John Keats (1795 – 1821)

Ode On A Grecian Urn - 1819

I

1. Tu, sposa ancora inviolata del silenzio,
2. Tu, figlia adottiva della quiete e del lento tempo,
3. Narratrice silvana che sai esprimere
4. Una storia fiorita tanto più dolcemente di quanto non sappiano fare i miei versi:
5. Quale leggenda incorniciata di foglie insegue la tua forma
6. Di divinità o di mortali o di entrambi,
7. Nella valle di Tempe o in Arcadia?
8. Chi sono questi uomini o sono forse dei? Chi sono queste vergini ritrose?
9. Che folle inseguimento sarà mai questo? Da quale lotta staranno mai fuggendo?
10. Che fletti e tamburelli? Che estasi selvaggia?

II

11. Le melodie ascoltate sono dolci, ma quelle non ascoltate
12. Sono più dolci; e allora voi, dolci flauti, suonate ancora
13. Non all’orecchio, ma, più armoniosi,
14. Suonate all’anima melodie senza suono.
15. Bella gioventù, sotto gli alberi, non potrai lasciare
16. A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
17. To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
18. What leaf-fring’d legend haunts about thy shape
19. What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

III

21. Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
22. Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
23. And happy melodist unweary’d,
24. For ever piping songs for ever new:
25. More happy love! more happy, happy love!
26. For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d,
27. For ever panting, and for ever young;
28. All breathing human passion far above,
29. That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy’d,
30. A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

IV

31. Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
32. To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
33. Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
34. And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
35. What little town by river or sea shore,
36. Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
37. Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
38. And, little town, thy streets for evermore;
39. Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
40. Why thou art desolate, can e’er return.

V

41. Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
42. Of marble men and maidens overworkt,
43. With forest branches and the trodden weed;
44. Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
45. As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
46. When old age shall this generation waste,
47. Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
48. Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
49. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," - that is all
50. Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.
1. What role does art play in your life? Can you think of an occasion when the contemplation of an art object has led you to intense personal reflection? Student's activity.

## Contents

2. What is represented on the surface of the urn?
   1st stanza: **An Arcadian landscape**.
   2nd stanza: **Some musicians are playing pipes and timbrels, and a young man is near kissing a girl**. 3rd stanza: **An eternal spring**.
   4th stanza: **A priest is leading a heifer to the sacrifice, and is followed by a religious procession taking place in the countryside since the poet imagines a town emptied of its people**.
   5th stanza: **The poet addresses directly the urn, which is perceived as an eternal object**.

3. Read the second stanza and say if the following statements are True or False. Correct the False ones.
   1. Unheard melodies are enjoyed through the ear. **False; those unheard melodies reach the spirit** (line 14).
   2. Unheard melodies are a creation of the mind. **True**.
   3. The boy will never stop playing his music. **True**.
   4. The boy will never be able to kiss the girl. **True**.
   5. He will love her forever. **True**.
   6. She will not be beautiful forever. **False; forever ... she be fair** (line 20).

4. How does passion affect human beings?
   While the love presented on the urn will never decay, the love of living men is short-lived and leaves hearts high-sorrowful and cloyed (lines 29-30). Reference to passion in the poem are provided in the following lines: being haunted by legends (line 5); wild ecstasy (line 10); sensual ear vs spirit (lines 13-14); grievance (line 18); happy love (line 25); enjoyable and panting (lines 26-27); breathing human passion (line 28); heart high sorrowful and cloy'd (line 29); desolation (line 40); teasing (line 44).

5. Why is the city "desolate" (line 40)?
   **The silence of the 'little town' is desolate because it is caused by the absence of people**.

