

The ode in brief

An ode is a **lyric poem**, usually **addressing a particular person or thing**.

It originated in Ancient Greece, and the Pindaric ode (so-called because it was written by the Theban poet Pindar, 518 ? 442 BC) was based on a pattern of **three stanzas called the strophe, antistrophe and epode**. It was performed by a chorus, which walked along one side of the orchestra chanting the strophe and down the other side chanting the antistrophe, then came to a standstill before the audience and chanted the epode. This performance was repeated with each set of three stanzas.

The Horatian ode (invented by the Latin poet Horace in about 65 BC) was adopted in the early 19th century by John Keats for one of his most famous poems, 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Many modern odes, however, are irregular in form, such as '**Intimations of Immortality**' from '**Recollections of Early Childhood**' by William Wordsworth.

Origin and Development of the Ode

Traditionally, the ode is **lengthy** (as lyrics go), **serious in subject matter, elevated in its diction and style**, and often **elaborate in its stanzaic structure**.

There were **two classical prototypes**, one **Greek**, the other **Roman**. The first was established by **Pindar**, a **Greek poet**, who **modelled his odes on the choral songs of Greek drama**. They were encomiums, i.e., **written to give public praise**, usually to athletes who had been successful in the Olympic games. Pindar patterned his **complex stanzas in a triad: the strophe and antistrophe had the same metrical form; the epode had another**. What is called in English the regular or Pindaric ode imitates this pattern.

As the ode developed in England, poets modified the Pindaric form to suit their own purposes and also turned to Roman models.

In 1656, Abraham Cowley introduced the "irregular ode," which **imitated the Pindaric style and retained the serious subject matter, but opted for greater freedom**.

It abandoned the recurrent strophic triad and instead permitted **each stanza to be individually shaped, resulting in stanzas of varying line lengths, number of lines, and rhyme scheme**. This "irregular" stanzaic structure, which created **different patterns to accord with changes of mood or subject, became a common English tradition**. Poets **also turned to an ode form modelled after the Roman poet, Horace**. The Horatian ode employed **uniform stanzas, each with the same metrical pattern, and tended generally to be more personal, more meditative, and more restrained**. Keats' "Ode to Autumn" and Wordsworth's "Ode to Duty" are Horatian odes.

The Romantic meditative ode was developed from these varying traditions. It tended to combine the stanzaic complexity of the irregular ode with the personal meditation of the Horatian ode, usually dropping the emotional restraint of the Horatian tradition. However, **the typical structure of the new form can best be described, not by traditional stanzaic patterns, but by its development of subject matter**. There are usually three elements:

the description of a particularized outer natural scene;
an extended meditation, which the scene stimulates, and which may be focused on a private problem or a universal situation or both;

the occurrence of an insight or vision, a resolution or decision, which signals a return to the scene originally described, but with a new perspective created by the intervening meditation.

Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," are examples, and Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," while Horatian in its uniform stanzaic form, reproduces the architectural format of the meditative soliloquy, or, it may be, intimate colloquy with a silent auditor.