

= Ode on Indolence =

The " Ode on Indolence " is one of five odes composed by English poet John Keats in the spring of 1819 . The others were " Ode on a Grecian Urn " , " Ode on Melancholy " , " Ode to a Nightingale " and " Ode to Psyche " . The poem describes the state of indolence , otherwise known as laziness , and was written during a time when he felt that he should devote his efforts to earning an income instead of composing poetry . After finishing the spring poems , Keats wrote in June 1819 that its composition brought him more pleasure than anything else he had written that year . Unlike the other odes he wrote that year , " Ode on Indolence " was not published until 1848 , 27 years after his death .

The poem is an example of Keats 's break from the structure of the classical form . It follows the poet 's contemplation of a morning spent in idleness . Three figures are presented ? Ambition , Love and Poesy ? dressed in " placid sandals " and " white robes " . The narrator examines each using a series of questions and statements on life and art . The poem concludes with the narrator giving up on having all three of the figures as part of his life . Some critics regard " Ode on Indolence " as inferior to the other four 1819 odes . Others suggest that the poem exemplifies a continuity of themes and imagery characteristic of his more widely read works , and provides valuable biographical insight into his poetic career .

= Background =

By the spring of 1819 , Keats had left his poorly paid position as a surgeon at Guy 's Hospital , Southwark , London , to devote himself to poetry . On 12 May 1819 , he abandoned this plan after receiving a request for financial assistance from his brother , George . Unable to help , Keats was torn by guilt and despair and sought projects more lucrative than poetry . It was under these circumstances that he wrote " Ode on Indolence " .

In a letter to his brother dated 19 March 1819 , Keats discussed indolence as a subject . He may have written the ode as early as March , but the themes and stanza forms suggest May or June 1819 ; when it is known he was working on " Ode on a Grecian Urn " , " Ode on Melancholy " , " Ode to a Nightingale " and " Ode to Psyche " . During this period , Keats 's friend Charles Armitage Brown transcribed copies of the spring odes and submitted them to publisher Richard Woodhouse . Keats wrote to his friend Sarah Jeffrey : " [T] he thing I have most enjoyed this year has been writing an ode to Indolence . " Despite this enjoyment , however , he was not entirely satisfied with " Ode on Indolence " , and it remained unpublished until 1848 .

Keats 's notes and papers do not reveal the precise dating of the 1819 odes . Literary scholars have proposed several different orders of composition , arguing that the poems form a sequence within their structures . In *The Consecrated Urn* , Bernard Blackstone observes that " Indolence " has been variously thought the first , second , and final of the five 1819 odes . Biographer Robert Gittings suggests " Ode on Indolence " was written on 4 May 1819 , based upon Keats 's report about the weather during the ode 's creation ; Douglas Bush insists it was written after " Nightingale " , " Grecian Urn " , and " Melancholy " . Based on his examination of the stanza forms , Keats biographer Andrew Motion thinks " Ode on Indolence " was written after " Ode to Psyche " and " Ode to a Nightingale " , although he admits there is no way to be precise about the dates . Nevertheless , he argues that " Ode on Indolence " was probably composed last .

= Structure =

" Ode on Indolence " relies on ten line stanzas with a rhyme scheme that begins with a Shakespearian quatrain (ABAB) and ends with a Miltonic sestet (CDECDE) . This pattern is used in " Ode on Melancholy " , " Ode to a Nightingale " and " Ode on a Grecian Urn " , which further unifies the poems in their structure in addition to their themes .

The poem contains a complicated use of assonance (the repetition of vowel sounds) , as evident in line 19 , " O why did ye not melt , and leave my sense " , where the pairs ye / leave and melt /

sense share vowel sounds . A more disorganized use of assonance appears in line 31 , " A third time pass 'd they by , and , passing , turn 'd " , in which the pairs third / turn 'd , time / by , and pass 'd / passing share vowel sounds . The first line exemplifies the poem 's consistent iambic pentameter scansion :

Keats occasionally inverts the accent of the first two syllables of each line or a set of syllables within the middle of a line . 2 @.@ 3 % of the internal syllables are inverted in the " Ode on Indolence " , whereas only 0 @.@ 4 % of the internal syllables of his other poems contain such inversions .

