English & Cultural Studies 1GO3 (Winter Term, 2026): Study Notes

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John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and “Ode to a Nightingale”

We took up both of these Odes but for the purposes of these Study Notes let me concentrate on "Ode to a Nightingale." My object here is to model for you how to read the odes carefully. You are now well into the course; you've had a good opportunity to read poetry and consider it in the light of the lectures, tutorials, and Study Notes. Once you've had a chance to consider my remarks here, turn to "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and test out an analogous reading strategy for yourself.

As you know, every text has a context, many contexts, and that includes the already existing *form* that the poet inherits from the history of literature and then chooses to use. The choice of form matters hugely in literature because it isn't a "box" into which a poet puts a certain meaning. Form is the way in which the poet gives meaning a shape; it is the primary means by which meaning is created and unfolded in a poem. Now, each inherited form makes its own demands on the poet, challenging the poet in unique ways. You can see an analogy in popular music. A musician must decide what form or hybrid of forms they will adopt. That choice will mean everything for how the lyrics work, how they will be received and understood and enjoyed. The choices are endless but every choice matters: Jamaican dance hall (a favourite of mine), new country, hip-hop, lounge-music, ambient, K-pop , etc.. As I said in class, during his short and intensely compressed lifetime, Keats was possessed by a wildly experimental spirit, trying out many different forms of poetry, testing each form for their respective strengths, weaknesses, and creative possibilities. During a short burst of enormous creativity in 1819, Keats wrote his most important *odes*, including the two odes we looked at in class. These odes became some of the most significant poems ever written in the English language, although of course Keats, who died penniless, a young man far from home, a child of war, could not have known anything about the splendid and still unfolding life that his poems would come to have.

But here's the odd thing about his decision to sink some of his best creative energies into the form of an ode. By 1819, the ode was an almost completely exhausted or depleted form. In Keats's day, odes were written mostly as a form associated with mockery. Some serious odes were still being written, but mostly they were heard and read as over-wrought, puffed up kinds of poems that a poet would only adopt then to poke fun at people and poetry--perhaps a bit like Stephen Colbert did several years ago with *The Colbert Report*, which, as you know, adopted the form of a conservative political opinion show precisely to mock its emptiness and depletion. So when Keats adopts the form of the ode, not to parody it or join the fun with which it had come to associated but to put it to new kinds of serious-minded labour, he has his work cut out for him. He must find a way to breathe new life into the form of the ode. There is an admirable fearlessness about Keats that helped fuel his insatiable curiosity about life and about the role of the imagination and poetry *in* life. Indeed, if there is a common theme joining "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "Ode to a Nightingale," it is an exploration of how poetry responds to the complexities of life and how, in responding to life, both life and poetry undergo remarkable transformations. Your task as a reader is then to return to the poems and to test that hypothesis: how do the two poems *differently* embody this theme. In what ways does both life and poetry undergo a transformation *in* the poems and *because* of what happens in the poems? Working out answers to that question will go a long way towards consolidating your understanding of the poems for this course.

Keats's decision to put the ancient form of the "Ode" to new uses, making and unmaking a long tradition of poetry

To be sure, the ode was a form of poetry that had in previous centuries, going all the way back to ancient Greece, been highly esteemed. Odes share certain common characteristics or conventions. These include:

--poems written in a highly stylized language, i.e., they are conspicuously formal, embellished, mannered, stately, and elaborate. Like the urn that Keats imagines in the ode that he wrote "on" it. The tone and language of the ode is *elevated*, i.e., it is language that says, "this is serious-minded stuff," "these are big questions being considered here." "Overwrought" is the word that Keats might use (look back at the poems and suss out where, exactly, Keats uses that mouth-filling word and why he uses it precisely *there*). And for a long time writes and readers were perfectly happy with "overwrought." It was taken to be a sign of the learnedness of the poet, and a sign too that the poet had the time and resources to layer his or her language. These are poems that brim with allusions or references to classical literature and myths. In the century before Keats, i.e., the 18th century, so much poetry and painting and architecture oriented itself towards the culture of ancient Greece, or what people imagined was the culture of ancient Greece, that the age would come to be known as "neo-classicism," the new revival of classicism. Keats doesn't altogether abandon this element of the ode; indeed, part of him is attracted to it, attracted to the *gravitas* or serious-mindedness that comes with the stately language of the ode. But he will use that stately formality in a certain way: he plays the dynamic motion of his speakers' minds *against* that stateliness, the better to make its motion and its transformations more legible. In their day, odes were known for being impressively static, like elaborate and complicated "paintings" of a scene; Keats wants to make them move. He wants to capture thinking and feeling in motion, what it means to shuttle between what the mind knows and the heart desires.

