Ode on a Grecian Urn

First Stanza:

Line 1-2

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,

Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,

Imagine walking into a room of a museum and seeing a young man talking to an ancient pot. That's what entering this poem is like. The speaker stands before an ancient Grecian Urn and talks to the urn as if it were a beautiful woman. He calls her the "unravish'd bride of quietness," he probably just means a really old pot and quietness go hand in hand. It looks youthful and pure, even though it's really old but it's still in great condition and hasn't suffered any major damage.

The urn is called the "foster-child" of Silence and slow Time. The urn has been adopted by "Silence" and "slow Time,". The pot lived on to age in silence, outside of the vibrant culture in which it was created.

Line 3-4

Sylvan historian, who canst thus express A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:

The speaker has addressed the urn by a bunch of different names and titles. Sylvan" is a just a word derived from Latin that refers to woods or forests. The word "history" is derived from a Latin word for "story" or "tale". He describes Urn as a "Sylvan historian" that is a better storyteller than the poet. The urn tells stories using pictures, while the poet uses "rhymes." The tale told by the urn is "flowery" and "sweet,".

Line 5-7

What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape Of deities or mortals, or of both, In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?

Having established that the urn is a storyteller, now he's trying to figure what's going on in the carved pictures that encircle it. Now every sentence for the rest of the stanza is a question that

begins with "What,". What legend they depict and from where they come. He looks at a picture that seems to depict a group of men pursuing a group of women and wonders what their story could be. Who are these characters, the speaker is wondering. Are they gods ("deities") or just normal human beings ("mortals")?

The speaker is also wondering where the story takes place. With his knowledge of Ancient Greece, he throws out a couple of names as guesses: Tempe and "Arcady," or Arcadia. (A "dale" is just a valley.)

Line 8-10

What men or gods are these? what maidens loth? What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

He looks at a picture that seems to depict a group of men pursuing a group of women and wonders what their story could be. Who are these characters, the speaker is wondering. Here speaker repeats the question about "deities or mortals" in more causal language: are they "men or gods"?

The picture carved in the Urn telling us a story that speakers suggests by a series of questions: Who are these characters painted on the Urn? Who are these reluctant maidens? What is this mad pursuit? Why the struggle to escape? What is the explanation for the presence of musical instruments on the Urn? Why this mad ecstasy?

Second Stanza:

Lines 11-12

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;

In these lines, the speaker seems to have moved on to another of the pictures on the side of the urn. He says that the melodies you don't hear are "sweeter" than those you do. This claim is a paradox: The speaker is imagining, and he thinks this imaginary song inside his head is better than anything he has heard with his ears. In other words, he prefers to the world of fantasy to the physical world.

He tells the "soft pipes" to keep playing, even though he's the one who is listening the pipes play,

by imagining them. In this sense, it’s almost like he’s talking to himself. He is both musician and audience.

Lines 13-14

Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd, Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:

The speaker tells spiritual ear is "more endear’d," or cherished, than his flesh-and-blood ears. He directs the piper to play on “unheard”melodies because they are not for common man’s ear but for “ditties of no tone”.

Lines 15-16

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;

In these lines,the speaker looks at a young man playing a pipe, lying with his lover beneath a glade of trees. He treats the urn like a real place, and because this place will never change, it means that the guy under the tree will always be playing the same song, in the same pose forever!

The weather will always be nice and the trees will never be "bare," without leaves.

Line 17

Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,

Now he turns back to the first scene, the guys chasing the women, and he starts talking to one of the guys. He calls him "bold,". The speaker says you live on an urn, you’re just a picture, and you can never move or change but you’ll always feel just as strongly about her, and she’ll always be really beautiful. Not such a bad deal.

Line 18-20

Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;

She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,

For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

He tells the youth that, though he can never kiss his lover because he is frozen. Yet, he comforts the lover not to grieve because her beauty will never fade. The speaker feels happy because piper's songs and love of the boy and girl will be last forever. They are youthful figures, the speaker sees their preservation as beautiful but complicated. Though they cannot satisfy their lust, they will never lose the physical and youthful beauty that enabled it.

