**English Romantic Verse** One-Page Guides

**Poem: ‘Ode to a Grecian Urn’**

Poet: John Keats

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| Context (biographical, Romantic attitudes, social/historical etc) | Inspired by the Sosibos Urn as well as the Elgin marbles and other artefacts  The themes of immortality could reflect his experience with death and illness in his family. |
| A poem about… (Interpretations, key Romantic themes, nature, mortality) | Themes:  History, Mythology, Art, Music, Poetry, Love, Memory, Sublime, Truth, **Mortality**, **Time**, Nature  The key theme of the poem is **Mortality** as the urn lives in ‘slow time’ and it ‘shall remain’ |
| Speaker (who? talking to whom? attitude to subject- ironic, reverent etc) | The speaker is talking directly to the Urn and the people depicted on the urn such as the “Bold Lover”, “happy melodist”. |
| Form (sonnet, ballad, verse form, rhyme and rhythm) | The poem is written in Ode form  5 stanzas of 10 lines each  Each verse begins with an ABAB rhyme scheme and the last three lines have a variation of CDECDE – beginning of stanzas reflect a classical literature structure but the remaining lines challenge the classical structure – Ode therefore quite a maleable form  First lines are partly iambic (stress, unstress) and end with a spondee with a double stress on “slow time” – slows down the rhythm conforming to the theme of immortality and the frozen time of the Urn |
| Overall structure (shifts, changes, climax of narrative etc) | The poem is organized into 5 ten line stanzas.  Begins by admiring the urn’s eternal beauty as it is frozen in time.  Lots of questions are used throughout, especially at the end of the first stanza. However, the speaker will not receive any answer as the urn cannot reply.  The speaker seemingly addresses the characters on the urn.  Poem moves through phases – e.g. the excitement and passion of stanza three, the contemplative ending |
| Language (vocabulary - heightened or demotic; rhetorical features etc) | Rhetorical questions – the speaker questions mortality and immortality – “what men or gods are these?”   * “unravished” – furthers the idea of immortality and eternal beauty as she is unspoilt by time and age. Also has sexual overtones – idea that the urn is pure (which is therefore open to a feminist critique)   “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” – truth is associated with innocence and this can be recognised through the “unravish’d bride” and “Bold lover, never can thou kiss”.  “Beauty os truth, truth beauty” – The final lines of the poem, the urn talks to the speaker of the beauty of time and of the infinite, as the characters on the urn will never be together truly as their world is frozen forever. The quote itself is cyclical, suggesting the world of the urn being paused. |
| Sound effects (harsh and soft, onomatopoeia etc) | Lots of assonance throughout – “out of thought as doth eternity”, and sibilance “foster child of silence and slow time” – slows down lines, soft, whispering quality |
| Imagery (metaphor, simile, images etc) | “Foster child” – personification of urn seen as a child. It is so old its creator has died but it has remained immortal.  The urn is frozen in time – “cold pastoral” – which depicts a frozen idyllic paradise untouched by time. – “Arcady” represents the unattainable rustic paradise in literature.  Sacrificing of the cow – “who are these coming to the sacrifice? / To the Green Alter” – ‘green’ = life and vitality and ‘alter’ contrasts this with imagery of sacrificing a cow.  Lots of mythological imagery; “Sylvan Historian”, “spirit ditties”, “Tempe or the dales of Arcady”   * The people depicted have left the “peaceful citadel” empty and silent – this can have a slightly melancholic tone. |
| Patterns of language (semantic fields, repetitions, oppositions) | Myth/legend: ; “Sylvan Historian”, “spirit ditties”, “Tempe or the dales of Arcady” – sense of timelessness of the tales, don’t age.  Stanza 3: “happy”, “love” repeated frequently connoting strong excitement that the urn has given people over many years and the speaker’s passionate response in middle stanzas  Nature: “flowery-tale”, “leaf fring’d”, “fair youth, beneath the trees”, “happy, happy boughs!That cannot shed Your leaves”, “green alter”, “river or shore, Or mountain-built” – connotes a link between youth and immortality and nature, possibly a sense of immortality in nature and not mankind (compare to nightingale?) |
| Punctuation and grammar (sentence length, end-stopping, caesura, verb mood – imperative, declarative, interrogative, exclamatory) | Lots of end stopping with colons, semi-colons, question marks, exclamation marks, commas and full stops – slows down the pace of the time, imitating the frozen state of the poem. |
| Links to other poems | Other Keats Odes, especially Ode on a nightingale as it uses similar themes of mortality/immortality.  Nature poems. |