--poems that are intricately and strictly organized. They are written in highly regular stanzas and are paced by analogously intricate rhyme schemes. (Take two stanzas from one of Keats's *Odes* and mark up the rhyme scheme the way that I did in the Study Notes for "The Wall.")

--poems written about and addressed *to* significant themes and big ideas. Before Keats's day, odes were reserved for addresses to only the most serious topics and the most powerful people. Keats returns his odes to that status. But he does so in his own way, allowing us to overhear the passionate and thoughtful and shifting world *inside* his speakers' minds. No longer is the ode a poem that speaks dispassionately about its theme, no longer a stately form with a stately voice. Now we have a voice that is by turns quizzical, sorrowful, evasive, joyful, forgiving, calm . . . among many other things. The form of the poem is still highly intricate and organized; but the voice doesn't match that high degree of organization or formality. Something new is being heard here, what Keats's called "the true voice of feeling." You and I take for granted that poetry is always about "the true voice of feeling." But that particular idea about how poetry sounds and works is a relatively recent phenomenon, and was an idea experimented with and invented by Keats's generation and the generation that directly preceded him, the generation of William Blake. If you go back farther, back to the early part of the 18th century, you

would have been laughed at for suggesting that poetry's task was to give voice to "the true voice of feeling." Other kinds of voices, less emotional and more formal, were much more valued in poems.

--poems that are addresses, i.e., they are gestures of acknowledgement and often praise, a kind of dedication *to* something or someone of importance, or of importance at least to the poet. The addressee, the person or idea to whom the ode is addressed, stirs something profound in the poet's imagination. When Keats addresses a Grecian urn he is probably on safe ground. But an ode addressed to a nightingale, that's something else again. That's risky because it asks his readers to take a common English bird (that has a truly complex song) with enormous seriousness. Keats's task is to write a poem that justifies the choice of his addressee.

In odes, an address often comes in the form of an *apostrophe*, i.e., a move in a poem or a *poetic device* in which the speaker "speaks" directly to someone, perhaps now dead, or to an inanimate object. An *apostrophe* has a curious effect in a poem: it momentarily endows the addressee with life because it assumes in that instant that the addressee can "hear" the address and might even respond. Many *apostrophes* make their presence known by beginning with the single syllable sound, "O!." As an exclamatory sound, the "O!" registers the depth of the speaker's feeling, expresses it, gives it a place to be heard. It wakes language up, readies it for the address.

As a form of poetry, the ode has a wonderful history. But things change. And with the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the wars in which Keats grew up, as I said earlier, the ode felt stuffy, old-fashioned, and hollowed out. Such grand gestures now felt over-done. To write a serious ode in 1819 would be like putting on a top hat today. Once upon a time, top hats were ubiquitous, but if you wore one today in public you'd look like you were dressing up for a costume party. Most of the odes that were being published when Keats starting writing poetry were in fact *parodies* of odes, written in a mocking way, satirizing the subject matter and mocking the form itself. The age was a depleted one. The war had totally exhausted the country's resources, its materials, peoples, and spirit. It was, after all, the first "total war," the first war in European history in which the object was the annihilation of the enemy rather than victory in battle, the first war in Europe in which all of the combatant country's resources were marshalled for the war effort. After it was over, even the inherited forms of literature felt emptied of purpose. It gets worse. With the end of the wars came not radical transformation, as many young people in Britain had certainly hoped would be the case, given the extraordinary costs of the wars, but quite the opposite. By 1819 it was obvious that Britain was facing a period of intense conservative reaction. For example, the army that had once fought in Europe now was tasked with firing on British citizens protesting food shortages in a crippled economy. And as always, it is young men and women who disproportionately bore the brunt of a nation's stagnation and exhaustion. At its heart, the monarchy too was despoiled: the Prince Regent had taken over as the sovereign because King George III had been deemed to be mentally incompetent to be King. But the Prince Regent was himself a buffoonish character, a wasteful idiot who lived an ostentatious and lavish life entirely isolated from Britain as it actually was. He was a gold-toilet kind of guy. Peering into this world, people like Keats and Blake could only feel that the country was sick. Keats tries to find his way in a very run-down place that offered few prospects. He had a very good education—but one that was in large part self-taught—but the question was where was he going to put it all to use? His often anxious struggle to become a poet

and find an audience felt like the struggle of lots of other youth trying to secure a flourishing place for themselves. The great 20th-century Irish poet, Yeats, once famously said that Keats was like a little boy with his face pressed up against the window of a cake-shop. I'm not convinced that that characterization is fair: Keats was no boy when it came to the craft of poetry, but an extraordinarily accomplished creator who happened to be very young. But Yeats image does capture the way in which Keats was always an outsider, always looking into the centre from the periphery. His poems often capture the spirit of a character who longs to be seen and heard but who also realizes that from the margins of the culture there are important things to think and feel. Precisely because he is far from the centres of power, far from the established literary, cultural, and political elites, he has room to manoeuvre and space to imagine.

