



## Ode on a Grecian Urn

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“ODE ON A GRECIAN URN” is one of the loveliest and most richly puzzling of English lyrics. In five short stanzas of ten lines each, Keats vividly presents the scenes adorning an ancient urn, which he personifies and addresses directly as “still unravished bride,” “Foster child of silence and slow time,” and “sylvan historian.”

The urn’s frieze eloquently if wordlessly proves that art offers a permanence impossible in the real world. The pictured trees beneath which a piper forever plays will never lose their spring leaves. The “bold lover” pressing his suit will never stop loving, nor will his lady cease to be fair. On the other hand, the kiss sought can never be granted, the melodies can never be heard, the trees can never bear summer fruit--so the changeless state conveyed by art clearly has its drawbacks.

Having reflected on the living moments frozen into decorative “attitudes” on the urn--love, flight and pursuit, music making, ritual sacrifice--Keats backs away to view the urn as a whole. The “cold pastoral” of the urn lives forever precisely because it has never lived. However the reader chooses to interpret the poem’s cryptic final lines, which because of a punctuation discrepancy in early editions permit sharply different readings, the urn’s message of “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” is a statement of triumph and limitation entirely valid in the realm of art where the urn exists.

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