

# Explication of ode on a grecian urn by john keats literature review

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John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is one of the most lasting and unforgettable poem of the Romantic Period. Through this poem, Keats absurdly conveys the message that the true language of art is speechless (Hofmann 251). By doing this, Keats is able to move readers of the present time, which is a universal trait of all 19th century poets Bloom and Trilling 494). Although Keats coherently develops the meaning of the whole poem to achieve this effect, but he especially emphasizes it in the concluding lines: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'" (49-50). Keats conveys his complete philosophy of art, beauty, and life in these apparently simple lines, giving the reader a chance to interpret. Although these two lines seem to stand out on their own, and their meaning is still understandable even without the rest of the poem complementing them, but the gravity of Keats's message can only be interpreted by explicating the poem as a whole.

Like many early 19th century poems, in the literal sense, Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" can be regarded as a poem about a vase. However, the conventional meaning of the Grecian urn has been overturned by Keats; instead, he uses it as a metaphor for poetry and the power of poetry. People use urns to preserve the ashes of the deceased. Similarly, Keats relates actuality with imagination, and compares the immortality and superiority of art to our ordinary life. Keats masterfully uses the device of metaphorical and symbolic language to create a poem that flows beautifully and is melodic. While the poem's setting is not known, but it seems that Keats is the speaker. Keats's awe and astonishment with the urn he is admiring is reflected in the tone of this poem. This poem has a fluid rhythmic effect

because it is written in iambic pentameter with ten lines in each stanza. The poem has an unusual rhyme scheme of “ a-b-a-b-c-d-e-d-c-e” but the fact that this poem has five stanzas, breaks this pattern.

It is relevant that Keats named his poem “ Ode on a Grecian Urn” since it after all an ode to the loveliness of an urn; however, he also describes how the urn itself is an ode to the extent that it immortalizes the most disturbing moments of life. This is asserted when the urn’s grandeur is described as a “ Sylvan historian, who canst thus express/A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme” (3-4). Keats then narrates a legend that is painted on the body of the urn. The legend includes a chase scene a sacrifice on a “ green altar” (32). Although the actual meaning of these events is frequently remarked by Keats, yet understanding its explicit meaning becomes difficult because of his constantly intensive probing, especially when he describes the chase:

### **What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?**

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (8-10).

Once the readers are finally able to understand this passage, they will learn more about the nature of the poem. These details of the legend have been included by Keats in order to show and prove that uncovering truth can be difficult. This, of course, is a paradox just as he says that, “ Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/Are sweeter” (11-12). Keats’s poem is full of various paradoxes. For instance, one paradox is the interaction of the mortals and deities and their working towards a single purpose. These paradoxes suggest that that Keats had most likely been constantly and firmly hinting at the juxtaposition of grief and joy throughout the poem.

Keats's contemplation on the urn also produces metaphors that make the readers wary of their deep desires to deal with co-existing opposites. Keats shows us how the sculpture estranges its viewers by comparing it to an "unravish'd bride" (1) who is chaste and quiet, the "foster-child of Silence and slow Time" (2). However, at the same time, he also presents these subjects as exalted, sublime, and even divine. According to Keats and within the context of the urn, the marriage of manner and myth become most obvious when he says "Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought/As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!" (44-45).

Humans who have passions that are never satisfied to the extent that they suffer from "a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,/A burning forehead, and a parching tongue" (29-30). However, the deities painted on the urn have no needs and are timeless. Therefore, he is free to compare even the cow that was scarified in the fourth stanza to a deity: "Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,/And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?" (33-34). If readers were actually looking at this urn that Keats tries to describe in detail throughout the poem, we would also most likely long for it, want to appreciate it, and feel discomfort. Keats hopefully concludes the poem with a very interesting phrase, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty - that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (49-50), and this seemingly points out that he too is aware that his poem needs to be well-balanced.

It is understandable that the theme of this poem develops through the stanzas, building up to the assertive proclamation that the speaker makes. In the first forty lines of this poem, Keats does nothing apart from describing the Grecian urn and reflecting on it in detail. In each stanza of the poem,

Keats asks several different questions that he does not answer until the very end of the poem. Finally, he provides a very simple, one-line answer to all of them: “ Beauty is truth, truth beauty” (49). The ulterior symbolic meaning of this phrase is disguised by its simplicity. Instead of using irrelevant words, such as an “ and” and another “ is,” Keats has favored a trimmed down, fluid statement that can be easily recalled and repeated. In comparison to the rest of the poem and others from the Romantic Period, the final lines are startling because Keats is apparently using the structure of the lines to draw in the reader. This short, pithy poetic statement seems timeless and universally appealing (Bloom and Trilling 494).

Thus, Keats’s dual-natured poem “ Ode on a Grecian Urn” takes us on a journey within his mind and soul, where he discloses his deepest beliefs. By using the Grecian urn, Keats is able to persuade the reader to ponder over the same aesthetic conflict that has engrossed the minds of many Romantic poets like him. Romantic poets of the 19th century were particularly concerned about the nature of beauty, truth, and the function of art. Keats too uses the lines of this poem to make contemplative observations of these, ask questions, to transmit his artistic philosophy. Ultimately, Keats finds the answer to all his curious questions, he finally realizes that “ Beauty is truth, truth beauty” (49).

## Works Cited

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