

John Keats (31 October 1795 - 23 February 1821) became one of the key figures of the Romantic movement. Along with Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, Keats was one of the second generation Romantic poets. During his very short life, his work received constant critical attacks from periodicals of the day, but his posthumous influence on poets such as Alfred Tennyson and Wilfred Owen would be immense. **The poetry of Keats was characterised by elaborate word choice and sensual imagery**, notably in a series of odes that were his masterpieces, and which remain among the most popular poems in English literature. The letters of Keats, which expound on his aesthetic theory of "negative capability" are among the most celebrated by any writer. Keats met Fanny Brawne (1800 - 1865) in 1818 and became engaged to Fanny Brawne (1800-1865). Because Keats could not afford to support a wife, they kept the engagement a secret from all but their closest friends. (It remained a secret to the general public till 1878, when his letters to her were finally published.) Keats wrote her a flood of notes and letters till March 1820. His expressions of love and its joys are mixed with pain and death.

**Negative capability** is a theory of the poet describing the capacity for accepting uncertainty and the unresolved. It has been compared to Heidegger's concept of *Gelassenheit*, "the spirit of disponibilité before What-Is which permits us simply to let things be in whatever may be their uncertainty and their mystery." Keats' theory of "negative capability" was expressed in his letter to his brother dated Sunday, 21 December 1817. He says

*I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.*

Keats believed that great people (especially poets) have the ability to accept that not everything can be resolved. Keats, as a Romantic, believed that the truths found in the imagination access holy authority. Such authority cannot otherwise be understood, and thus he writes of "uncertainties." This "being in uncertaint[y]" is a place between the mundane, ready reality and the multiple potentials of a more fully understood existence. It relates to his metaphor of the Mansion of Many Apartments. The **Mansion of Many Apartments** is a metaphor that the John Keats expressed in a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds dated Sunday, 3 May 1818.

*I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon me - The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think - We remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second Chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten to it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by awakening of the thinking principle - within us - we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight: However among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the nature and heart of Man — of convincing one's nerves that the world is full of misery and Heartbreak, Pain, sickness and oppression — whereby This Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open - but all dark - all leading to dark passages — We see not the balance of good and evil. We are in a Mist - We are now in that state — We feel the burden of the Mystery.*

Here Keats suggests that people were capable of different levels of thought. Those who did not consider the world around them remained in the thoughtless chamber. Even though the door to move on to the next "apartment" was open, they had no desire to think any deeper and to go into that next apartment. When you did move on into the next chamber, you would for the first time have a choice of direction, as from this apartment there were several different dark passages. Keats believed that he was at this point when he wrote the letter, as was William Wordsworth when he wrote *Tintern Abbey*. Keats expressed this idea in *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream* (1819).

### John Keats 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' Poem Animation Movie

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE-6gS8s-D8>

Written in 1819, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* was the third of the five 'great odes' of 1819, which are generally believed to have been written in the following order - *Psyche*, *Nightingale*, *Grecian Urn*, *Melancholy*, and *Autumn*. Of the five, *Grecian Urn* and *Melancholy* are merely dated '1819'. Critics have used vague references in Keats's letters as well as thematic progression to assign order. This ode contains the most discussed two lines in all of Keats's poetry - "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," - that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.' The exact meaning of those lines is disputed by everyone; no less a critic than T.S. Eliot considered them a blight upon an otherwise beautiful poem. Scholars have been unable to agree to whom the last thirteen lines of the poem are addressed. Arguments can be made for any of the four most obvious possibilities, -poet to reader, urn to reader, poet to urn, poet to figures on the urn.

### John Keats Reads his Love letter to Fanny Brawne, 13 October 1819 " Poem animation

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G\\_yXjiaMfu0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G_yXjiaMfu0)

Keats's letters to Fanny Brawne are among the most famous love letters ever written. As next door neighbours, they exchanged numerous short notes, and occasionally more passionate ones. None of Fanny's letters to Keats survive. From his, however, it seems he was often unsettled by her behaviour and uncertain of her affection. His illness brought them closer; when he left for Rome, they were engaged and deeply in love.