6. Why does Keats refer to the vase as "cold" (line 45)?
   1. Because it is made of marble and it will not decay.
   2. because imagination fails and so the urn becomes lifeless piece of cold marble again
   3. because the urn is decorated with beautiful scenes which are devoid of human passion (the poet realizes that here real happiness can never be achieved)
   4. because the poet uses his imagination and sees an empty town that conveys a sense of coldness: this is another paradox: cold because it is thought to be real not because it is unreal (cold marble)

   **Why is the urn "a friend to man" (line 48)?**
   Because it always reminds men of the possibility of escaping from their earthly reality into the eternal world of art and beauty.

## Structure and Style

7. Focus on the musical devices.
   1. Work out the rhyme scheme. Is it is regular? The rhyme scheme is regular: ABAB CDEDCE, with a variation in line 2 (ABAB CDECED) and in lines 3-4 (ABAB CDECDE).
   2. As you can see, each stanza is made up of two parts: What are they? Each stanza is made of two parts: a **quatrain and a sestet**.
   3. Find the most significant examples of alliteration and assonance. Here are some examples of **alliteration**:...
8. Read the first stanza carefully.
1. Note down the metaphors used by the poet to address the urn; then point out the common ground of each metaphor.
   - unravish'd bride of quietness (line 1), foster-child of silence and slow time (line 2), Sylvan historian (line 3).
   - The first two metaphors belong to the semantic sphere of purity; the last one refers to a timeless tale better than poetry.

2. Say what kind of world is introduced through the poet's questions. The valleys of Arcady, that is, a Pastoral ideal world where gods and human beings live together, is introduced; the world of love (line 8) and that of music (line 10) are also present.

What is the key-word in the last six lines? What state of mind does it imply? 'Ecstasy' (line 10) is a key-word; in fact it implies a passage out of rational state, to a higher form of thought, which is the realm of imagination, through the world of sensation represented by nature, love and music. This world depends on a passage to the spiritual beauty, a much deeper experience of joy and suggests the sense of possible sublime that art can communicate.

9. The second stanza opens with a paradox. Identify it.
1. Explain how expectation and fulfilment are related. What theme is therefore introduced? The paradox is in lines 11-12. It introduces the theme that expectation is better than fulfilment, which is, for the poet, a betrayal of potential. The ideal for Keats is to be put before experience.
2. Who is the poet addressing in the remaining lines of the stanza? What do these figures symbolise? Why? The poet is addressing to the 'Fair youth' (line 15), who represents a song out of time, and the 'Bold Lover' (line 17), who stands for the eternal desire. These two characters point out the clash between reality and the Ideal.

10. Consider the third stanza.
1. Underline the repeated words and say what they refer to. 'Happy' and 'for ever' are repeated six times; they highlight the eternal positive character of the urn.
2. Lines 28-30 contain the climax of the whole ode: the description of human passion. Say how it contrasts with the eternal love of the "Bold Lover" and complete the sentences below:
   - The love on the Urn is happy, young and panting forever.
   - Human passion brings only sorrow and pain.

11. The world evoked by Keats in the first three stanzas is that of sensations.
1. Group some examples of words and phrases of the poem under these three headings: sight, hearing, touch.

### SENSE

**Sight**
- Sylvan, trees bare, (cannot) fade, leaf-fring'd legend, men, maidens, pipes, timbrels, trees, the girl, boughs, melodist, ...

**Hearing**
- Quietness, silence, sweet tales, pipes and timbrels, heard melodies, unheard, pipe, ditties of no tone, thy song, melodist, silence, melodies, ditties, songs

**Touch**
- unravished, burning forehead, parching tongue.

2. Which is the most privileged sense in each stanza?
First stanza: Sight
Second stanza: hearing
Third stanza: touch

12. While stanza 3 ends with a bitter reflection on the short-lived passions of human beings, stanza 4 introduces a note of sadness and desolation.
1. Underline all the words belonging to this semantic area. Sacrifice (line 31), emptied of this folk; pious morn (line 37), silent (line 39), not a soul to tell (line .39), desolate (line 40).
2. Some scenes described are really observed by the poet, others imagined. Circle the former and box the latter. What do these sentences stress?
Scenes really observed: a priest leading a heifer to sacrifice, and a procession of people.
Scenes imagined: the altar and a little, emptied town.

