Ode on a Grecian Urn
by John Keats (1820)

• British Romantic Poet
• Part of the Fab Five: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lord Byron, Shelley, Keats
• Romantic tradition: love of classical forms, elevating the common man (very influenced by the French Revolution), anti-establishment, highly philosophical by nature, considered quite avant-garde

*Composed after viewing the Elgin Marbles on exhibition at the British Museum in London. This is a picture of the one he supposedly reflected on.
A variety of paradoxes that compare the urn’s art form and the poet’s own art. The speaker is just an observer—periodically speaks to the urn and also to the reader.

- works of art and real life
- truth and beauty
- frozen images and dynamic emotions
- mortality and immortality
- the transient/human and the eternal/unchangeable
- ancient/classical Greece and contemporary society
- the art of poetry and the art of stonework and painting, etc.
Thou still unravished bride of quietness,  
Thou foster child of silence and slow time,  
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express

A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:

What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape

Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?

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

Rhyme scheme: ababcedcedce
Meter: Iambic pentameter

Caesuras? Enjambment? Note the hard stop with colons and question marks.

What consonant sounds are repeated both alliteratively and as consonance?
Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.

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,
Though winning near the goal—-yet, do not grieve;

She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss
Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

What are the “heard melodies”? The sweeter “unheard” melodies? Why are they sweeter?

Who has the sensual ear?

Who is the “Fair youth” and the “Bold Lover”?

The young man will always be leaning in longing for a kiss, but will never attain “bliss.” He will never have her—never consummate their love, YET she will never grow old and unattractive and your love will always be the young love—undefiled by life and hardship. Is the speaker envious or is he being sarcastic? Can you make a case for both?
Stanza 3

Ok, this is where the tone seems to either be mocking...or tragically envious...Make a case for either.

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unweari-ed,
Forever piping songs forever new;

More happy love! more happy, happy love!
Forever warm and still to be enjoyed,
Forever panting, and forever young;

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

How does the repetition used in this stanza affect your reading of it?

*continued use of caesuras and line enjambment.
*Consonance: “t” “p” “d” this is different how? and why? To what effect?

Seriously! This guy has had some bad love experiences.

Rhyme scheme: ababcddecde
Meter: Iambic pentameter

Heat--passion--leaves humans burning and thirsty for more, but never satisfied. Could he be envying the lovers on the urn?
Stanza 4

A switch in characters...religious/pagan rituals

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 dressed?

What little town by river or sea shore,

Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,

Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

And, little town, thy streets for evermore

Will silent be; and not a soul to tell

Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

*continued use of caesuras and line enjambment.
*Consonance: “S” much softer sound. Some “T” as well. To what effect?
Assonance: “or” sound

Town will always be emptied--no one there ever--all at the pagan ritual.

Rhyme scheme: ababcdecde
Meter: Iambic pentameter

Is there a shift of tone yet?
Stanza 5

And back to talking to the urn!

O **Attic** shape! Fair **attitude**! with **brede**

Of **marble** men and **maidens overwrought**, **attic**

**With** forest **branches** and the trodden **weed**;

notice the commas offsetting "silent form"

Thou, **silent form**, dost **tease** us out of thought

As doth eternity. **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 know.

**Rhyme scheme: ababcededce**

**Meter: Iambic pentameter**

*continued use of caesuras and line enjambment.*

*Consonance: “T” and “d” To what effect? Assonance:*

Who is"ye"? This is one of the most debated lines in poetry...is the speaker being sarcastic? Is the statement true for the urn? For man?