25 College Street

My dearest Girl,

This moment I have set myself to copy some verses out fair. I cannot proceed with any degree of content. I must write you a line or two and see if that will assist in dismissing you from my Mind for ever so short a time. Upon my Soul I can think of nothing else - The time is passed when I had power to advise and warn you again. It is the unpromising morning of my Life - My love has made me selfish. I cannot exist without you - I am forgetful of every thing but seeing you again - my Life seems to stop there - I see no further. You have absorb'd me. I have a sensation at the present moment as though I was dissolving - I should be exquisitely miserable without the hope of soon seeing you. I should be afraid to separate myself far from you. My sweet Fanny, will your heart never change? My love, will it? I have no limit now to my love - You note came in just here - I cannot be happier away from you - 'T is richer than an Argosy of Pearles. Do not threat me even in jest. I have been astonished that Men could die Martyrs for religion - I have shudder'd at it - I shudder no more - I could be martyr'd for my Religion - Love is my religion - I could die for that - I could die for you. My Creed is Love and you are its only tenet - You have ravish'd me away by a Power I cannot resist: and yet I could resist till I saw you; and even since I have seen you I have endeavoured often to reason against the reasons of

my Love." I can do that no more - the pain would be too great - My Love is selfish - I cannot breathe without you.

Yours for ever  
John Keats

### 'Bright Star' Trailer

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITetIodauIM&feature=related>

Based on the three-year romance between 19th century poet John Keats and Fanny Brawne, which was cut short by Keats' untimely death at age 25.

### Jane Campion Interview for "Bright Star"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRHh72YPF4k&feature=fvvr>

From *The Piano* to *In the Cut*, writer-director Jane Campion always puts strong women characters at the centre. In *Bright Star*, Campion's heroine is Fanny Brawne, a smart, young dressmaker who will do anything if someone tries to break her relationship with the man she loves, the great romantic poet, John Keats. Inspired by the acclaimed biography of Keats written by Andrew Motion, Campion focuses on the love story between Brawne and Keats. Told through the eyes of the poets' love and inspiration, their romance inspired some of the most beautiful love letters ever written. **Their correspondence would later scandalize Victorian society.**

Told during the last three years in the life of Keats, the unlikely pair started at odds. Keats thinks Brawne is a stylish minx (a young woman who is considered flirtatious), while she is wholly unimpressed by his literature. But love soon blossoms and inspires Keats to write some of his most brilliant works such as 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' 'Ode on Melancholy' and 'Ode to a Nightingale.' I have the feeling as if I were dissolving, Keats tells Brawne. Indeed, the young lovers are swept into powerful, uncontrollable sensations. Charles Armitage Brown, Keats' friend and benefactor, tries to separate the lovers away. Perhaps due to jealousy or Brown is just overprotective of Keats. Written by Campion herself, the film's tone is like a ballad. The narrative is told in verses beginning with the couple's involvement all the way to their problems. The greatest line in the film is told when Keats confronts Brown and says, There is a holiness to the hearts' affections. *Bright Star* is also visually splendid. Cinematographer Greig Fraser lovingly shot each frame to replicate the film's romantic theme. Whether it's Keats atop a tree or Brawne walking in a snow-filled night, you will be drawn into the powerful, hypnotic look of the movie.

If you are looking to know more about the life of Keats, the poet, you may be disappointed with *Bright Star*. But if you want to dig deeper into the mind of Keats, the lover, then you will enjoy the film. **It celebrates the frailties of love and sorrow.**

## Ode on a Grecian Urn

"The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth." John Keats

"Ode on a Grecian Ode" is based on a series of paradoxes and opposites:

- the discrepancy between the urn with its frozen images and the dynamic life portrayed on the urn,

- the human and changeable versus the immortal and permanent,
- participation versus observation,
- life versus art.

As in "Ode to a Nightingale," the poet wants to create a world of pure joy, but in this poem the idealized or fantasy world is the life of the people on the urn. Keats sees them, simultaneously, as carved figures on the marble vase and live people in ancient Greece. Existing in a frozen or suspended time, they cannot move or change, nor can their feelings change, yet the unknown sculptor has succeeded in creating a sense of living passion and turbulent action. As in "Ode to a Nightingale," the real world of pain contrasts with the fantasy world of joy. Initially, this poem does not connect joy and pain.

Understanding some lines in this poem is a challenge to any reader, particularly the last two lines: 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,'--That is all

Ye know of earth, and all ye need to know.

