

Truth versus immortality in john keats' ode on a grecian urn assignment

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Truth versus Immortality in John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" In John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the speaker admires the immortality and excitement of life depicted on an urn, before realizing that the truth of life and mortality is preferable to static eternal existence. The speaker suggests that the young figures depicted on the urn are frozen in time forever, and therefore will eternally be young, carefree, and beautiful. It's suggested that such immortality is inferior to mortal existence, however, since such carefree existence lacks the "truth" of human passion and ephemeral living.

Through skillful word choice, the changing tone of the speaker, and the use of paradox, Keats through the speaker conveys his feelings towards art and beauty versus aging and truth: beauty in art is unobtainable, and the reality of change is where true beauty exists. Keats' careful diction in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" works to effectively and powerfully convey the changing feelings of the speaker. The first three stanzas of the poem, when the speaker is addressing life depicted on the urn and contemplating immortality, are full of joyful imagery and positive language towards the static world of the urn.

The urn is "unravished" (1), "leaf-fringed" (5), and "flowery" (4), with the figures on it "fair" (20) and possibly even "gods" (9). Clearly the speaker admires the purity of the imaginary world of the urn, and finds the youth on the urn to be both jubilant and beautiful. The use of nature imagery, with additional descriptions of the art like "happy, happy boughs!" (21) and trees that will "nor ever[...] be bare" (16), really reinforces the speaker's initial positive attitude to the idealized world. Nature is beautiful, and

existence depicted on the urn feels like it is full of budding life, due to the imagery and choice of language.

The speaker's word choices change, however, midway through the third stanza, and help to convey his changing opinion of the urn's fantasy world. The tone of the poem, which begins light and merry and is supported by a simple song-like rhyme scheme, darkens after line 27. The scenes on the urn are "for ever panting, and for ever young; all breathing human passion far above" (27-28). Words like "panting" and the absence of the "far above" passion first hint at what the idealized immortal world lacks: a real ephemeral human condition and a restful endpoint.

Such an existence, the speaker adds, "leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed, a burning forehead, and a parching tongue" (29-30). Whereas the speaker had previously suggested that the urn's life was even more beautiful than the poem itself (4), this new negative language, which alludes to sickness and fatigue, is the first suggestion that the speaker doesn't support such a life. The tone of such language turns resentful and almost tragic. He continues in the fourth stanza to describe a scene of a sacrifice (31), which supports the idea that the immortals are "sacrificing", or lacking, a key piece of fulfilled existence.

Addressing an unseen town that depicted immortals left empty to make a sacrifice, the speaker mentions that there is "not a soul to tell Why thou art desolate" (39-40). That is, the town is beautiful (it is "by river or sea shore" and is equipped with "peaceful citadel" (36)) but still desolate. This is a parallel for art itself: it is ideal yet still lacking qualities of reality, or as the <https://assignbuster.com/truth-versus-immortality-in-john-keats-ode-on-a-grecian-urn-assignment/>

speaker says with careful word order, "art desolate" (40) which can be taken for the second meaning; "art is desolate". In the fifth and final stanza, the speaker concedes that he or she now understands that the urn is a "Cold Pastoral" (45).

The use of "pastoral", which is literature that idealizes life in nature, completes the speaker's change in views: he or she once pondered the "wild ecstasy" (10) of the depicted figures' lives, but now sees eternal life differently: it's an unreachable, idealized illusion. The paradox between the silent, unchanging state of the urn and the vibrancy of the life depicted on it demonstrates the speaker's point that idealism in art isn't true beauty like reality is. The urn, a "bride of quietness" and "foster-child of silence and slow time" (1-2), is adorned with images of "mad pursuit" (9), "pipes and timbrels" (10), and "spirit ditties" (14).

The contrast of pace and noise between eternal art and the life depicted on art is the exact paradox that the speaker examines between immortalized imagery and immediate, mortal reality: art is a dishonest depiction of beauty, but truthful life is the beauty that art strives to imitate. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty - that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." (49-50) the speaker concludes at the end of the poem. "Truth", which can be interpreted as the mortal human condition, is what we 'know on earth'; it is what we live.

The speaker believes we should live with mortality in mind, and enjoy our fleeting youth when we can. Seeking immortality only serves to "tease us out of thought" (44), because we would be seeking a false beauty. The

object of the speaker's initial lust, an urn, also should be considered for what it actually is: urns are typically used as receptacles for a human's lifeless ashes. The paradox of such loud, exciting youth depicted on a receptacle for the dead only further reinforces the contrast between art and life; immortality and humanity.

The reality of change is what the speaker, who likely expresses the ideas of Keats himself, finds beautiful. Keats died at age 26, just years after writing "Ode on a Grecian Urn." It is interesting to observe that he apparently had the insight into his own mortality, and knew to live in the present, as the speaker advises. While the world of art has aesthetic, idealized beauty, to live in it means losing one's real human life, a life of aging and change. A fulfilled life, the poem suggests, includes both art and reality, or truth and beauty: as the speaker concludes, that is "all ye need to know" (50) on earth.