Keats's "negative capability"

What is Keats's response to this unpromising and constricting environment? He insists on creating poems that embody what he calls the spirit of "negative capability." In a letter written to his beloved brothers in 1818, Keats says that now more than ever he would like to be a man "*capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason*." (These are words well worth remembering and being in a position to explain: they may come in handy again in this course.) Consider carefully what Keats is saying here: he affirms the capacity to dwell in the midst of uncertainty and thus to ward off the desire to know things fully, completely, quickly, or dogmatically. Do you see the fearlessness of this invitation? --Living in a deeply uncertain age, and deeply uncertain about his own future, he nevertheless calls for embracing and sheltering a place for uncertainty, or at least for a kind of uncertainty. He doesn't want to be an impoverished poet with no real audience; that kind of uncertainty is totally unpalatable. But there is another kind of uncertainty, one that offers freedom from fixed ideas and explanations that claim to be complete and final. Writing from the margins played a big role in developing this "negative capability." Keats embraces a willingness and a poetic practice that affirms a much more forgiving way of being in an unforgiving world, one more hospitable to not having all the answers. That's hard to do and to be. But not impossible. Keats calls for a certain patience with the world, and for a life that learns to thrive, to *be* (hence his phrase *being in*) in the midst of unknowns. Poetry can do that. He writes poetry in part to think openly and to practice thinking, demonstrating to others and to himself what can come from having the courage to dwell amid uncertainty. And not only to dwell amid uncertainty. Writing poetry is also about discovering and creating forms of *pleasure* in that uncertainty, i.e., to be a *joyful* thinker, taking pleasure in the powers of language at work with life. Facts and reasons remain important, to be sure. But Keats reminds us that there are fruitful things to be found in embracing all those things about life that remain deeply important but not, strictly speaking, "facts." Love, friendship, a sense of your own mortality, the fragile yet profoundly moving powers of beauty, sorrow, loss, and longing, the unfathomable depths of the English language, the voluptuous pleasures to be had by observing the natural world: these are some of the things Keats explores precisely because they aren't easily measured by "facts and reasons" and yet remain meaningful and stimulating. Keats's poems, including his odes, are poems that capture the spirit of "negative capability." To be more precise, they capture what a mind looks, sounds, and feels like as it

struggles between the need for certainty, which under particular circumstances can feel and be real enough, and an openness to dwell in uncertainty, which can also make a claim on us and in life.

Keats writes his odes, adopting and modifying all of conventions I've just described. But he does something new too. Although the form is quite rigid, Keats creates speakers whose minds are actively in motion. He plays the voice and feelings of a dynamic, changeful speaker *against* the rigid form, thereby throwing the liveliness of the speaker's voice into sharper relief. Here's a useful analogy, and one that Keats would appreciate it, since he evokes it in both of the poems we consider: life needs death to be life. There can be no life without death, without the possibility of death. A life without the prospect of death, without loss and longing, without pleasure and pain, without thought and feeling, would after all be no life at all. (Is that what "the woman" senses is so ominous about "Eden" in Donald Justice's "The Wall"?) Death and mortality frames life, makes life, in all its complexities, all its joys and sorrows, *lively*. Without the frame, we do not have a clear sense of what is being framed. That's why the immortal life of the gods or of those figures on the surface of the Grecian Urn would be so empty, if not terrifyingly boring. So Keats uses the static form of the ode to throw into the sharpest possible relief the liveliness of his speakers. The poems trace the speaker's subtle movements of thinking and feeling as they engage an enormous question or problem. That's what makes them *mortal.* The key to understanding the poems and to writing about them well is to be able to trace those movements, pointing to where the speaker shifts from position to position, the moments when the speaker changes and why. As a mortal creature, that is the speakers' prerogative. And it isn't only the speaker who changes. The urn and the nightingale also change, depending on how the speaker thinks and feels about them. As you are reading the poems, mark how and when and why those changes happen. The urn changes the speaker and the speaker changes the urn. --Same thing with the nightingale.

