

## John Keats: Ode on a Grecian Urn (text page 189 textbook)

### Summary

**In the first stanza**, the speaker stands before an ancient Grecian urn and addresses it. He is preoccupied with its depiction of pictures frozen in time. It is the “still *unravish’d* (inviolata) bride of quietness,” the “*foster-child* (figlia adottiva) of silence and slow time.” He also describes the urn as a “historian” that can tell a story. He wonders about the figures on the side of the urn and asks what legend they depict and from where they come. He looks at a picture that seems to depict a group of men pursuing a group of women and wonders what their story could be: “What mad *pursuit* (obiettivo) ? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and *timbrels* (tamburelli)? What wild ecstasy?”

**In the second stanza**, the speaker looks at another picture on the urn, this time of a young man playing a *pipe* (flauto), lying with his lover beneath a glade of trees. The speaker says that the piper’s “unheard” melodies are sweeter than mortal melodies because they are unaffected by time. He tells the youth that, though he can never kiss his lover because he is frozen in time, he should not grieve, because her beauty will never fade.

**In the third stanza**, he looks at the trees surrounding the lovers and feels happy that they will never *shed* (perdere) their leaves. He is happy for the piper because his songs will be “for ever new,” and happy that the love of the boy and the girl will last forever, unlike mortal love, which lapses into “breathing human passion” and eventually vanishes, leaving behind only a “burning forehead, and a *parching* (riarsa, secca) tongue.”

**In the fourth stanza**, the speaker examines another picture on the urn, this one of a group of villagers leading a *heifer* (giovenca) to be sacrificed. He wonders where they are going (“To what green altar, O mysterious priest...”) and from where they have come. He imagines their little town, empty of all its citizens, and tells it that its streets will “for evermore” be silent, for those who have left it, frozen on the urn, will never return. In the final stanza, the speaker again addresses the urn itself, saying that it, like Eternity, “doth tease us out of thought.” He thinks that when his generation is long dead, the urn will remain, telling future generations its enigmatic lesson: “*Beauty is truth, truth beauty.*” The speaker says that that is the only thing the urn knows and the only thing it needs to know.

### Themes

If the “Ode to a Nightingale” portrays Keats’s speaker’s engagement with the fluid expressiveness of music, the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” portrays his attempt to engage with the static immobility of sculpture. The Grecian urn, passed down through countless centuries to the time of the speaker’s viewing, exists outside of time in the human sense—it does not age, it does not die, and indeed it is alien to all such concepts. In the speaker’s meditation, this creates an intriguing paradox for the human figures carved into the side of the urn: **They are free from time, but they are simultaneously frozen in time.** They do not have to confront aging and death (their love is “for ever young”), but neither can they have experience (the youth can never kiss the maiden; the figures in the procession can never return to their homes).

The speaker attempts three times to engage with scenes carved into the urn; each time he asks different questions of it. In the first stanza, he examines the picture of the “mad pursuit” and wonders what actual story lies behind the picture: “What men or gods are these? What maidens *loth*

(riluttanti)?” Of course, the urn can never tell him the whos, whats, whens, and wheres of the stories it depicts, and the speaker is forced to abandon this line of questioning.

In the second and third stanzas, he examines the picture of the piper playing to his lover beneath the trees. Here, the speaker tries to imagine what the experience of the figures on the urn must be like; he tries to identify with them. He is tempted by their escape from temporality and attracted to the eternal newness of the piper’s unheard song and the eternally unchanging beauty of his lover. He thinks that their love is “far above” all transient human passion, which, in its sexual expression, inevitably leads to an abatement of intensity—when passion is satisfied, all that remains is a *wearied* (tired, exhausted) physicality: a sorrowful heart, a “burning forehead,” and a “parching tongue.” His recollection of these conditions seems to remind the speaker that he is inescapably subject to them, and he abandons his attempt to identify with the figures on the urn.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker attempts to think about the figures on the urn as though they *were* experiencing human time, imagining that their procession has an origin (the “little town”) and a destination (the “green altar”). But all he can think is that the town will forever be deserted: If these people have left their origin, they will never return to it. In this sense he confronts head-on the limits of static art; if it is impossible to learn from the urn the whos and wheres of the “real story” in the first stanza, it is impossible *ever* to know the origin and the destination of the figures on the urn in the fourth.

It is true that the speaker shows a certain kind of progress in his successive attempts to engage with the urn. His idle curiosity in the first attempt gives way to a more deeply felt identification in the second, and in the third, the speaker leaves his own concerns behind and thinks of the processional purely on its own terms, thinking of the “little town” with a real and generous feeling. But each attempt ultimately ends in failure. The third attempt fails simply because there is nothing more to say—once the speaker confronts the silence and eternal emptiness of the little town, he has reached the limit of static art; on this subject, at least, there is nothing more the urn can tell him.

In the final stanza, the speaker presents the conclusions drawn from his three attempts to engage with the urn. He is *overwhelmed* (sopraffatto) by its existence outside of temporal change, with its ability to “tease” him “out of thought / As doth eternity.” If human life is a succession of “hungry generations,” as the speaker suggests in “Nightingale,” the urn is a separate and self-contained world. It can be a “friend to man,” as the speaker says, but it cannot be mortal; the kind of aesthetic connection the speaker experiences with the urn is ultimately insufficient to human life.

The final two lines, in which the speaker imagines the urn speaking its message to mankind—“*Beauty is truth, truth beauty,*” have proved among the most difficult to interpret in the Keats canon. After the urn utters the enigmatic phrase “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” no one can say for sure who “speaks” the conclusion, “*that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*” It could be the speaker addressing the urn, and it could be the urn addressing mankind. If it is the speaker addressing the urn, then it would seem to indicate his awareness of its limitations: The urn may not need to know anything beyond the equation of beauty and truth, but the complications of human life make it impossible for such a simple and self-contained phrase to express sufficiently anything about necessary human knowledge. If it is the urn addressing mankind, then the phrase has rather the weight of an important lesson, as though *beyond* all the complications of human life, all human beings need to know on earth is that **beauty and truth are one and the same**. It is largely a matter of personal interpretation which reading to accept. (adapted from [Sparknotes.com](http://Sparknotes.com))