Romantic Poetry Notes

John Keats

**Background**

In his short life, John Keats wrote some of the most beautiful and enduring poems in the English language. Among his greatest achievements is his sequence of six lyric odes, written between March and September 1819—astonishingly, when Keats was only twenty-four years old. Keats’s poetic achievement is made all the more miraculous by the age at which it ended: He died barely a year after finishing the ode “To Autumn,” in February 1821.

Keats was born in1795 to a lower-middle-class family in London. When he was still young, he lost both his parents. His mother succumbed to tuberculosis, the disease that eventually killed Keats himself. When he was fifteen, Keats entered into a medical apprenticeship, and eventually he went to medical school. But by the time he turned twenty, he abandoned his medical training to devote himself wholly to poetry. He published his first book of poems in1817; they drew savage critical attacks from an influential magazine, and his second book attracted comparatively little notice when it appeared the next year. Keats’s brother Tom died of tuberculosis in December 1818, and Keats moved in with a friend in Hampstead.

In Hampstead, he fell in love with a young girl named Fanny Brawne. During this time, Keats began to experience the extraordinary creative inspiration that enabled him to write, at a frantic rate, all his best poems in the time before he died. His health and his finances declined sharply, and he set off for Italy in the summer of 1820, hoping the warmer climate might restore his health. He never returned home. His death brought to an untimely end one of the most extraordinary poetic careers of the nineteenth century—indeed, one of the most extraordinary poetic careers of all time. Keats never achieved widespread recognition for his work in his own life (his bitter request for his tombstone: “Here lies one whose name was writ on water”), but he was sustained by a deep inner confidence in his own ability. Shortly before his death, he remarked that he believed he would be among “the English poets” when he had died.

Keats was one of the most important figures of early nineteenth-century Romanticism, a movement that espoused the sanctity of emotion and imagination, and privileged the beauty of the natural world. Many of the ideas and themes evident in Keats’s great odes are quintessentially Romantic concerns: the beauty of nature, the relation between imagination and creativity, the response of the passions to beauty and suffering, and the transience of human life in time. The sumptuous sensory language in which the odes are written, their idealistic concern for beauty and truth, and their expressive agony in the face of death are all Romantic preoccupations—though at the same time, they are all uniquely Keats’s.

Taken together, the odes do not exactly tell a story—there is no unifying “plot” and no recurring characters—and there is little evidence that Keats intended them to stand together as a single work of art. Nevertheless, the extraordinary number of suggestive interrelations between them is impossible to ignore. The odes explore and develop the same themes, partake of many of the same approaches and images, and, ordered in a certain way, exhibit an unmistakable psychological development. This is not to say that the poems do not stand on their own—they do, magnificently; one of the greatest felicities of the sequence is that it can be entered at any point, viewed wholly or partially from any perspective, and still prove moving and rewarding to read. There has been a great deal of critical debate over how to treat the voices that speak the poems—are they meant to be read as though a single person speaks them all, or did Keats invent a different persona for each ode?

There is no right answer to the question, but it is possible that the question itself is wrong: The consciousness at work in each of the odes is unmistakably Keats’s own. Of course, the poems are not explicitly autobiographical (it is unlikely that all the events really *happened* to Keats), but given their sincerity and their shared frame of thematic reference, there is no reason to think that they do not come from the same part of Keats’s mind—that is to say, that they are not all told by the same part of Keats’s reflected self. In that sense, there is no harm in treating the odes a sequence of utterances told in the same voice.

**“When I Have Fears”**

**Summary**

When Keats experiences feelings of fear (1) that he may die before he has written the volumes of poetry that he is convinced he is capable of writing, (2) that he may never write a long metrical romance, fragments of which float through his mind, and (3) that he may never again see a certain woman and so never experience the raptures of passionate love — then he feels that he is alone in the world and that love and fame are worthless.

**Analysis**

In "When I Have Fears," Keats turns to the Shakespearean sonnet with its abab, cdcd, efef, gg rhyme scheme and its division into three quatrains and a concluding couplet. It was written after Keats made a close study of Shakespeare's songs and sonnets and, in its development, it imitates closely one of Shakespeare s own sonnet patterns. The three quatrains are subordinate clauses dependent on the word "when"; the concluding couplet is introduced by the word "then." The sonnet, like "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," is constructed with care. Like "Chapman's Homer," it is concerned with the subject of poetry, to which Keats adds another favorite theme, that of love.