For a lovely recording of the unique song of a nightingale, see:

Listening to the complex patterns of the song, which has its own repetitions and pacings, including moments to take a breath, perhaps like breaks between stanzas, you can't help but think that the form of Keats's own poem in some way mimics this song. And yet, and yet . . . this is a poem, an ode, an address in language *to* the bird. And so it is inevitably a poetic evocation of the bird and its song, not the bird itself or its song. (Think of a the moment in Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck" in which her speaker puzzles this question: a part of her wants to get past the stories and myths of the wreck to the wreck itself; and yet, it's not clear from the poem that that jump out of language is possible or desirable.) When Keats writes a poem about and to a nightingale, he inevitably conjures up some of the important ways that nightingales have been taken up in myth and story before him—not "real" nightingales, but the nightingales that live in literature long before he wrote his poem. You can't in fact write a poem about a nightingale and not find yourself haunted by other nightingales in previous poems, myths, and stories. Those nightingales possess a "life" too, for they form part of the long and complex "life" of the literary culture that meant so much to Keats, as indeed it does to any practicing poet. Chief among those nightingale stories is the ancient Greek myth of Philomena, who was sexually assaulted by her brother-in-law. He cut out his sister-in-law's tongue to keep her silent. She and her sister exacted their revenge, to be sure, but Philomena nevertheless feared for her life, pleading with the gods to keep her safe. They did so by transforming her into a nightingale. Lots to consider here. In what ways does

that haunting myth of violence, transformation, and complex escape inform Keats's poem? A "real" bird undoubtedly activated Keats's imagination in the spring of 1819; but so did vividly realized nightingales that lived in literature before Keats's time, including this Greek myth. Keats's speaker is never far from realizing that no matter how "real" a "real" flesh-and-blood nightingale is, it will always be filtered through his imagination, always recreated in language and imagined using the deep and rich resources of the English language. The Ode is proof of that. Consider the lovely English garden to which the speaker of "Ode to a Nightingale" returns at a key moment in the poem. (Why key? What has just happened that leads to the speaker to abruptly finding himself there in that garden, in the dark? He's been back on earth before, but now the planet feels very differently. How so? Why is there that difference? How does Keats's poem mark that difference, making it legible to you as the reader?) Keats's language is remarkable here because it is relatively unadorned—i.e., more straightforwardly descriptive, sometimes reducing itself down to a list of the names of the flora and fauna around him. Compare that simplicity of description to the overwrought fairy-world in which he had momentarily transported himself only a moment before. The generation of poets before Keats, the generation to which William Blake belonged, introduced that kind of poetry to British audiences for the first time: what if we wrote more straightforwardly, what if we tried to capture the sights and sounds of the natural world in a simpler way, they asked? Up until the end of the 18th century, British poets describing the natural world only wanted to describe it the way they thought ancient Greek writers might describe it, i.e., as a world haunted by gods and goddesses, nymphs and other spirits of the place. The natural world mattered mostly because of the cultured, human imprint upon it. Describing and experiencing the natural world in this way gave a scene a certain seriousness or gravity. Since ancient Greek civilization was thought to be the high-point of human development, and the original source for all poetry, it made sense to write in ways that made sure to pay homage to Greece. But by the end of the 18th century, men and women of Blake's generation were experimenting with new ways of describing the natural world, trying, as it were, to imagine that world unplugged. Keats's inherits that spirit and adapts it. He's attracted to a language that captures the sheer sensuousness of enjoying the natural world, to be sure, but he loves the rich history of poetry and isn't willing to abandon it altogether. Consider the English garden in his poem. After all, as relatively unadorned as it is, it isn't a photograph of the garden, so to speak, but happily remains a creation of the poet's language and imagination rather than only his perception. He senses the garden but what he does with it, using his imagination, is not the same thing as mere sensation; it is after all the garden recreated in Keats's carefully crafted verses. Consider how the speaker cannot see a single thing that he describes in the garden. That's a super important detail in the poem that is easy to miss but freighted with significance. Poems often work that way. In the dark, he must *imagine* what creatures and flowers are all around him. He must conjure the sights and sounds and scents of the garden using the powers of his imagination and the resources of the language. Even the simplest English garden is shaped by the poet's imagination. That's the price of getting into a poem in the first place.