= = Poem = =

The poem relies on a first @-@ person narration style similar to " Ode to Psyche " . It begins with a classical scene from an urn in a similar manner to " Ode on a Grecian Urn " , but the scene in " Indolence " is allegorical . The opening describes three figures that operate as three fates :

One morn before me were three figures seen ,
With bowed necks , and joined hands , side @-@ faced ;
And one behind the other stepp 'd serene ,
In placid sandals , and in white robes graced ;
They pass 'd , like figures on a marble urn
When shifted round to see the other side ;
They came again , as , when the urn once more
Is shifted round , the first seen shades return ;
And they were strange to me , as may betide
With vases , to one deep in Phidian lore . (Lines 1 ? 10)

The figures remain mysterious as they circle around the narrator . Eventually they turn towards him and it is revealed that they are Ambition , Love , and Poesy , the themes of the poem :

A third time pass 'd they by , and , passing , turn 'd
Each one the face a moment whiles to me ;
Then faded , and to follow them I burn 'd
And ached for wings , because I knew the three :
The first was a fair Maid , and Love her name ;
The second was Ambition , pale of cheek ,
And ever watchful with fatigued eye ;
The last , whom I love more , the more of blame
Is heap 'd upon her , maiden most unmeek , ?
I knew to be my demon Poesy . (Lines 31 ? 40)

The poet wishes to be with the three figures , but he is unable to join them . The poem transitions into the narrator providing reasons why he would not need the three figures and does so with ambition and love , but he cannot find a reason to dismiss poesy :

They faded , and , forsooth ! I wanted wings :
O folly ! What is Love ? and where is it ?
And for that poor Ambition ? it springs
From a man 's little heart 's short fever @-@ fit ;
For Poesy ! ? no , ? she has not a joy , ?
At least for me , ? so sweet as drowsy noons ,
And evenings steep 'd in honied indolence ;
O , for an age so shelter 'd from annoy ,
That I may never know how change the moons ,
Or hear the voice of busy common @-@ sense ! (lines 41 ? 50)

Concluding the poem , the narrator argues that the figures should be treated as figures , and that he would not be misled by them :

So , ye three ghosts , adieu ! Ye cannot raise
My head cool @-@ bedded in the flowery grass ;
For I would not be dieted with praise ,

A pet @-@ lamb in a sentimental farce !
 Fade softly from my eyes , and be once more
 In masque @-@ like figures on the dreary urn ;
 Farewell ! I yet have visions for the night ,
 And for the day faint visions there is store ;
 Vanish , ye phantoms , from my idle spright ,
 Into the clouds , and never more return ! (lines 51 ? 60)

= = Themes = =

The poem centres on humanity and human nature . When the poet sees the figures , he wants to know their names and laments his ignorance . Eventually , he realizes that they are representative of Love , Ambition , and Poetry . While he longs , he fears they are out of reach and therefore tries to reject them . He argues that love is what he needs least and dismisses it by questioning what " love " actually means (" What is Love ? and where is it ? ") . He rejects ambition , but it requires more work (" And for that poor Ambition ? it springs / From a man 's little heart 's short fever @-@ fit ; ") . Unlike the personas of Love and Ambition , the narrator is unable to find a reason to banish Poesy (Poetry) , which reflects the poets ' inner conflict : should he abandon poetry to focus on a career in which he can earn a decent living ? Keats 's sought to write great poetry but feared his pursuit of literary prominence was based on a delusional view of his own merit as a poet . Further , he was incapable of completing his epic , " Hyperion " . As Walter Jackson Bate explains , to Keats " Neither a finished ' grand Poem ' nor even the semblance of a modest financial return seemed nearer . "

Keats realized that he could never have Love , could not fulfil his Ambition , and could not spend his time with Poesy . The conclusion of " Ode to Indolence " is a dismissal of both the images and his poetry as figures that would only mislead him . Even indolence itself seems unattainable ; Andrew Motion writes that the figures force Keats to regard indolence as " the privilege of the leisured class to which he did not belong . " If the poem is read as the final poem in the 1819 ode series , " Ode on Indolence " suggests that Keats is resigned to giving up his career as a poet because poetry cannot give him the immortality he wanted from it . Ironically , the poem provided Keats with such immortality . Besides the biographical component , the poem also describes Keats 's belief that his works should capture the beauty of art while acknowledging the harshness of life . In this way , the poems as a group capture Keats 's philosophy of negative capability , the concept of living with unreconciled contradictory views , by trying to reconcile Keats 's desire to write poetry and his inability to do so by abandoning poetry altogether and accepting life as it is .