The sonnet is distinguished by Keats' characteristic melodiousness and by his very distinctive style, which is marked by the presence of archaic words borrowed from the Elizabethan poets. The first line, "When I have fears that I may cease to be," appeals at once to the ear and is a compelling invitation to the reader to go on with the poem. "Before high-piled books, in charact'ry, / Hold like rich garners the full-ripen'd grain" contains two words, *charact'ry*and *garners*, that are quite remote from the kind of language recommended by Wordsworth in his famous preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*and quite remote from the language used by Keats in conversation with his friends.

"When I Have Fears" is a very personal confession of an emotion that intruded itself into the fabric of Keats' existence from at least 1816 on, the fear of an early death. The fact that both his parents were short-lived may account for the presence of this disturbing fear. In the poem, the existence of this fear annihilates both the poet's fame, which Keats ardently longed for, and the love that is so important in his poetry and in his life.

As it happened, Keats was cheated by death of enjoying the fame that his poetry eventually gained for him and of marrying Fanny Brawne, the woman he loved so passionately. This fact gives the poem a pathos that helps to single it out from among the more than sixty sonnets Keats wrote. The "fair creature of an hour" that Keats addresses in the poem was probably a beautiful woman Keats had seen in Vauxhall Gardens, an amusement park, in 1814. Keats makes her into an archetype of feminine loveliness, an embodiment of Venus, and she remained in his memory for several years; in 1818, he addressed to her the sonnet "To a Lady Seen for a Few Moments at Vauxhall." "When I Have Fears" was written the same year. One of his earliest poems, "Fill for Me a Brimming Bowl," written in 1814, also concerns this lovely lady. In the poem, he promises that "even so for ever shall she be / The Halo of my Memory."

**“Ode on a Grecian Urn”**

In the first stanza, the speaker stands before an ancient Grecian urn and addresses it. He is preoccupied with its depiction of pictures frozen in time. It is the “still unravish’d bride of quietness,” the “foster-child of silence and slow time.” He also describes the urn as a “historian” that can tell a story. He wonders about the figures on the side of the urn and asks 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: “What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?”

In the second stanza, the speaker looks at another picture on the urn, this time of a young man playing a pipe, lying with his lover beneath a glade of trees. The speaker says that the piper’s “unheard” melodies are sweeter than mortal melodies because they are unaffected by time. He tells the youth that, though he can never kiss his lover because he is frozen in time, he should not grieve, because her beauty will never fade. In the third stanza, he looks at the trees surrounding the lovers and feels happy that they will never shed their leaves. He is happy for the piper because his songs will be “for ever new,” and happy that the love of the boy and the girl will last forever, unlike mortal love, which lapses into “breathing human passion” and eventually vanishes, leaving behind only a “burning forehead, and a parching tongue.”

In the fourth stanza, the speaker examines another picture on the urn, this one of a group of villagers leading a heifer to be sacrificed. He wonders where they are going (“To what green altar, O mysterious priest...”) and from where they have come. He imagines their little town, empty of all its citizens, and tells it that its streets will “for evermore” be silent, for those who have left it, frozen on the urn, will never return. In the final stanza, the speaker again addresses the urn itself, saying that it, like Eternity, “doth tease us out of thought.” He thinks that when his generation is long dead, the urn will remain, telling future generations its enigmatic lesson: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.” The speaker says that that is the only thing the urn knows and the only thing it needs to know.

#### Form

“Ode on a Grecian Urn” follows the same ode-stanza structure as the “Ode on Melancholy,” though it varies more the rhyme scheme of the last three lines of each stanza. Each of the five stanzas in “Grecian Urn” is ten lines long, metered in a relatively precise iambic pentameter, and divided into a two part rhyme scheme, the last three lines of which are variable. The first seven lines of each stanza follow an ABABCDE rhyme scheme, but the second occurrences of the CDE sounds do not follow the same order. In stanza one, lines seven through ten are rhymed DCE; in stanza two, CED; in stanzas three and four, CDE; and in stanza five, DCE, just as in stanza one. As in other odes (especially “Autumn” and “Melancholy”), the two-part rhyme scheme (the first part made of AB rhymes, the second of CDE rhymes) creates the sense of a two-part thematic structure as well. The first four lines of each stanza roughly define the subject of the stanza, and the last six roughly explicate or develop it. (As in other odes, this is only a general rule, true of some stanzas more than others; stanzas such as the fifth do not connect rhyme scheme and thematic structure closely at all.)