It is the passions of the poet and his imagination that seemed to Keats the source of any work of art; the work of art embodies these feelings in its intrinsic beauty and it can communicate these feelings and its sense of beauty to the artist and the poet.

13. The last stanza can be divided into two parts: the quatrain, which contains the poet's return from his journey of imagination to real life, and the sestet, which sums up the result of the poet's experience with an aesthetic consideration.
1. What has changed in the poet's attitude to the urn? The poet is now considering the urn as an object and not as a witness from the past; its beauty can help man to accept his difficult life.
2. The sestet starts with the contrast between the urn and mankind and ends with Keats's concept of art and imagination. Fill in the diagram below choosing from the list provided:

Imagination → work of art → eternity → beauty = truth / knowledge

14. Refer to the Romantic poets of the second generation, analyse the similarities and differences regarding their life, the importance given to Nature and Imagination, their language and themes. Student's writing activity.

SUPPLEMENTARY ACTIVITIES:

■ What does the urn's final message "beauty is truth, truth beauty" (line 49) mean?

1. Art is beautiful and true because it renders the essential elements of human experience
2. Art should have an aesthetic aim but also a moral aim, that is, teaching the truth
3. Art gives that condition of serenity and inner peace that is usually connected with the revelation of truth, in other words the contemplation of beauty can lead to the truth
   the contemplation of an art object leads you to intense personal reflection
4. Art is eternal → art is beauty → beauty is the only value immune to time: it must be truth: we decay / disappear: it is difficult to define as real / true something whose definition changes
5. Beauty is total acceptance of life: the pursuit and devotion to this beauty gives life its deepest meaning

BUT ART implies a LOSS:
   punctuation: the speaker in line 50 (“that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”) could be the poet commenting on the limited knowledge / viewpoint of the urn available to those who inhabit the unchanging, perfect world untouched by suffering and decay.

The poet can delude himself with the idea that truth is beauty (the speaker is the Urn), with the idea of the permanence of beauty, art, poetry and joy BUT according to the unavoidable laws of life [suffering] truth is sad and ugly.

2 The revaluation of ancient Greece is also present in the works of Ugo Foscolo (1778-1827); identify the texts where this theme appears and explain the value it acquires.
Sugestions
In the sonnet "A Zacinto" the world of ancient Greece becomes a metaphor for poetry; therefore poetry turns out to be the image of the universe and of mankind as a whole; it is also able to transcend the limits of space and time. Because of this, the classic image can be combined with the present and becomes an element belonging to the present. Italian Neoclassicism defines its own identity and peculiarity with this identification of ancient Greece with the universal meaning of poetry.

3 In the poem *Il Sabato del Villaggio* Leopardi tells his "garzoncello scherzoso" that Saturday is more beautiful than Sunday because real pleasure comes from expectation and not from fulfilment.

KEATS AND AESTHETICISM: cf.
1. emphasis on the contrast art-life
2. relish on sensation
3. ardour with which Keats pursued beauty

BUT Keats was not a mere aesthete: beauty is not an end in itself, his poetic creed has a moral basis.
Ode on Melancholy (1819)

1. No, no! go not to Lethe, neither twist
2. Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;
3. Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kissed
4. By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpina;
5. Make not your rosary of yew-berries,
6. Nor let the beetle nor the death-moth be
7. Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl
8. A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;
9. For shade to shade will come too drowsily,
10. And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.

