

17. John Keats

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Ode on a Grecian Urn (1819) 61

The poem deals with a marble Grecian urn, a carved vase that Keats had seen at the British Museum. The urn contained the ashes of the dead; it is therefore an object linked to eternity.

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness¹,
 Thou foster-child² of silence and slow time,
 Sylvan historian³, who canst thus⁴ express
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
 5 What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape⁵
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,
 In Tempe or the dales⁶ of Arcady?
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loth⁷?
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
 10 What pipes and timbrels⁸? What wild ecstasy?
 Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye⁹ soft pipes, play on¹⁰;
 Not to the sensual ear¹¹, but, more endear'd¹²,
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone¹³:
 15 Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
 Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare¹⁴;
 Bold¹⁵ Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
 Though winning near the goal¹⁶ yet, do not grieve¹⁷;
 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss¹⁸,
 20 For ever wilt¹⁹ thou love, and she be fair!
 Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed²⁰
 Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu²¹;
 And, happy melodist, unwearied²²,
 For ever piping songs for ever new;
 25 More happy love! more happy, happy love!
 For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
 For ever panting²³, and for ever young;
 All breathing human passion far above,
 That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd²⁴,
 30 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue²⁵.
 Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
 To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
 Lead'st²⁶ thou that heifer lowing²⁷ at the skies,

1. **unravish'd bride of quietness:** untouched bride. The oxymoron stresses the perfection of the urn and its link with death
2. **foster-child:** it. *figlia adottiva*. The epithet enhances the previous concept
3. **Sylvan historian:** the urn is the narrator of a story set in the woods. The double nature of the urn (linked both to life and death, is made clear by the use of the three epithets)
4. **canst thus:** can so
5. **leaf-fring'd legend ... shape:** what story decorated with leaves covers your form
6. **Tempe or the dales:** Tempe or the valleys (of Arcady), typical bucolic settings in Greece
7. **maidens loth:** unwilling girls
8. **timbrels:** it. *tamburelli*
9. **ye:** *arch.* for you
10. **play on:** keep on playing
11. **sensual ear:** it. *orecchio corporeo, fisico*
12. **endear'd:** wished for, desired
13. **ditties of no tone:** songs that cannot be heard (but just imagined)
14. **bare:** without leaves
15. **Bold:** Enterprising, passionate
16. **winning near the goal:** almost reaching her
17. **grieve:** feel sorrow (it. *soffrire, essere in lutto*)
18. **thou ... bliss:** you will not have your happiness
19. **wilt:** *arch.* for will
20. **shed:** lose
21. **bid ... adieu:** say good-bye
22. **unwearied:** never tired
23. **panting:** here, breathing with difficulty because of anxiety or desire
24. **high-sorrowful and cloy'd:** sad and nauseous (it. *triste e sazio*)
25. **parching tongue:** dried tongue
26. **Lead'st:** *arch.* For lead
27. **heifer lowing:** it. *giovenca mugghiante*

- And all her silken flanks²⁸ with garlands drest²⁹?
- 35 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
- 40 Why thou art desolate³⁰, can e'er³¹ return.
- O Attic³² shape! Fair attitude! with brede³³
Of marble men and maidens overwrought³⁴,
With forest branches and the trodden weed³⁵;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought³⁶
- 45 As doth³⁷ eternity: Cold Pastoral³⁸!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt³⁹ remain, in midst⁴⁰ of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st⁴¹,
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all
- 50 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know⁴².'

28. **silken flanks**: sides as smooth as silk

29. **drest**: *arch.* dressed

30. **art desolate**: are empty

31. **e'er**: *arch.* For ever

32. **Attic**: Classical, elegant (referring to the Greek region of Attica)

33. **brede**: breed (it. *stirpe*)

34. **overwrought**: carved, decorated

35. **trodden weed**: a crowded place because the grass is trodden

36. **dost tease ... thought**: you deceive us by showing us unreachable beauty and perfection

37. **doth**: does

38. **Cold Pastoral**: Pastoral: because it tells a story set in an ideal, pastoral world; Cold: because made of marble and linked to stillness/death

39. **shalt**: *arch.* for shall

40. **midst**: *arch.* for among

41. **say'st**: *arch.* say

42. **Beauty ... know**: He remarks on the union of beauty and truth like the Greek Philosophers