Take, then, "Ode To a Nightingale." Here we have a poem in 8 highly regular stanzas—3 more stanzas that "Ode on a Grecian Urn," suggesting that in the Nightingale poem the speaker encounters more problems, needs more space, more room ("stanza" means "little room") to think and feel their way to the strangely open-ended conclusion. Each stanza accomplishes a certain amount of "work," as it were. Each marks a moment in the speaker's ongoing journey of exploration. Each stanza a kind of snap-shot

of the speaker's shifting relationship with the nightingale and with the different thoughts and feelings that that invisible bird deeply evokes in him. So your task is to ask yourself, what frame of mind is the speaker in, say, the first stanza? And where is the speaker in the fourth stanza? What is happening, *what has the poem made happen*, so that the speaker has moved from one state of mind, one understanding and feeling in the presence of the nightingale's song, to another?

How "Ode to a Nightingale is structured: 8 stanzas, each with a similar rhyme scheme, but several turns

"Ode to a Nightingale" may be in 8 stanzas but if you are attending closely to the speaker's journey you will notice that it falls into three parts. In other words, the poem takes two significant *turns*.

1) First turn: The lead up to this turn is complex, as you might expect. Poems must prepare the grounds for their turns, just as they must prepare for their own conclusions, their *closure*. In the third stanza, the word *fade*, used at the end of the second stanza, seems to resonate sadly in the speaker's mind. At first, the word describes how the nightingale disappears into the "forest dim." The bird "fade[s] away into the forest dim," he says. But the word, "fade," sticks in the speaker's mind. The fact that the bird fades away reminds him that he too is fading away, but in the worst possible way: not freely flying into the forest like the bird but fading in the sense of dying. And so the third stanza begins with the feeling of what it means for the speaker not the bird to fade away, what it means to live in a world of fading away, a world ""where men sit and hear each other groan," a world in which "youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies." (That's a reference to Keats's beloved brother, Tom, who died of tuberculosis, "the wasting disease," as Keats would only a few years later: he knew that he would become this "youth" robbed of his youth.) The speaker suddenly finds himself not affirming the beautiful, unearthly, spontaneous, and untroubled song of the bird but instead contrasting that bird's life to the world in which human beings live and die, a world where "but to think is to be full of sorrow," i.e., a world in which even the act of thinking brings deep, aching sadness. (Contrast that sadness with the aching heart we hear at the start of the poem. What is the difference?) Such a dark death-world is very difficult to contemplate. And so the speaker stops the poem here and starts again, as if having touched a live wire and pulling his hand away suddenly from the shock. The opening lines of the next stanza, stanza four, is a double exclamation, "Away! Away!," as if through the sheer force of his exciting declaration, "Let's get the hell outa here," as it were, he could escape. Finding himself having fallen into the deepest depths triggers a corresponding wish to be with the nightingale. So the poem *turns* here: in the blank space between stanza 3 and stanza 4 we see the speaker pushing off from one world towards another . . or what feels like a pushing off or what the speaker *says*, as much to convince himself as us, is pushing off. As the poet acknowledges at the end of the poem, poets can "cheat" themselves, i.e., use poetry to convince themselves of something that they know not to be true. The heart sometimes desires something that the mind knows cannot be. Here in stanza 4, the journey towards the bird's world proves to be quite difficult and lasts only a moment. As the speaker declares emphatically, I'm going to get to that place "on the viewless wings of Poesy," i.e., I will use my imagination, whose workings are invisible, "viewless," to lift myself from the world of the dying to the intense

life that the bird lives. Indeed, he says, he's already made it, "Already with thee!," he exclaims. But is he there? As I've said before in this course, it can help a lot sometimes to *trust the tale, not the teller.* The teller, the speaker, *says* he's escaped but his own words, *the tale*, offers up a different story. For the world he describes feels weirdly artificial: "And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne, / Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays." The world he's found himself in feels fake, over-wrought, a world of fantastical or mythical creatures, an imaginary palace in which sits a mythical figure surrounded by her loyal fairies. *Really*? Keats's writes a kind of poetry here that his audiences would instantly recognize as fake, antique, and unconvincing. That world is described in a deliberately dreamy way. This moment is a bit like one you would see in a dream-sequence in a movie; you know it's a dream because suddenly the camera-angles are strange, people look odd and do unexpected things; something's off. This place isn't real enough. The bird's world is one in which he sings spontaneously, "in full-throated ease," but this world is anything but spontaneous; it looks and feels like a scene out of a Pixar animated movie not the dark forests that are the bird's natural home: it's lovely, but finally not enough, not given the stakes. And we know just how unconvincing it is because at the instant Keats imagines it, it drops away. The speaker indulges in this escape only to jettison it after a few verses. "<u>But</u> <u>here</u> there is no light," he says. One moment before we were watching the mythical queen and in the next moment we are down on the ground, "here," in the darkness of the poet's beautiful garden. The speaker has tested his creative powers but, for the moment, found them unconvincing. So, there's more work for him to do. The poem isn't over, not nearly. He begins again, this time in the simple English garden where Keats's wrote the Ode. So stanza five is entirely taken up with a fine-grained description of the sounds and scents of that garden, which, paradoxically, the speaker can't actually see because of the falling dark or what he calls the "embalmed darkness." ("Embalmed" means heavy with scent . . . but of course the word also means corpse-like, deathly. Why would that deathliness haunt this point in the poem through the word's *ambiguity*?) Because he can't see the things he describes so vividly, he is compelled to *imagine* them for us, thereby demonstrating the new powers of creativity that are now stirring in him.

