an idea is very difficult to be separated due to its mysteriousness. It's unclear whether the sentiment is spoken by the narrator, the urn, or by Keats himself, thanks to the enigmatic use of quotation marks. The source of the speech matters that's why is very important.

If the source is the narrator, then it could mean that he has become aware of the limitations of such a static piece of artwork. If it's the urn, then the idea that one piece of art (or self-contained phrase) could understand humanity is nonsensical, and the line deliberately plays off this. There's a futility to trying to sum up the true nature of beauty in just twenty syllables, a fact which might actually be the point of the couplet. Thanks to the solid, complicated nature of the final two lines, the opening remains open to interpretation.

## Brief Analysis

Keats' complete devotion to art as pure expression of beauty (element that made him a "myth" for all the romantic poets and even for many artists of later periods) appears clearly since from the first verses of the *Endimion*, a long allegorical poem upon the search for an "*ideal female love*" published by Keats in 1818, where it states:

- **A thing of beauty is a joy for ever.**

The deep admiration of beauty, intertwined with the Romantic sensibility and the acute perception of the precariousness of human life, and the art of ancient Greece

It is because of this love for beauty, which is intertwined with romantic sensibility and with the acute perception of the precariousness of human existence, that took Keats to visit and admire the rooms of the British Museum. The Ode on a Greek urn, published in 1819, may have originated from the observation of the Parthenon marbles displayed in the London museum.

The Ode on a Greek urn actually represents a paradox of romantic poetry because it does not contain any of the typical romantic themes such as nature, the life of ordinary people, the magic or the supernatural, nor does it tell of exotic loves or adventures. The theme of the Ode is the search for permanence and immortality, which for Keats can only be found in art, which, unlike all human things, is not changeable. The idea therefore takes up the theme, already dear to Shakespeare, of "*art as the only alternative to death*" and the only possible immortality. But art has no intrinsic power; In fact, Keats describes the urn as "cold", it is the poet's imagination that gives life to the urn and makes the characters there painted on, life and act. It is only through the imagination - and not the physical senses - that according to Keats we can achieve perfection.

The ode is therefore the song dedicated to the beauty of a timeless handmade object, or a Greek urn decorated with classical motifs, which becomes a symbol of eternity precisely because of the power of imagination. What fascinates Keats is the fact that poetic art is able to present an ideal world by fixing its actions and gestures (the kiss, the sacrifice) in a particular emotion, which poetry makes eternal as an expression of beauty. The young man who tries to kiss the girl will never kiss her, but will be waiting in that immense trepidation that precedes the kiss. The beauty of the young, the passion of the boy, the pleasure given by the music and the **branches in bloom**.