John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn:” Dissolving into the Moment

In "Ode on a Grecian Urn," John Keats indulges in the moment, and tries to hold onto that moment as long as he can before it slips through his fingers. By fastening on to the perfect beauty and electricity found in the images on a Grecian urn, Keats slips away from his dreary reality and into an ideal world. The frozen images on the urn transform into beautiful ideals charged with life and possibility when Keats dissolves into them, and his poem reveals the polarity between the cold depictions and the hidden vivacity and electricity inside them.

From the title, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," we can see the personification Keats has placed toward the urn, giving life to an otherwise cold object. Odes are typically dedicated to people, mainly because they use an exalted style and tend to be emotional. Keats' ode fits the guideline -- he uses lofty and elevated diction, and is certainly emotional -- yet his object's frozen characteristics create a contradicting element that Keats must overcome before his ode can exude the affection necessary. This is conquered by his dissolution into the beauty of the vase, and his emotional reaction to that beauty. By letting the sensational and cerebral aspects of the images on the urn overpower the physical and real boundaries, Keats transforms a dead object into an idea of frozen beauty suitable for an ode.
The first verse of the poem reveals Keats' initial interest in the urn, and his curiosity of the world in which the images live in. He treats the images as if they were keys to locked worlds, and he has already begun to forget his reality by imagining and wondering about the "reality" of the depiction.

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

(5-7)

The scene on the urn, despite its two-dimensionality, has become transformed into a real scene, only frozen in time. The urn depicts perfect beauty, in its violent and fleeting moments of life: "What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?" (9-10). By questioning and interacting with the urn, Keats displaces his reality to the imaginary world on the urn.

Once Keats has fallen out of his reality, and into the pictoral scene on the urn, his attention is brought to the ideals of beauty which can exist in art and not in actuality. This contrary phenomenon sparks the electricity and energy in the art that opposes its two-dimensional form and causes polarity. Keats delves further into his psyche by imagining the sounds of pipes (being played on the urn), and revels in the potential of perfect sounds, which could never be perfect if they were real: “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on ;”(11-12)

The depiction allows for potential beauty rather than actual beauty, and thus it can never be surpassed, nor have any blemishes. The potential tunes the pipes could play
remain unscathed since they never existed to begin with. Keats is attracted to this, and dissolves himself from a world of actual occurrences (reality), where nothing is perfect, to one where anything could exist, thus allowing for perfection.

The potential of perfection in the urn creates great intensity and electricity, particularly in the depiction of two lovers about to kiss. The anticipation of their actions creates an intense and suspenseful emotional response in both the reader and Keats, creating tension in the poem and the urn: “Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave / Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare; / Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss, (15-17). The electricity between the two lovers is exaggerated in their unresolved actions, and the potential, unsatisfied energy remains concentrated. This energy due to the tension between the two lovers creates a great emotional response in Keats, and the urn becomes alive despite its static quality.

By the third verse, Keats is intoxicated with the perfection, intensity and beauty found in the images on the urn, and has completely dissolved from his own reality. He becomes overwhelmed by the frozen potential of perfection and beauty, and yearns for the beauty and love in the scene on the urn, which unlike reality, has not, nor will ever extinguish it's youth and vivacity, but rather continue forever: “More happy love! more happy, happy love! / For ever warm and still to be enjoyed, / For ever panting, and for ever young; (25-27). His words reveal an overflowing of sensation, and his use of exclamation points shows his excitement as he is enraptured by the images on the urn. The quality of being frozen in time in a perfect moment perpetuates the energy and excitement on the urn. At this point in the poem, Keats has completely entered into the world of the image, and is saturated with sensations and perceptions of beauty.
Keats cannot maintain his anticipation, and eventually tires: "All breathing human
passion far above, / That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed, / A burning forehead,
and a parching tongue," (28-30). Here we see his intoxication subside, and he is
somewhat hung-over from his exhausting emotional outburst. Keats' distance from the
image grows, as he realizes the tragedy of potential beauty, and the perfection of art:
“And, little town, thy streets for evermore; / Will silent be; and not a soul to tell / ;Why
thou art desolate, can e'er return.(38-40). This let-down, and sunken feeling emoted from
the poem shows Keats' return to reality. He no longer wishes to live in the world of the
urn, and understands that despite its beauty, it is dead and empty. Without his attachment
to the image on the urn, the once alive object returns to its former coldness, yet the
eternal beauty remains: “

. . . Cold Pastoral!

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,

Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"--that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to (45-50)

The urn returns to its original state, and the picture is no longer alive, but a "cold
pastoral." Keats is resolved to admire the beauty depicted on the urn from a distance, as
he understands that such perfection can only exist in the mind. As the urn returns to its
deadened state, Keats likewise transforms back to a less emotional and sensational state
of mind. He returns to his reality, and is no longer dissolved to the world of beauty on
the urn. Keats, looking at the Grecian urn, craves to escape from himself and delve into
the scene on the urn. He grasps onto images of beauty and holds onto the moment,
slipping into a world of eternal beauty. This reveals the author's ache for the eternity of a
moment, and his attempt to dissolve himself into that moment, yet it is impossible to
reach such a conclusion, and one can only pine for such idealism.
Work Cited