Third Stanza:

Lines 21-22

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;

The branches of the trees never lose their leaves because the world of the urn never changes. To bid "adieu" is to say "goodbye" in French, Fortunately for the tree branches, they never have to say goodbye to the Spring, which will never be replaced by summer in this world.

Lines 23-24

And, happy melodist, unwearied, For ever piping songs for ever new;

These lines make us think that the speaker is still talking about the second scene of the urn: the young musician playing the pipes under a tree.Now he calls him a "melodist." In line 24, the speaker says that the songs played by the musician are always fresh and new. Again, that's because the world of the urn never changes.

Line 25- 27

More happy love! more happy, happy love!

For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd, For ever panting, and for ever young;

He thinks the music and "love" go hand in hand, so more music means more love. The speaker seems to have returned to the "men or gods" chasing a bunch of women, are just about the catch the women, but they haven't yet, so they always have the big moment ahead of them. The speaker keeps using the words "for ever" to make the point that the people on the urn are frozen in time.

Line 26 refers to the bodies of the women, which are "warm and still to be enjoy'd."

Line 27 refers to both men and women, who are "panting" from their chase.

Lines 28-30

All breathing human passion far above, That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd, A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

The final three lines abandon happiness and portray real love as akin to an illness: human passion "leaves a heart high-sorrowful," sick with sweetness, feverish, and thirsty.

Keats says, love between man and women in real the world is imperfect, bringing pain and sorrow, and desire that can not fully quenched. The lovers come away with a "burning forehead, and a parching tongue".

Fourth Stanza:

Line 31-34

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?

To what green altar, O mysterious priest, Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies, And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?

Now the speaker is looking at the third scene on the urn, which depicts an animal for sacrifice. The speaker talks to the priest on the urn, about the depicted picture in which a mysterious priest leads a pretty cow to a green altar to sacrifice her. Its sides ("flanks") are dressed in a string or "garland" of flowers.

Lines 35-37

What little town by river or sea shore, Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel, Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

Keats inquires about these folks come from a little town on a river, seashore or mountain topped from a fortress. We can now piece together the whole third scene. There's a priest, a cow, a green altar, and a crowd of people, following behind. Everyone is outside, enjoying the weather and looking forward to the ritual. The town is "emptied" because it is a "pious" or holy morning.

Lines 38-40

And, little town, thy streets for evermore Will silent be; and not a soul to tell Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

The speaker talks to the town to inform wherever the town is, it will be forever empty , for all of its inhabitants are here participating in the festivities depicting on the Urn. Like other figures on the Urn, townspeople are frozen and never can escape or return to their homes.

Although the speaker knows that everyone is headed to a sacrifice, he doesn't know what the sacrifice is for, and he can never find out because there is "not a soul, to tell" the reason for the holy day.

Fifth Stanza:

Lines 41-45

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede Of marble men and maidens overwrought, With forest branches and the trodden weed;

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought As doth eternity: Cold pastoral!

Keats begins by addressing the Urn as an "Attic Shape" . The Urn is a beautiful one, depicting marble men and women , forest tree branches and weeds. As people look upon the scenes, they ponder it- trying so hard to grasp meaning that they exhaust themselves of thought. Keats calls the scene as " cold pastoral" because it is made of cold and unchanging marble.

Lines 46-48

When old age shall this generation waste, Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,

The speaker imagines that after everyone in his generation is dead, the urn will still be around.The problems or "woe" of the present generation will have been replaced by new problems. But the urn, like a good therapist and "a friend of man," won't be lacking in advice to give new generations. In fact, it has always given the same advice to everyone, throughout history.

Lines 49-50

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'--that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

It's all so simple! Beauty and truth are the same thing. The speaker thinks that we don't need truths that can be expressed in words. The experience of beauty is enough. In other words, do not try to look beyond the beauty of the Urn and its images, which are representations of the eternal, for no one, can see into eternity. The beauty itself is enough for a human; that is the only truth that a human can fully grasp.