Some of the difficulty arises because there is no definitive text for this poem. No manuscript in Keats's handwriting survives. Although the poem was included in a volume of poems published in 1820, Keats may have been too ill to correct typesetting errors.

Aside from textual considerations, the final couplet is ambiguous and has resulted in an extensive critical controversy over its meaning. Jack Stillinginger comments, "As to critical interpretation of who says what to whom, no single explanation can satisfy the demands of text, grammar, consistency and common sense." Some readers write off this couplet; T.S. Eliot calls these lines a "serious blemish (= imperfection) on a beautiful poem; and the reason must be either that I fail to understand it, or that it is a statement which is untrue." So if you have trouble understanding these last two lines, you are in good company.

## Analysis

### Stanza I

Stanza I begins slowly, asks questions arising from thought and raises abstract concepts such as time and art. The comparison of the urn to an "unravish'd bride" functions at a number of levels. It prepares for the impossibility of fulfillment of stanza II and for the violence of lines 8-10 of this stanza. "Still" embodies two concepts--time and motion--which appear in a number of ways in the rest of the poem. They appear immediately in line 2 with the urn as a "foster" child. The urn exists in the real world, which is mutable or subject to time and change, yet it and the life it presents are unchanging; hence, the bride is "unravish'd" and as a "foster" child, the urn is touched by "slow time," not the time of the real world. The figures carved on the urn are not subject to time, though the urn may be changed or affected over slow time.

The urn as "sylvan historian" speaks to the viewer, even if it doesn't answer the poet's questions (stanzas I and IV). Whether the urn communicates a message depends on how you interpret the final stanza. The urn is "sylvan"--first, because a border of leaves encircles the vase and second because the scene carved on the urn is set in woods. The "flowery tale" told "sweetly" and "sylvan historian" do not prepare for the terror and wild sexuality unleashed in lines 8-10 (another opposition); the effect and the subject of the urn or art conflict. Is it paradoxical that the urn, which is silent, tells tales "more sweetly than our rime"? Twice (lines 6 and 8) the poet is unable to distinguish between mortal and immortal, men and gods, another opposition; is there a suggestion of coexistence and inseparableness in this blurring of differences between them?

With lines 8-10, the poet is caught up in the excited, rapid activities depicted on the urn and moves from observer to participant in the life on the urn, in the sense that he is emotionally involved.

Paradoxically, turbulent dynamic passion is convincingly portrayed on cold, motionless stone.

Paradox and opposites run through the rest of the poem. As you read and reread the poem, you should become aware of them.

**Stanza II**

The first four lines contrast the ideal (in art, love, and nature) and the real; which does Keats prefer at this point? What is the paradox of unheard pipes? Is this an oxymoron?

The last six lines contrast the drawback of frozen time; note the negative phrasing: "canst not leave," "nor ever can," "never, never canst" in lines 5-8. Keats says not to grieve; whom he is addressing--the carved figures or the reader? or both? Then he lists the advantages of frozen time; however, Keats continues to use negative phrasing even in these lines: "do not grieve," "cannot fade," and "'hast not thy bliss." Keats may have made a mistake, or there may be a reason for this negative undertone, a reason which will become clear as the poem continues.

**Stanza III**

This stanza recapitulates ideas from the preceding two stanzas and re-introduces some figures: the trees which can't shed leaves, the musician, and the lover. Keats portrays the ideal life on the urn as one without disappointment and suffering. The urn-depicted passion may be human, but it is also "all breathing passion far above" because it is unchanging. Is there irony in the fact that the superior passion depicted on the urn is also unfulfillable, that satisfaction is impossible?

How does he portray real life, actual passion in the last three lines? Which is preferable, the urn life or real life? Note the repetition of the word "happy." Is there irony in this situation?

**Stanza IV**

Stanza IV shows **the ability of art to stir the imagination**, so that the viewer sees more than is portrayed. The poet imagines the village from which the people on the urn came. In this stanza, the poet begins to withdraw from his emotional participation in and identification with life on the urn. This stanza focuses on communal life (the previous stanzas described individuals). What paradox is implicit in the contrast between the event being a sacrifice and the altar being "green"? Between leading the heifer to the sacrifice and her "silken flanks with garlands drest"?