Within the many poems that explore this idea ? among them Keats 's and the works by his contemporaries ? Keats begins by questioning suffering , breaks it down to its most basic elements of cause and effect , and draws conclusions about the world . His own process is filled with doubt , but his poems end with a hopeful message that the narrator (himself) is finally free of desires for Love , Ambition , and Poesy . The hope contained within " Ode on Indolence " is found within the vision he expresses in the last stanza : " I yet have visions for the night / And for the day faint visions there is store . " Consequently , in her analysis of The Odes of John Keats , Helen Vendler suggests that " Ode on Indolence " is a seminal poem constructed with themes and images that appeared more influential in his other , sometimes later , poems . The ode is an early and entirely original work that establishes the basis of Keats 's notion of soul making , a method by which the individual builds his or her soul through a form of education consisting of suffering and personal experience . This is a fundamental preoccupation of the Romantics , who believed the way to reconcile man and nature was through this soul development , education ? the combination of experience and contemplation ? and that only this process , not the rationality of the previous century , would bring about true Enlightenment .

The classical influences Keats invoked affected other Romantic poets , but his odes contain a higher degree of allusion than most of his contemporaries ' works . As for the main theme , indolence and poetry , the poem reflects the emotional state of being Keats describes in an early

1819 letter to his brother George :

[I] ndolent and supremely careless ... from my having slumbered till nearly eleven ... please has no show of enticement and pain no unbearable frown . Neither Poetry , nor Ambition , nor Love have any alertness of countenance as they pass by me : they seem rather like three figures on a greek vase ? a Man and two women ? whom no one but myself could distinguish in their disguisement .

Willard Spiegelman , in his study of Romantic poetry , suggests that the indolence of the poem arises from the narrator 's reluctance to apply himself to the labour associated with poetic creation . Some critics provide other explanations , and William Ober claims that Keats 's description of indolence may have arisen from the use of opium .

= = Critical response = =

Literary critics regard " Ode on Indolence " as inferior to Keats 's other 1819 odes . Walter Evert wrote that " it is unlikely that the ' Ode on Indolence ' has ever been anyone 's favorite poem , and it is certain that it was not Keats 's . Why he excluded it from the 1820 volume we do not know , but it is repetitious and declamatory and structurally infirm , and these would be reasons enough . " Bate indicated that the poem 's value is " primarily biographical and not poetic " .

" Ode on Indolence " is sometimes called upon as a point of comparison when discussing Keats 's other poems . Charles Wentworth Dilke observed that while the poem can be read as a supplemental text to assist the study of " Grecian Urn " , it remains a much inferior work . In 2000 , Thomas McFarland wrote in consideration of Dilke 's comparison : " Far more important than the similarity , which might seem to arise from the urns in Keats 's purview in both Ode on Indolence and Ode on a Grecian Urn ... is the enormous dissimilarity in the two poems . Ode on Indolence ... is a flaccid enterprise that hardly bears mention alongside that other achievement . "

Sidney Colvin , in his 1917 biography on Keats , grouped " Indolence " with the other 1819 odes in categorizing Keats 's " class of achievements " . In 1948 , Lord Gorell described the fifth stanza as , " lacking the magic of what the world agrees are the great Odes " but describes the language as " [d] elicate , charming even " . Later , in a 1968 biography of Keats , Gittings describes the importance of the poem : " The whole ode , in fact , has a borrowed air , and he acknowledged its lack of success by not printing it with the others ... Yet with its acceptance of the numb , dull and indolent mood as something creative , it set the scene for all the odes that followed . "

In 1973 , Stuart Sperry described it as " a rich and nourishing immersion in the rush of pure sensation and its flow of stirring shadows and ' dim dreams ' . In many ways the ode marks both a beginning and an end . It is both the feeblest and potentially the most ambitious of the sequence . Yet its failure , if we choose to consider it that , is more the result of deliberate disinclination than any inability of means . " Andrew Motion , in 1997 , argued , " Like ' Melancholy ' , the poem is too articulate for its own poetic good ... In two of his May odes , ' Melancholy ' and ' Indolence ' , Keats defined themes common to the whole group with such fierce candour that he restricted their imaginative power . His identity had prevailed . "