



John Keats

Ode on a
Grecian Urn

Background Information

- Beloved figure in literature
- "I have lov'd the principle of beauty in all things:
- Nothing abstract of intellectual about his poems

Background Information

- Lived from 1795 – 1821
- Humble beginnings
- An apprentice as a surgeon and apothecary
- First book was *Poems* - 1817
- Died of tuberculosis

Getting at Meaning #1-5;
Developing Skills #1-2



Ode on a Grecian Urn

- Sylvan Historian
 - Sylvan -leafy border “leaf-fringed legend” that “haunts about thy shape”
 - Historian — decoration is representational and for centuries has told the “flowery tale”

Ode on a Grecian Urn

- Flowery Tale

- Men, or gods, pursue maidens through a pastoral setting
- Perhaps a Dionysian rite that include music
- Greek gods regularly took on human forms

Unheard Melodies

- Not heard by the “sensual ear”; extolling powers of the imagination:
 - Unheard melodies cause the listener to imagine.
 - What you imagine is greater than the experience.
 - Imagination can magnify and perfect reality

Warmth and Passion

- Physical warmth of the human body
- Emotional heat of passion
- Lovers on the urn enjoy eternal youth and anticipation of intimacy; however, they are frozen in time and get to gain the full experience of life or love.
- Art cannot speak and tell the story behind the moment it depicts

Imagined Scene — 4th Stanza

- Shows a religious procession
- Lines 35 — 40 — Speaker wonders of the nature of the little town that is not shown, “What little town by the river or seashore”
 - It is desolate (both senses of the word)
 - Deserted of inhabitants
 - They are in the funeral procession “this pious mourn”
 - Unhappy and forlorn
 - “not a soul” can ever return

Cold Pastoral

- Apparent contradiction
 - Cold marble of the literal figures
 - Physical and emotional warmth evoked by the scene (and the urn's contents)
- Comparison between what art makes eternal and the spontaneous intensity of experienced emotion"

Ode

- Elaborate interweaving of descriptions of the urn's decoration with reflections on the nature of art and beauty
- The many apostrophes (pause in poetry) and exclamations show the depth of the speaker's emotion
- Formal diction and measured rhythm maintain a dignified, exalted tone.

Diction

- DOUBLE MEANING WORDS

- STILL — Line 1

- “Thou still unravished bride of quietness”
 - Can be an adverb meaning “as yet” and modifying unravished
 - Refers to the timeless element

OR

- Can be an adjective modifying bride and meaning “mute, motionless”
 - Refers to the nature of the depiction as an artifact rather than reality
 - Both meanings pick up on the central image of the moment frozen in time by art

Diction

- Importance of AMBIGUITY — creates poetic texture and meaning that can never be fully captured by a prose paraphrase.
- Other Examples
 - Flowery — Line 4
 - “covered with flowers”
 - “full of fine words or phrases”
 - Legend — Line 5
 - “a story coming down from the past”
 - “an inscription or title on an object”