In imagining an empty town, why does he give three possible locations for the town, rather than fix on one location? Why does he use the word "folk," rather than "people"? Think about the different connotations of these words. The image of the silent, desolate town embodies both pain and joy. How is it ironic that not a soul can tell us why the town is empty and that the vase communicates so much to the poet and so to the reader? Is this also paradoxical? In terms of the theme of pain-joy, what is Keats saying in lines 1-4, which describe the procession? In the rest of the stanza which describes the desolate town? Is he describing a temporary or a permanent condition? Is the viewer, who is the poet as well as the reader, pulled into the world of the urn?

**Stanza V**

**The poet observes the urn as a whole and remembers his vision.** Is he emotionally involved in the life of the urn at this point, or is he again the observer? What aspect of the urn is stressed in the phrases "marble men and maidens," "silent form," and "Cold Pastoral"? Is there a paradox in the phrase "Cold Pastoral"? Yet the poet did experience the life experienced on the urn and comments, ambiguously perhaps, that the urn "dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity." Is this another reference to the "dull brain" which "perplexes and retards" ("Ode to a Nightingale")? Why does Keats use the word "tease"? By teasing him "out of thought," did the urn draw him from the real world into an ideal world, where, if there was neither imperfection nor change, there was also no real life or fulfillment? Or, possibly, was the poet so involved in the life of the urn that he couldn't think? Was the urn an escape, however temporary, from the pains and problems of life? One thing that all these suggestions mean is that this is a puzzling line. In the final couplet, is Keats saying that pain is beautiful? You must decide whether it is the poet (a persona), Keats (the actual poet), or the urn speaking. Are both lines spoken by the same person, or does some of the quotation express the view of one speaker and the rest of the couplet express the comment upon that view by another speaker? Who is being addressed--the poet, the urn, or the reader? Are the concluding lines a philosophical statement about life or do they make sense only in the context of the poem?

Some critics feel that Keats is saying that Art is superior to Nature. Is Keats thinking or feeling or talking about the urn only as a work of art? Your reading on this issue will be affected by your decision about who is speaking. Do the last two lines make a final statement on the relation of the ideal to the actual? Is the urn rejected at the end? Is art--can art ever be--a substitute for real life? What, if anything, has the poet learned from his imaginative vision of or daydream participation in the life of the urn?

<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/urn.html>

**Paradox:** a statement whose two parts seem contradictory yet make sense with more thought. Christ used paradox in his teaching: "They have ears but hear not." Or in ordinary conversation, we might use a paradox, "Deep down he's really very shallow." Paradox attracts the reader's or the listener's attention and gives emphasis.

**Oxymoron:** a statement with two parts which seem contradictory; examples: sad joy, a wise fool, the sound of silence, or Hamlet's saying, "I must be cruel only to be kind"

**Irony:** the discrepancy between what is said and what is meant, what is said and what is done, what is expected or intended and what happens, what is meant or said and what others understand. Sometimes irony is classified into types: in **situational irony**, expectations aroused by a situation are reversed; in **cosmic irony** or **the irony of fate**, misfortune is the result of fate, chance, or God; in **dramatic irony**, the audience knows more than the characters in the play, so that words and action have additional meaning for the audience; **Socratic irony** is named after Socrates' teaching method, whereby he assumes ignorance and openness to opposing points of view which turn out to be (he shows them to be) foolish. Irony is often confused with sarcasm and satire:

- **Sarcasm** is one kind of irony; it is praise which is really an insult; sarcasm generally involves malice, the desire to put someone down, e.g., "This is my brilliant son, who failed out of college."
- **Satire** is the exposure of the vices or follies of an individual, a group, an institution, an idea.

**Connotation:** the emotions, values, or images associated with a word. The intensity of emotions or the power of the values and images associated with a word varies. Words connected with religion, politics, and sex tend to have the strongest feelings and images associated with them.

For most people, the word *mother* calls up very strong positive feelings and associations--loving, self-sacrificing, always there for you, understanding; the denotative meaning, on the other hand, is simply "a female animal who has borne one or more children." Of course connotative meanings do not necessarily reflect reality; for instance, if someone said, "His mother is not very motherly," you would immediately understand the difference between motherly (connotation) and mother (denotation). a society, etc., usually with a view to correcting it. Satirists frequently use irony.

A **persona** is a fictional character. Sometimes the term means the mask or alter-ego of the author; it is often used for first person works and lyric poems, to distinguish the writer of the work from the character in the work.

