



***READING AND WRITING SKILLS FOR STUDENTS OF
LITERATURE IN ENGLISH: ROMANTICISM***

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2.3. John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1819)

Reading Skills

I

Before reading the poem

What do you expect the poem to be about? Why do you think Keats is writing about an ancient urn?

After reading the poem

Were your ideas right?

Would you agree with the idea that “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is a political poem? Why/Why not? Support your answer with examples from the text.

Now let’s look at the poem:

Stanza 1

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
 Thou foster child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fringed 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 loath?
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

1. Who is speaking in the poem?
2. Who, or what, is the “unravished bride of quietness”?
3. Why “quietness”?
4. Who, or what, is the “Sylvan historian”?
5. Where is/was Arcady?
6. What is being described in this stanza?
7. How would you describe the language Keats uses in the poem?

Stanza 2

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
 Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
 Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal – yet, do not grieve;
 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss
 Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Stanza 3

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
Forever piping songs forever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
Forever warm and still to be enjoyed,
Forever panting, and forever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

1. Why are unheard melodies sweeter than heard melodies?
2. Who appear in stanza 2 and 3?
3. Why can the "Bold Lover" never kiss?
4. Why can the tree never shed its leaves?
5. What similar images are described?
6. Is there a negative side to this apparent immortality?

Stanza 4

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

1. What connection do these people have to those of the previous stanzas?
2. Is their town depicted on the urn?
3. What are the people doing?
4. Some critics have argued that this stanza does not fit with the rest of the poem. Do you agree?

Stanza 5

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity. Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty" – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

1. Why is it a "Cold Pastoral"?
2. What does "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" mean?
3. What is Keats telling us in this poem?

II

1. What does the urn depict?
2. When and where, approximately, was the urn made?
3. Do you think the urn really existed? Does it matter?
4. Does the urn, and the scenes depicted on it, have any relevance to Keats's own time?
5. What was the role of the poet according to Keats and contemporaries such as Wordsworth and Shelley?
6. Is there a poet, or similar figure, depicted on the urn?
7. After further analysis, do you find a political message in the poem?
8. T.S. Eliot argued that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" had no meaning. Do you agree? Is discovering its meaning important to understanding and enjoying the poem?

Writing Skills

1. The central theme of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is the contrast between art and eternity on the one hand and life and passion on the other. Discuss.
 - a) Remember that in answering this question you are expected to put both sides of the argument.
 - b) Draw up a list of ways in which the poem contrasts art and eternity with life and passion.
 - c) Draw up a second list of themes or ideas in the poem which are not related to art, eternity, life and passion.
 - d) Write an essay in which the two lists provide the ideas for two paragraphs (one paragraph for each list). Include a brief conclusion in which you decide, on the balance of the evidence provided in the two previous paragraphs, whether you agree with the essay statement.