As I said earlier, Stanza 5 is remarkable in the poem for the simplicity of its description. Now, rather than characterizing *this* world as a place only of the dead and dying, the speaker acknowledges that that same world also brims with beauty. Keats is here writing a new kind of poetry. After the great American poet, Wallace Stevens, let us call this poetry "the poetry of earth," meaning a poetry that unapologetically affirms the immense gifts of this mad, bad, and beautiful world rather than imagining an escape to another world. For a moment, for just a few verses, the speaker is happy imagining each of the plants and creatures populating that world; it is enough briefly and plainly to describe them, and to take an inventory of them and to take pleasure in taking that inventory: "the grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild," the "murmerous" sounds of insects flying about "on summer eves." But of course, this world of beauty is also a world of death. No life without death. Keats wrote other poems that linked those two things very closely together: what makes something beautiful and precious is precisely the fact that it is transitory, ephemeral, that it doesn't last forever. Death haunts this

English garden, as it does every garden. That's why Keats uses that strange metaphor for the time of day, "embalmed darkness," using this metaphor of embalming to suggest that he is almost buried in or interred in the world he describes so lovingly and plainly. And we know death creeps back into his thoughts and into his poem because it is the subject of the opening lines of the very next stanza, stanza 6.

2) Second turn: In the sixth stanza, the speaker is momentarily overcome with a wish to die: "Now more than ever seems it rich to die, / To cease upon the midnight with no pain." Keats frankly acknowledges that there are moments in which a young person might be so depleted, so exhausted by loss and sadness, so disoriented by a world that offered so little in return, that absenting himself from the world starts to feel not only possible but desirable. But note how even as the speaker contemplates that death, as if experimenting with the idea of it, seeing what it feels like, he qualifies himself. He is scrupulously thorough in taking a kind of inventory of his own feelings—and so invites us, as readers, to be just as attentive. Here he acknowledges that he is "half in love with easeful Death"—the *other* half of him is turned towards a quite different direction. But the speaker imagines what it would be like to die while the nightingale sang its gorgeous song, "pouring forth thy soul abroad / In such an ecstasy!" He takes a breath, and then faces a very different thought, but one that could only have come from the thoughts and feelings leading up to this moment: "Still wouldst though sing, and I have ears in vain-- / To thy high requiem become a sod." In other words, the nightingale would continue to sing if the speaker were dead; and dead, he would be insensate, lacking the ears to hear that music, the heart to feel it, the mind to contemplate it. He would be nothing more than *that*-- a "sod," a lump of clay on the ground. Yikes. The word happens suddenly, plunked down there at the end of the stanza, rough and plain and one syllable. It's as much a punctuation mark, an end-stop or period as it is a word. Its appearance is the place where the poem pivots for the second time. We know that because when you look at the next stanza, stanza 7, we hear a new voice from the speaker. Now he doesn't long to be with the nightingale. He isn't pained by the comparison between the nightingale's life and his life. He doesn't disavow that pain or those comparisons. They too, after all, remain a central part of the poem and indeed form the means or path by which he gets to this point late in the poem. Instead, he is in frame of mind that lets him fondly observe the nightingale, right away remarking that it possesses a kind of immortal existence, seemingly untouched by time, while he remains in a world of "hungry generations," whose weight he feels. The speaker is now more generous both to the nightingale and more importantly towards himself in the presence of the creature's beautiful and evocative song. The speaker imagines all the different places the bird has graced with its music: in classical myth, in the bible . . . and in totally imaginary places, places that the speaker himself is responsible for inventing using the power of his imagination, those worlds "opening on the foam / Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn." It's a lovely thought, and a sign of a certain calm. But again, a single word shakes the poet to the core, and this time that word is *forlorn*. It means "distant" in stanza 7. But it triggers other associations; *forlorn* can also mean "empty." There is something "empty" about those