**Ode:** usually a lyric poem of moderate length, with a serious subject, an elevated style, and an elaborate stanza pattern. There are various kinds of odes, which we don't have to worry about in an introductory course like this. The ode often praises people, the arts of music and poetry, natural scenes, or abstract concepts. The Romantic poets used the ode to explore both personal or general problems; they often started with a meditation on something in nature, as did Keats in "Ode to a Nightingale" or Shelley in "Ode to the West Wind."

## The Romantic Poets and the Ode

The Romantic period raised the lyric to unprecedented prominence. Although there are many different species of lyric, most of them apply and/or renovate some set of conventions, whether derived from classical models or from the lyric types generated in earlier periods of European and English poetry. British Romantic poets perfected a special form of ode--"the personal ode of description and passionate meditation," as M. H. Abrams described it--sometimes called the "Romantic meditative ode."

### Origin and Development of the Ode

Traditionally, the ode is lengthy, serious in subject matter, elevated in its diction and style, and often elaborate in its stanzaic structure. There were two classical prototypes, one Greek, the other Roman. The first was established by Pindar, a Greek poet, who modelled his odes on the choral songs of Greek drama. They were encomiums, i.e., written to give public praise, usually to athletes who had been successful in the Olympic games. Pindar patterned his complex stanzas in a triad: the *strophe* and *antistrophe* had the same metrical form; the *epode* had another. What is called in English the regular or Pindaric ode imitates this pattern; the most famous example is Thomas Gray's "The Progress of Poesy." As the ode developed in England, poets modified the Pindaric form to suit their own purposes and also turned to Roman models. In 1656, Abraham Cowley introduced the "irregular ode," which imitated the Pindaric style and retained the serious subject matter, but opted for greater freedom. It abandoned the recurrent strophic triad and instead permitted each stanza to be individually shaped, resulting in stanzas of varying line lengths, number of lines, and rhyme scheme. This "irregular" stanzaic structure, which created different patterns to accord with changes of mood or subject, became a common English tradition. Poets also turned to an ode form modelled after the Roman poet, Horace. The Horatian ode employed uniform stanzas, each with the same metrical pattern, and tended generally to be more personal, more meditative, and more restrained. Keats' "Ode to Autumn" and Wordsworth's "Ode to Duty" are Horatian odes.

The Romantic meditative ode was developed from these varying traditions. It tended to combine the stanzaic complexity of the irregular ode with the personal meditation of the Horatian ode, usually dropping the emotional restraint of the Horatian tradition. However, the typical structure of the new form can best be described, not by traditional stanzaic patterns, but by its development of subject matter. There are usually three elements:

- the description of a particularized outer natural scene;
- an extended meditation, which the scene stimulates, and which may be focused on a private problem or a universal situation or both;
- the occurrence of an insight or vision, a resolution or decision, which signals a return to the scene originally described, but with a new perspective created by the intervening meditation.

Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," are examples, and Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," while Horatian in its uniform stanzaic form, reproduces the architectural format of the meditative soliloquy, or, it may be, intimate colloquy with a silent auditor.

Adapted from *A Guide to the Study of Literature: A Companion Text for Core Studies 6, Landmarks of Literature*, ©Brooklyn College.

## Vocabulary and Allusions: "Ode on a Grecian Ode"

### Stanza I

Line 3, *sylvan*: pertaining to or living in the woods; hence, a sylvan historian records scenes in the woods.

Line 8, *Tempe*: a beautiful valley in Greece, it was sacred to Apollo, the god of poetry and music.

*Arcady*: the literary word for Arcadia, in the central Peloponnesus. Zeus was born there, in one account. The word connotes a place of rural peace and simplicity because of the ancient reputation of its inhabitants as innocent and peaceful.

Line 10, *timbrels*: ancient tambourines

### **Stanza II**

Line 3, *sensual ear*: ear of the senses, i.e., they hear.

### **Stanza V**

Line 1, *Attic*: Grecian. Attica is in the central part of Greece where Athens was located.

*brede*: embroidery.

Line 2, *overwrought*: covered with.

Line 5, *cold pastoral*: pastoral story in marble.

*pastoral*: (1) pertaining to shepherds; hence it connotes simple, peaceful country life and the qualities associated with such a life, e.g., naturalness and innocence. (2) a kind of poem which praises the virtues of country living (simplicity, innocence, etc.).