11. But when the melancholy fit shall fall
12. Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
13. That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
14. And hides the green hill in an April shroud;
15. Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
16. Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,
17. Or on the wealth of globed peonies;
18. Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
19. Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,
20. And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

21. She dwells with Beauty -- Beauty that must die;
22. And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
23. Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
24. Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips;
25. Ay, in the very temple of delight
26. Veiled Melancholy has her sovran shrine.
27. Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
28. Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
29. His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
30. And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

11. Ma quando la morsa della malinconia sarà discesa
12. dal cielo, improvvisamente, come nube che piange
13. e nasconde la verde collina in un sudario d’Aprile,
14. e nutriti intensamente, intensamente dentro i suoi occhi senza pari.
15. tu tienile la mano e lascia che deliri,
16. o nella ricchezza dei globi delle peonie;
17. o nella ricchezza dei globi delle peonie;
18. o se la tua signora mostra una certa col
19. tu tienile la mano e lascia che deliri,
20. e nutriti intensamente, intensamente dentro i suoi occhi senza pari.

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Read the first stanza carefully and answer the following questions.

1. Who is speaking to whom? The poet is speaking to those people who look for Melancholy.
2. What general advice does the poet give his addressee? His addressee is asked not to look for Melancholy in the places which are commonly supposed to be her dwelling.
3. Which extreme measures in the quest after Melancholy have to be avoided and why? The oblivion of the river Lethe (line 1), wolf's-bane, a powerful narcotic (line 2), death (line 4) and the macabre death-moth (line 6) have to be avoided because they are linked to false Melancholy.
4. Why are all those measures courted by men? Because they are supposed to bring oblivion.
5. Is the addressee able to appreciate his sorrow? No, he is not since he is lulled into drowsiness (line 9).
6. What is 'the wakeful anguish of the soul' drowned by? It is drowned by the influence of all the previously Melancholy associations leading to oblivion.

Now read the second stanza and note down:

1. when "the Melancholy fit" falls: it falls suddenly from heaven (lines 11-12).
2. what Melancholy is compared to: it is compared to a weeping cloud (line 12) and to an April shower (line 14).
3. where the addressee has to 'glut' his sorrow: he has to glut his sorrow on beautiful natural things, like a morning rose (line 15), a shore rainbow (line 16) and peonies (line 17).
4. what the flowers stand for: they stand for the most available forms of beauty.
5. what else Keats offers as food for sorrow: the wealth of one's mistress "rich anger" (line 18).
6. whether true Melancholy involves a gradual evasion of its claims: no, it involves a sudden increase in consciousness (lines 11-20).

The second stanza. It is characterised by two antithetical semantic areas: Joy and Melancholy.
Rainbow || Meaning: (refined / momentary) Beauty, hope
Salt sandwave || Meaning: Energy, beauty
Globed peonies || Meaning: wealth / beauty in nature

**MELANCHOLY:**
Weeping cloud || Meaning: Rain which fosters the flowers which are themselves sorrowful (droop-headed)
April shroud || Meaning: April is both rainy and part of springtime, while shroud is an anticipation of death
Sorrow || Meaning: Melancholy

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**Read the poem till the end and complete the following sentences.**

1. "She" might be seen at first as an *imagined mistress* (lines 20-21)
2. Then "she" becomes the *goddess* of *Melancholy* (line 26).
3. Melancholy dwells close to *pleasure* (line 23) whose keenness turns into *pain* (line 23).
4. The sweetness of joy turns into *poison* (line 24) as soon as it is tasted.
5. This new sort of delight is in part a fusion of *joy* and *melancholy* (lines 25-26).
6. Only those who can appreciate the finest shades of *melancholy* can equally appreciate *joy* (lines 27-28).
7. The soul of man is similar to *clouds* which are hung as *trophies* in the shrine of melancholy (lines 29-30).

The poet points out the contrasting effect of Melancholy in line 24 again. He uses a particular image: “Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips”.

