

## CLEANTH BROOKS'S "KEATS'S SYLVAN HISTORIAN: HISTORY WITHOUT FOOTNOTES"

This handout was prepared by Dr. William Tarvin, a retired professor of literature. Please visit my free website [www.tarvinlit.com](http://www.tarvinlit.com). Over 500 works of American and British literature are analyzed there for free.

Text used: Charles Kaplan and William David Anderson, eds. Criticism: Major Statements, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Bedford, 2000.

1. According to Kaplan and Anderson, "until the early 1940s," what were "the typical academic approaches" to analyzing a literary work? (465) Contrarily, what did the New Criticism insist upon? (465) According to them, what is the "task of the critic and the teacher of literature"? (465)

(1) The "typical academic approaches were historical, social, biographical, philosophical, psychological, mimetic, and moral, in any combination" (465).

(2) "The New Criticism" returned literary study "to the words on the printed page, to the text itself" (465)—the Objective Approach.

(3) "The task of the critic and the teacher of literature was to analyze and describe objectively the formal properties of a literary text by a close, detailed reading, without regard to extrinsic considerations" (465).

2. List the ideas about a literary work which were "rejected" (465) by the New Criticism.

"They rejected the idea of the work as an expression of a specific time and place; they rejected the idea of authorial intention, considered a Romantic fallacy; and they rejected the idea that a literary work was to be studied as an expression of its author's personality" (465).

3. "As formalist critics," with what were they concerned? (465)

"As formalist critics, they were concerned only with the poem as poem, with an analysis of its form, structure, and imagery" (465).

4. Define "structure" as used by the New Critics (465-66).

“By ‘structure,’ the New Critics referred to the interrelationships between the parts of a poem, how the complex organization of its parts created coherent meaning not of a logical kind, such as would be found in the propositions in expository writing, but of a kind peculiar to poems. Unity, ambiguity, irony, integrity, and paradox were some of the new terms describing desirable literary qualities” (465-66).

5. Although “its influence is still strong today,” what made New Criticism “old hat” by the end of the 1960s? (466)

It declined “into overingenious, self-enclosed exercise in explication, as ambiguities, ironies, and paradoxes were discovered to flourish everywhere” (466).

Also, as noted on page 465, New Criticism was more effective in analyzing poetry than fiction or drama.

6. What poetic dictum does Brooks quote at the beginning of his essay? (466)

The closing line of Archibald MacLeish’s poem “Ars Poetica”: “A poem should not mean / But be” (466).

7. Brooks notes that Keats, contrary to this dictum, closes his “Ode on a Grecian Urn” with a meaningful statement. What is this sententious statement? (466)

That “beauty is truth” and that “this bit of wisdom sums up the whole of mortal knowledge” (465).

8. Often it is good to begin a literary essay by citing some previous critics of a poem. Whom does Brooks cite here? Briefly summarize their critiques of the ending of Keats’s poem (466-67).

T. S. Eliot called the line “a serious blemish on a beautiful poem” (466). Middleton Murry agrees with Eliot (466-67). H. W. Garrod (467), a traditional critic, also objected to the ending.

9. Brooks next gives the thesis of his essay; he says that the “very **ambiguity** of the [poem’s closing] statement . . . ought to warn us against insisting very much on the statement in **isolation**, and to drive us back to a consideration of the **context** in which the statement is set. . . . [O]ur specific question is . . . was Keats the poet able to exemplify [the] **relation** [of beauty and truth] in this particular poem? [That is,] the relation of the final statement in the poem to the total **context** is all-important” (467).

NOTE: This idea about the organic unity of a poem (that lines cannot be understood out of the poem’s context) was stressed by Coleridge, although it can be traced to Aristotle and Longinus.)

10. In the third paragraph of page 468, Brooks argues that the paradox of the concluding statement of the poem is prepared for by earlier paradoxes in the poem: Readers “must not be too much disturbed to have the element of **paradox** latent in the poem emphasized” (468).

What paradoxes occur in stanza 1? (468-69)

The poem “begins on a note of paradox, though a mild one: for we ordinarily do not expect an urn to speak at all” (468).

The urn is called a “bride of quietness” and a “foster-child of silence,” but the urn is a “historian” too. “Historians tell the truth, or are at least expected to tell the truth” (468). However, the urn as historian “supplies no names and dates” (469). The actions described on the urn are passionate, but “the urn is cool marble” (469). “And the paradox goes further: the scene is one of violent love-making, . . . but the urn itself is like a ‘still unravish’d bride’” (469).