#### Themes

If the “Ode to a Nightingale” portrays Keats’s speaker’s engagement with the fluid expressiveness of music, the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” portrays his attempt to engage with the static immobility of sculpture. The Grecian urn, passed down through countless centuries to the time of the speaker’s viewing, exists outside of time in the human sense—it does not age, it does not die, and indeed it is alien to all such concepts. In the speaker’s meditation, this creates an intriguing paradox for the human figures carved into the side of the urn: They are free from time, but they are simultaneously frozen in time. They do not have to confront aging and death (their love is “for ever young”), but neither can they have experience (the youth can never kiss the maiden; the figures in the procession can never return to their homes).

The speaker attempts three times to engage with scenes carved into the urn; each time he asks different questions of it. In the first stanza, he examines the picture of the “mad pursuit” and wonders what actual story lies behind the picture: “What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?” Of course, the urn can never tell him the whos, whats, whens, and wheres of the stories it depicts, and the speaker is forced to abandon this line of questioning.

In the second and third stanzas, he examines the picture of the piper playing to his lover beneath the trees. Here, the speaker tries to imagine what the experience of the figures on the urn must be like; he tries to identify with them. He is tempted by their escape from temporality and attracted to the eternal newness of the piper’s unheard song and the eternally unchanging beauty of his lover. He thinks that their love is “far above” all transient human passion, which, in its sexual expression, inevitably leads to an abatement of intensity—when passion is satisfied, all that remains is a wearied physicality: a sorrowful heart, a “burning forehead,” and a “parching tongue.” His recollection of these conditions seems to remind the speaker that he is inescapably subject to them, and he abandons his attempt to identify with the figures on the urn.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker attempts to think about the figures on the urn as though they *were* experiencing human time, imagining that their procession has an origin (the “little town”) and a destination (the “green altar”). But all he can think is that the town will forever be deserted: If these people have left their origin, they will never return to it. In this sense he confronts head-on the limits of static art; if it is impossible to learn from the urn the whos and wheres of the “real story” in the first stanza, it is impossible*ever* to know the origin and the destination of the figures on the urn in the fourth.

It is true that the speaker shows a certain kind of progress in his successive attempts to engage with the urn. His idle curiosity in the first attempt gives way to a more deeply felt identification in the second, and in the third, the speaker leaves his own concerns behind and thinks of the processional purely on its own terms, thinking of the “little town” with a real and generous feeling. But each attempt ultimately ends in failure. The third attempt fails simply because there is nothing more to say—once the speaker confronts the silence and eternal emptiness of the little town, he has reached the limit of static art; on this subject, at least, there is nothing more the urn can tell him.

In the final stanza, the speaker presents the conclusions drawn from his three attempts to engage with the urn. He is overwhelmed by its existence outside of temporal change, with its ability to “tease” him “out of thought / As doth eternity.” If human life is a succession of “hungry generations,” as the speaker suggests in “Nightingale,” the urn is a separate and self-contained world. It can be a “friend to man,” as the speaker says, but it cannot be mortal; the kind of aesthetic connection the speaker experiences with the urn is ultimately insufficient to human life.

The final two lines, in which the speaker imagines the urn speaking its message to mankind—”Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” have proved among the most difficult to interpret in the Keats canon. After the urn utters the enigmatic phrase “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” no one can say for sure who “speaks” the conclusion, “that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” It could be the speaker addressing the urn, and it could be the urn addressing mankind. If it is the speaker addressing the urn, then it would seem to indicate his awareness of its limitations: The urn may not need to know anything beyond the equation of beauty and truth, but the complications of human life make it impossible for such a simple and self-contained phrase to express sufficiently anything about necessary human knowledge. If it is the urn addressing mankind, then the phrase has rather the weight of an important lesson, as though *beyond* all the complications of human life, all human beings need to know on earth is that beauty and truth are one and the same. It is largely a matter of personal interpretation which reading to accept.