Complete the diagram below in order to explain its meaning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenor</th>
<th>Melancholy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Common Ground</td>
<td>They both give suffering and joy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehicle</td>
<td>The bee able to give both poison and honey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Adjective useful if you want to talk about the theme of transience:**

Adjectives: *temporary, impermanent, brief, ephemeral, fleeting, momentary, provisional, short-lived, transitory, transient, passing*

Nouns: *temporality, impermanence, brief duration, ephemeralness, fleetingness, transitoriness, transience, changeability, fickleness, frailty, mutability, precariousness, unpredictability*

**Beauty is transient. Also love and joy fade. Therefore enjoyment must be accompanied with Melancholy.**

*Beauty is lovely because it dies: impermanence is the essence of joy.*

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**Connection**

The theme of “Time” has been developed by *Shakespeare* in his *Sonnets*, too. Define the attitudes of the two poets towards this theme.

Suggestion: *They both realised that love and beauty were subject to time and decay.*

1. Melancholy is a fundamental Romantic theme. It may be linked both to physical and psychological loneliness and suffering; it links more closely than oblivion since it is strictly linked to joy. What other Romantic poets belonging both to English and Italian literature have made an extensive use of this theme? Answer this question referring to the texts you have analysed.

In Italian literature the Romantic poets who dealt with this topic were Ugo Foscolo and Giacomo Leopardi. Foscolo felt a sort of melancholy for the happy, light period of childhood and used the remembrance of glorious people belonging to the past in order to overcome the negativity of his age. Leopardi pointed the difference existing between infancy, the age of happiness and illusions, and maturity, a period in human life characterised by sadness and disillusionment. His melancholy was caused by nature which was indifferent to man's sufferings in "Dialogo di un Islandese"; by the regret for what never belonged to his life experience in "II Passero solitario"; by the longing for a love which was never satisfied in "A Silvia"; by a nostalgia for the past in "Le Ricordanze".

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In "Ode on Melancholy" Keats accepts the truth he sees: joy and pain are inseparable and to experience joy fully we must experience sadness or melancholy fully. This ode expresses Keats's view wholeheartedly since here he values intensity of emotion, intensity of thought, and intensity of experience implying that fulfilment comes from living and thinking passionately.

The poem has a logical structure or progression. Stanza I urges us not try to escape pain and not to look for Melancholy in the places which are commonly supposed to be her dwelling because they – Lethe, poisons, the
beetle or the death-moth are supposed to bring oblivion, while in moments of depression and melancholy man is more sensitive to beauty.

This is the reason why in stanza II Keats tells us to embrace the transient beauty and joy of nature and human experience even if they contain inevitably pain and death. In other words, the poet suggests the addressee 'glutting' his sorrow on beautiful natural things like a “morning rose”, “the rainbow of the salt sand-wave” or “globed peonies”. The “wealth” of these flowers links to Melancholy’s “rich” anger, while verbs like "Emprison" and the imagery of eating intently ("glut", "feed deep, deep") imply passionate involvement in experience and suggests that melancholy is incorporated into, becomes part of and nourishes the individual. In fact all these marvels last a short time: the rose is a "morning" rose, while the rainbow produced by the wave is so shortlived that can easily pass unnoticed. The theme of transience of joy, beauty as well as any experience acquires here more consistency.

In stanza III we have the conclusion: Melancholy dwells close to pleasure because fatally the sweetness of joy turns into poison as soon as it is tasted. So, in order to experience joy we must experience the sorrow that beauty dies, joy evaporates. Ours is a world of change, of flux: pure happiness does not exist. Melancholy has her shrine in the “temple of delight” precisely because melancholy and delight are inseparable since any form of pleasure is painful, it is an "aching pleasure" which is an effective and convincing oxymoron. The more intensely we feel happiness, the more subject we are to melancholy. We are asked to immerse ourselves in the multi-faceted process of life accepting the idea of experiencing every emotion fully, since life acquires real meaning only in this perspective.

But only those who are able to relish the finest joys can behold the "Veil'd melancholy". And only those who can appreciate the finest shades of melancholy can equally appreciate joy becoming in this way the "trophy" won by Melancholy.