

ODE ON A GRECIAN URN
-JOHN KEATS

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" was written by the influential English poet John Keats in 1819. It is a complex, mysterious poem with a disarmingly simple set-up: an undefined speaker looks at a Grecian urn, which is decorated with evocative images of rustic and rural life in ancient Greece. These scenes fascinate, mystify, and excite the speaker in equal measure—they seem to have captured life in its fullness, yet are frozen in time. The speaker's response shifts through different moods, and ultimately the urn provokes questions more than it provides answers. The poem's ending has been and remains the subject of varied interpretation. The urn seems to tell the speaker—and, in turn, the reader—that truth and beauty are one and the same. Keats wrote this poem in a great burst of creativity that also produced his other famous odes (e.g. "[Ode to a Nightingale](#)"). Though this poem was not well-received in Keats' day, it has gone on to become one of the most celebrated in the English language.

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summary

- The speaker directly addresses the urn, deeming it a pure partner of quietness itself as well as the adopted child of silence and vast lengths of time. The urn speaker's era (or perhaps language more generally). The speaker wonders what stories are being told by the images on the urn; whether the figures it depicts are human beings or gods, and which part of Greece they are in. The speaker wonders about the specific identity of the male characters and the reluctant-looking women. Do the scenes show a chase and an attempt to escape? Noting the musical instruments on the urn, the speaker questions if the scenes on display represent some kind of delirious revelry.

The speaker praises music, but claims that music that cannot be heard (like that on the urn) is even better. As such, the speaker implores the urn's pipes to keep playing—not for sensory reward, but in tribute to silence. The speaker focuses a young piper sitting under some trees; just as the piper can never

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stop playing his song—as he is frozen on the urn—so too the trees will never shed their leaves. The speaker then focuses on a scene that depicts two young lovers. Though they are nearly kissing, their lips can never meet. The speaker tells them not to be upset, however: though the kiss will never happen, the man and woman will always love one another (or the man will always love the woman), and the woman will always be beautiful.

The speaker now addresses the images of trees on the urn, calling their boughs happy because they will never lose their leaves, and they will never have to say goodbye to spring. The speaker then returns to the piper, whom they perceive as happy and untiring—the piper will play new music for the rest of time. This fills the speaker with thoughts of happiness and love. The figures on the urn will always have happiness to look forward to, always be out of breath from the chase, and always be young. All the passions of the living human world are far removed from the figures on the urn—and these passions cause

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heartachelovesick fevers, and thirstThe speaker turns their attention to another scene on the urn, which appears to depict a ceremonial progression. They notice the figure of a shadowy priest leading a cow, which is mooing towards the sky and is dressed with ceremonial silks and flowers. This image causes the speaker to wonder where those in the procession have come from—which town by the river, coast, or mountain has fallen quiet because they have left on this religiously significant morning? The speaker directly addresses this unknown



town, acknowledging that its streets are frozen forever in silence. There is no one left who can explain why the town is empty.

The speaker takes a more zoomed-out look at the urn, noting its shape and apparent attitude. They recap the urn's population of pictorial men and women and its depictions of nature. To the speaker, the urn seems to offer a temporary respite from thought, in the same way that eternity does. But this respite seems inhuman or false, leading the speaker to call the urn

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cold. Inspired by this sentiment, the speaker notes that, when everyone in their generation has died, the urn will still be around. It will become an object of contemplation for people with different problems than the speaker's generation. To them, the urn will say that beauty and truth are one and the same; this fact is all that it is possible to know, and all that anybody actually needs to know.