invented lands into which the speaker has just travelled, listening for the nightingale's song. He wakes up at the sound of it: "Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!" His own language rouses the speaker and it is this rousing that confirms important pivot or turn in the poem. He is now himself again, but a new self, so different from how he was at other points in the poem. How do we know that? We know that because, among several other things, the eighth and last stanza is a *benediction*, a gesture of well-wishing and farewell. At the start of the poem, the speaker was immersed, and understandably so, in his "aching" sorrow. But now he turns his eyes and ears outwards, towards others. He bids the nightingale goodbye ("Adieu!"), letting it fade into the meadows and streams and hills and onto the next "valley-glades," but now, notice, not hungering after it. And it is in that more generous state of mind that the poet brings about the poem's closure. The poem ends with several questions, so this is a special kind of closure. Your task as reader is to consider why those questions and why end the poem with those questions. The poem *earns* the right to ask these questions and to ask them in a particular way, i.e., as genuinely querying, open to possibilities, rather than questions of the sort with which "Ode on a Grecian Urn" begins, where the speaker grasps after the urn's meaning precisely because the urn refuses to speak or yield up its meaning. The poem addresses the nightingale but that address has changed the poet. How so?

<u>One way to read "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is to compare and contrast them, treating them as carrying on a dialogue among themselves:</u>

1) "Ode *on* a Grecian Urn" is a poem that addresses the urn, yet the use of the preposition, "on," holds the urn away at a certain distance. Compare that to "Ode *to* a Nightingale," the preposition, "to," meaning that the speaker is speaking directly *to* the bird.
2) The Urn stands attractively and, at least in the opening stanza, frustratingly silent until the last verses of the last stanza. Compare the nightingale, a creature that is mesmerizingly beautiful to the speaker because of its song, its "pouring forth" of a kind of natural music, the fact that it *is* its song.
3) The urn is the creation of human hands—and yet it has somehow survived generations of human beings, seemingly immune to the touch of time. Compare the nightingale, a creature that is very much alive, not a creation of human hands, not an inanimate object. Yet it too seems to have survived generations: nightingales have sung their song, it appears, as long as human beings have been on this planet and perhaps even longer. The creature is alive, part of the natural world, and yet also seemingly immune to time.
4) The urn is examined in its minutest details, the speaker zeroing in on different scenes he sees or thinks he sees on its surface; he goes so far as to project scenes onto that surface. The nightingale, in contrast, is invisible to the speaker, who hears but cannot see the creature.
5) The "Ode on a Grecian Urn" ends with the speaker acknowledging that the urn "will remain;" and the poem ends with the urn making an oracular, authoritative announcement. Compare "Ode to a Nightingale," which concludes by asking questions while the creature flies away to another place, deeper and deeper into the world.

Study questions to consider about Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

Okay, now that you've had a chance to consider Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," turn to "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Some questions to consider:

1. In what specific ways does this ode call upon the conventions of the form of the ode and reproduce those conventions?
2. In what ways does Keats play the dynamic voice of the speaker *against* the regularity of the form of the ode?
3. In what ways does this poem embody "negative capability"?
4. Where are the turns in the poem? Why there? In other words, what has happened in the poem for the turn to take place at that particular moment? How are the turns marked in the poem? The poem is paced by being divided into separate stanzas. But it is also paced by separate movements, i.e., *groups* of stanzas that mark the places where the poems shift gears, try new directions, earn new thoughts or escape old ones.
5. In what ways is the speaker different between the start and the end of the poem?
6. How does the urn change as the poem unfolds and as the speaker changes?
7. How does the poem end?
8. In what ways is the urn different from the poem, "Ode on a Grecian Urn"?
9. Where do you see Keats's drawing on the resources of the English language, working with the power and depth of words?
10. Compare and contrast the urn and the nightingale. Compare and contrast the two poems addressed to the urn and the nightingale, respectively.

One way to read the two Odes and to understand what makes them tick, so to speak, is briefly to recall the differences in their subjects of their respective addresses, one addressing the nightingale, the other the Grecian Urn.

a) The urn remains until the end of the poem silent and restrained, qualities that activate the poet's imagination. But the nightingale is mesmerizing and attractive because it is heard "pouring forth," unrestrained and far from silent.
b) Both nightingale and urn remain mostly indifferent to the poet who is, contrastingly, deeply invested in them and complexly attached to them. Each is fascinating and troubling for being so self-sufficient, so *not* in need of anyone else. Is that why the ode about the urn is the ode *on* a Grecian urn? Is the most that the speaker is willing to say in the title is that he can talk *about* the urn since the urn seems to hold itself apart from him?
c) The urn is a human creation, a work of art made with human hands. Yet it also appears to transcend human life, surviving thousands of years seemingly impervious to the touch of time. The nightingale is a creature of the natural world, alive rather than inanimate, like the urn. It too seems impervious to the touch of time. The same song that was sung in the ancient past is sung today, in Keats's English garden. The bird itself lives—or seems to live--vibrantly in an eternal "now" of the present, joyfully oblivious to the passage of time. Keats's speaker, not so much.