11. What paradoxes are manifested in stanza 2? (469-70)

NOTE: Brooks writes “Stanza II” (469), the stylistic convention of his time. However, the MLA Handbook now insists that stanza, chapter, part, section, and so forth, not be capitalized, and that Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, etc.) typically replace Roman numerals (I, II, III, etc.).

“The first lines of the stanza state a rather bold paradox. . . . it is a statement which is preposterous, and yet true . . . . The unheard music is sweeter than any audible music” (469).

“The general paradox runs through the stanza: action goes on though the actors are motionless; the song will not cease; the lover cannot leave his song; the maid, always to be kissed, never actually kissed, will remain changelessly beautiful” (469). “The beauty portrayed is deathless because it is lifeless” (469-70).

12. What paradoxes dominate stanza 3? (470-71)

Brooks finds this stanza to be a recapitulation of the ideas of the first two stanzas, but adds that “whatever development there is in the stanza inheres in the increased stress on the paradoxical element” (470). For instance, the “songs are ‘for ever new’ because they cannot be completed” (470).

“The paradox is carried further in the case of the lover whose love is ‘For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d’”; however, this love “becomes suddenly in the next line, ‘All breathing human passion far above.’ But if it is above all breathing passion, it is, after all, outside the realm of breathing passion, and therefore, not human passion at all” (470).

“For Keats in the ‘Ode’ is stressing the ironic fact that all human passion does leave one cloyed; hence the superior of art” (471).

“Keats is perfectly aware that the frozen moment of loveliness is more dynamic than is the fluid world of reality only because it is frozen. The love depicted on the urn remains warm and young because it is not human flesh at all but cold, ancient marble” (471).

13. What paradoxes occur in stanza 4? (471-72)

Stanza 4 “emphasizes, not individual aspiration and desire, but communal life” (471).

“If the earlier stanzas have been concerned with such paradoxes as the ability of static carving to convey dynamic action, of the soundless pipes to play music sweeter than that of the heard melody; of the figured lover to have a love more warm and panting than that of breathing flesh and blood, so in the same way the town implied by the urn comes to have a richer and more important history than that of actual cities” (472).

14. What are the paradoxes of stanza 5? (472-73)

“The central paradox of the poem, thus, comes to conclusion in the phrase, ‘Cold Pastoral.’ The word ‘pastoral’ suggests warmth, spontaneity, the natural and the informal as well as the idyllic, the simple and the informally charming. . . . The urn itself is cold, and the life beyond life which it expresses is life which has been formed, arranged. The urn itself is a ‘silent form,’ and it speaks, not by means of statement, but by ‘teasing us out of thought.’ . . . The marble men and women of the urn will not age as flesh-and-blood men and women will” (473).

15. Beginning in the third paragraph from the bottom of page 473 and continuing onto page 474, Brooks returns to the relation of the last lines of the poem to the whole of the poem. Summarize his points (473-74).

As a timeless representative, the urn says to the poet “that ‘formed experience,’ imaginative insight, embodies the basic and fundamental perception of man and nature. The urn is beautiful, and yet its beauty is based . . . on an imaginative perception of essentials. Such a vision is beautiful but it is also true.” (473)

“Moreover, the ‘truth’ which the sylvan historian gives is the only kind of truth which we are like to get on this earth, and, furthermore, it is the only kind that we have to have. The names, dates, and special circumstances, the wealth of data—these the sylvan historian quietly ignores” (473). The urn “does better than that: it takes a few details and so orders them that we have not only beauty but insight into essential truth. Its ‘history,’ in short, is a history without footnotes” (473).

Thus “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’ . . . is a speech ‘in character’ and supported by a dramatic context” (474).

16. In his concluding paragraph, what does Brooks state about “organic context”? (474)

“If he can see that the assertions made in a poem are to be taken as part of an organic context, if we can resist the temptation to deal with them in isolation, then we may be willing to go on to deal with the world-view, or ‘philosophy,’ or ‘truth’ of the poem as a whole in terms of its dramatic wholeness: that is, we shall not neglect the maturity of attitude, the dramatic tension, the emotional and intellectual coherence in favor of some statement of theme abstracted from it by paraphrase” (474).