

## Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

- I. One of Keats’s most famous poems
- II. Nearly a twin to “Ode to a Nightingale”
- III. Again the speaker is trying to transcend time, this time through the immortality of art
- IV. Poem presents a dialectic, a set of opposites and their resolution
  - A. Similar to Blake’s notion of “contraries”
  - B. In the philosopher Hegel’s expression: thesis + antithesis = synthesis
  - C. Keats’s poem is a dialectical synthesis through art
  - D. Some of the opposites or contradictions in the poem include:
    1. Sound/Silence
    2. Time/Eternity
    3. Movement/Stasis
    4. Truth/Beauty
    5. Sensual/Spiritual
- V. The urn is a piece of ancient Greek pottery that has scenes painted on it
- VI. There are either three separate scenes, or two scenes with a detail of one scene
  - A. The first scene depicts revelry and sexual pursuit
  - B. The second and third stanzas of the poem correspond to a separate scene (or a detail of the first)
  - C. Stanzas four and five depict a religious ritual involving a sacrifice
- VII. In Stanza one, “Unravish’d bride” refers to the maidens (that is, virgins) painted on the urn, but also to the urn itself, which is intact and unbroken
  - A. Note the imagery of silence, first, and then commotion and noise: wild ecstasy, pipes and timbrels—that contrasts with silence.
- VIII. In the second and third stanzas, the speaker transitions from sound and silence toward a more visual (and sensual) set of images that will involve movement and stasis
  - A. Here we see the opposition of heard and unheard: “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter.”
  - B. Stanzas depict imagery of love, of the youth pursuing the maiden
  - C. Also depicts frozen movement—a chase that can never be fulfilled.
    1. Art has made this beauty last (In real life, it would have been over)
    2. Anticipation is in some ways better than fulfillment, because the desire is always expressed
    3. Around the potential lovers, the trees can never fade
- IX. Final two stanzas move from the sensual to the spiritual
  - A. Time and eternity are in opposition. “When old age shall this generation waste, / Thou shalt remain.”
  - B. “Beauty is truth, truth beauty, — that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”
    1. These oft-quoted lines constitute a dialectic
    2. The idea is more complex than it sounds
    3. He is not saying that beauty and truth are the same thing; they coexist
    4. The Keats scholar, Helen Vendler, has suggested that
      - a) “beauty is truth” is an expression through the eyes of sensation
      - b) “truth beauty” is an expression through the eyes of thought
  - C. Poem’s structure also represents a reconciliation of the beautiful that we see in the first three stanzas, and the true, that we see in the last two
  - D. The ratio of three to five—that is, the first three stanzas to the five stanzas of the whole poem—is close to the Golden Section