

Odes and Elegies

1. The Ode

What is it?

The ode is a form of **lyric poetry**. Lyric poetry means poetry that is '**musical**' in its combinations of word, sound and rhythm.

Odes are also **subjective**; that means they reveal the personality and feelings of the poet. The feelings or scenes described in the poem are seen through the eyes of the poet.

To understand the musicality of odes, read and re-read the following extract from an ode by famous Romantic poet William Wordsworth. Feel how **rhythm** and **sounds** combine in a way that is **pleasing**, or satisfying - especially when read aloud.

EXAMPLE: Hence, in a season of calm weather,
 Though inland far we be
Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
 Which brought us hither;
 Can in a moment travel thither,
 And see the children sport upon the shore
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.
 from 'Intimations of Immortality', by William Wordsworth

This extract is also typical of an ode in that it sounds **dignified**, even majestic, in its tone; almost like a hymn.

John Keats was another famous **Romantic** poet (Romanticism was a major movement in the early 19th Century in literature, art and music, and featured such great names as Goethe and Beethoven in Germany, Coleridge and Wordsworth in Britain, Gericault and Delacroix in France).

On the next page is one of his odes. What is its theme?

How would you describe the mood of this poem?

Could Autumn be symbolic? If so, of what?

How would you describe the musicality of this poem? What techniques does the poet use to achieve this?



To Autumn

by John Keats (1795-1821)

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spare the next swath and all its twined flowers:
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last oozy hours by hours.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river shallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

Odes in the 20th Century, like the sonnet, developed and changed. They no longer have to be serious and noble. The following two examples are odes that you, too, could write!

These two odes may not be entirely serious, but they still retain the noble, dignified quality of an ode (although the dignified tone is for fun, not for real).

Do they have any of the musical quality that a traditional ode should have? Read them to yourself and then try to answer.

Ode to the Amoeba

by Arthur Guiterman (1871-1943)

Recall from Time's abysmal chasm
That piece of primal protoplasm
The first amoeba, strangely splendid,
From whom we're all of us descended.
That first amoeba, weirdly clever,
Exists today and shall forever,
Because he reproduced by fission;
He split himself, and each division
And subdivision deemed it fitting
To keep on splitting, splitting, splitting;
So, whatsoe'er their billions be,
All, all amoebas still are he.
Zoologists discern his features
In every sort of breathing creatures,
Since all of every living species,
No matter how their breed increases
Or how their ranks have been recruited,
From him alone were evolved.
King Solomon, the Queen of Sheba
And Hoover sprang from that amoeba;
Columbus, Shakespeare, Darwin, Shelley
Derived from that same bit of jelly.
So famed he is and well-connected,
His statue ought to be erected,
For you and I and William Beebe
Are undeniably amoebae!

An Ode to a Delectable Bore (written by a student to her grammar teacher)

by Kate Jones

Oh Mr. Brown!
How I wish grammar
was as interesting,
as you.
The only active
or passive things
to me are your
movements.
Who cares about
verbs, unless you're
holding, kissing, touching, stroking, caressing,
my hand?
If you want,
you can even make it
carefully, softly, gently, lovingly, continually,
adverbial.
Oh Mr.Brown!
Don't you know that
divine, handsome, suave, cuddly, heroic
adjectives only apply
to you?
Oh Mr.Brown!
Your tenses are all wrong.
The present counts
not the past.
Oh Mr.Brown!
I wish you taught
Maths, History, Science, Cooking and Netball
too.
At least then
I'd enjoy them even
though I don't
understand them,
either.

2.The Elegy

What is it?

An elegy has no particular structure; it is **defined by its content**. It is a **sad** poem, usually about the **loss** of a loved person, object or place.

The mood of an elegy is **serious**, and **melancholic**, and the rhythm is usually **slow-moving**. Sometimes the sounds of the words also contribute to the slowness and the sombre mood.

Here is an extract from perhaps the most famous elegy in English.

EXAMPLE: The curfew tolls the knell of parting day

The lowering herd wind slowly o'er the lea

The plowman homeward plods his weary way

And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,

And all the air a solemn stillness holds,

Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,

And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds.

from 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', by Thomas Gray

Here are two elegies to compare.

She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways

by William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

She dwelt among the untrodden ways

Beside the springs of Dove,

A Maid whom there were none to praise

And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone

Half hidden from the eye!

--Fair as a star, when only one

Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know

When Lucy ceased to be;

But she is in her grave, and, oh,

The difference to me!

Requiescat

by Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)

Tread lightly, she is near
Under the snow,
Speak gently, she can hear
The daisies grow.

All her bright golden hair
Tarnished with rust,
She that was young and fair
Fallen to dust.

Lily-like, white as snow,
She hardly knew
She was a woman, so
Sweetly she grew.

Coffin-board, heavy stone,
Lie on her breast,
I vex my heart alone,
She is at rest.

Peace, peace, she cannot hear
Lyre or sonnet,
All my life's buried here,
Heap earth upon it.

In the first poem, why were there 'none to praise' and 'few to love' this person?

How does the poet reveal his feelings?

In the second poem, how can we tell that death has heightened the senses of the poet?

How does the fourth stanza introduce something of a contrast into the poem?

Which line(s) most clearly reveal the depth of the poet's feelings?