d) The urn is examined for its fine-grained details; indeed, at a certain moment the poet almost appears to enter into those details, travelling to locales "on the urn" but "in" his own imagination. But the nightingale is invisible, heard or over-heard, not seen.
e) The nightingale Ode concludes with the bird flying away, leaving the poet to ask questions about what has just happened. The urn, on the other hand, "will remain," as it has for millennia. That poem ends with an oracular assertion by the urn that *sounds* like wisdom that explains the world but in fact is only what the world looks like from the point of view of the urn. The poem, however, is what the world looks like from the point of view of the poet. Those two perspectives are very different. How so?
f) The fact that Keats chose as his topic the Grecian urn in one of his odes signals to us the connection that he felt to the art and creativity of that far way place and time. He was hardly alone. Lots of other Europeans and Britons idealized ancient Greece. Based on the few fragments that had been unearthed over the ages, Europeans and Britons imagined that ancient Greece was the highpoint of human civilization, a remarkable world that fostered the creation of beautiful art—sculpture, buildings, poems, and plays. That it was also a society rooted in slavery. and a society that treated women as disposable property, much less a society that was constantly at war, wasn't really considered. Earlier in the 19th century, the British had cut an enormous swathe of sculptures from the Parthenon in Greece, figures dating from about 440 BC. They were transported to England where they changed hands a couple of times, finally ending up as a key exhibit in the British Museum (where they can be found to this day). Keats saw the sculptures in 1817 (called "the Elgin Marbles) and in fact wrote a remarkable sonnet about them. But even at the time, as today, there was fierce opposition to the British having stolen these ancient artifacts. Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is informed by the arrival of the Elgin Marbles and by the sensation that they caused in Britain. Keats's doesn't share that feeling. Many Britons looked at the evidence of a splendid ancient Greek civilization and wondered if their empire would last as long: would some distant civilization in the future look back at Britain the way Briton's looked back on Greece? To be sure, Keats admires the remains of ancient Greek civilization—indeed, enough that he selected a poetic form—the ode—

going back to ancient Greece when he chose to write his odes. But he doesn't fawn over ancient Greece and all that it seemed to represent to people in the first decades of the 19th century. His feelings, expressed through his speaker, are more complex. The urn becomes the occasion for the speaker to sort out what kind of artistic creation truly matters. The urn is such a complex object, finally, untouched by time and admired by a speaker who feels the weight of time; and yet untouched by time it can also seem distant from the complications of actually lived life. When the urn finally speaks, it speaks from a very lofty position that the speaker does not share. How do we know that? The poem, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in its totality, captures the complexities of the speaker who lives in *this* world, not the other-worldly place from which the urn's voice seems to emanate. Keats's speaker doesn't deny the power of the urn's oracular pronouncement that beauty is truth, i.e., that what is true is the beautiful and that is all that one needs to know. Keats's speaker honours that point of view but the poem as a whole says to us that the world is much more complicated than the urn's world. Another way to think of this problem is that the poem as a whole puts to us that there are *other* forms of beauty than the one

that the urn represents. Keats's Ode is no less beautiful than the urn about which it is written—but it is a different beauty, one born in time and of time, rather than the seemingly timeless beauty of the urn. The speaker's voice is so much calmer and open at the end of the poem than the beginning, where the speaker is agitated and restless, demanding things of the urn. At the end, the urn remains "a friend to man," meaning, not necessarily "human" and yet on amicable terms with human beings. Keats's speaker doesn't dismiss the urn, but remains in a friendly relationship with it. But the poem taken as a whole reminds us that he doesn't endorse the urn's pronouncement. The poem on the urn is *not* the urn. The urn is deeply attractive, and is the occasion for a series of very different scenes, different understandings and feelings about the urn; that sequence of understandings and feelings is what takes up the work of the poem. And like the urn, those understandings and feelings, which give the speaker to determine what matters and what does not, possess their own power, their own beauty. It seemed for a moment that, compared to the monumental immortality of the urn, the speaker was small, insignificant. But that is not where the speaker ends up. Facing the urn, using it as a kind of strange mirror in which to see himself more clearly and complexly, the speaker of the poem comes to accept his powers as enough, more than enough.