UNIT 7: JOHN KEATS: LIFE AND WORKS

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7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- obtain a general idea of the works of John Keats, the English Romantic poet
- situate Keats in the context of the British Romantic Movement and assess his contributions
- identify John Keats as an important poet critic of the Romantic Age

7.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of Block 2 of the Course on English Poetry: Romantic to Victorian. In this unit, we shall discuss the life and works of yet another accomplished Romantic poet John Keats (1795–1821). Although, he died at the age of 25, he became one of the main figures of the Second Generation of Romantic poets, along with Byron and Shelly. His poems were not well received by critics during his lifetime. However, after his death, his reputation grew. By the end of the 19th century, he becomes one of the most beloved of the English poets. You will note that, Keats rendered a

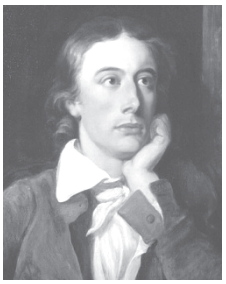
significant influence on a diverse range of poets and writers. The Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, in his book *The Craft of Verse,* stated that his first encounter with Keats' work was the most significant literary experience of his life. His poetry, especially his odes, is characterised by sensual imagery. Some of the greatest poetic works of Keats include "I Stood Tip-toe Upon a Little Hill", "Sleep and Poetry", and the famous sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer". This unit shall help you to discuss the different aspects of John Keats as a Romantic poet.

7.3 JOHN KEATS: THE POET

In the following subsections, we shall look at the life and works of John Keats.

7.3.1 His Life

John Keats was the last born of the British Romantic poets who had a very brief poetic career but proved himself worthy of continuing popularity down the ages. What is astonishing is the fact that within a brief time span (comprising twenty-five years) he was able to add a rare perfection to his works, ensuring a permanent place in the English poetic tradition. Though open to the influence of other poets and sensitive to criticism, throughout his career, he turned out to be a most original and individual English poet. His development as a poet went in parallel with his continuous self-critical thinking and analysis, articulated in his famous letters. Because of his lower-middle class family background, he was denied of classical education but he was nevertheless extraordinarily well-read; he had recourse to John Lemprière's classical dictionary and read Chaucer, Spenser, Dante, Dryden, Boccaccio, Ariosto and Shakespeare. Traditionally seen as a poet of the senses, Keats was soon able to adopt the raw sensations and impulses into aesthetically heightened poetic articulation.



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org

John Keats was born in London in 1795 to Thomas Keats and Frances Jennings. There are many myths woven around this poet, one of which is about his humble origin. There was, for instance, a belief that Keats was born in a coaching inn "The Swan and Hoop" and that his father was an 'ostler' in that inn. There was, however, little evidence to prove them. Yet, it is true that Keats faced financial troubles throughout his life. He did not have the privilege enjoyed by other Romantics like Byron and Shelley who were born into landed aristocratic families. Moreover, unlike Wordsworth and Coleridge, Keats did not secure literary patronage either. Little is known of his father Thomas Keats; his mother was the daughter of John Jennings— a man of property who purchased the leasehold of 'The Swan and Hoop' in 1774. Keats had three brothers, George, Thomas and Edward, and a sister Fanny. It is to be acknowledged that it was George and Tom who played a significant role in the poet's life.

Keats went to Clarke's School in Enfield in 1803. Next year his father died by falling off a horse. Frances Jennings arranged a hasty marriage with William Rawlings and the couple took up a residence in The Swan and Hoop. In 1805, John Jennings died leaving a substantial estate to members of his family, but Frances challenged some of its terms, ultimately leaving the action incomplete. Soon, the Keats children left their mother and stepfather and went to live with their maternal grandmother. However, there is evidence to support that Keats's mother was finally reconciled to her family. In the mean time, he was at Clarke's school, where he learnt scientific and practical subjects, Latin and French. He developed an enthusiasm for Leigh Hunt at this stage, when his literary taste began to be strongly influenced by Cowden Clarke with whom he had friendship.

In 1819, Keats's mother died and subsequently, he left school to be apprenticed to the surgeon and the apothecary Thomas Hammond. After apprenticeship, he registered as a medical student at a hospital in 1815. Contrary to the expectation of his family, his

long and expensive medical training did not give him financial security. He grew increasingly ambivalent about his medical career because it absorbs much of his writing time. Given his continuing financial trouble, it was a tough choice, which even pushed him to periods of depression. After securing the apothecary's license, however, he resolved to be a poet, not a surgeon.

Keats saw ravages of death in his family. In fact, the whole family suffered from Tuberculosis which had no medical treatment and cure until 1921. His brother had been suffering from the disease for a long time before he died. The same disease took the life of his mother. Another of his brothers George and his wife immigrated to America and died penniless racked by tuberculosis. In case of Keats after he left medical training he began to suffer from continuous cold; and in the beginning of the year 1821, he too reached the final stage of tuberculosis. Keats died on 23 February 1821 in a Protestant Cemetery in Rome. In accordance with his last wishes, he was buried under an unnamed tombstone containing only the words: 'Here lies one whose name was writ in water'. Although his literary career spanned only four years and consisted of just fifty-four poems, Keats demonstrated remarkable intellectual and artistic development.

7.3.2 His Works

Keats's poetic career was linked to his closeness to the radical journalist and poet Leigh Hunt whose rift with the government caused great disturbances. Keats was known to Shelly and others through his association with the radical brotherhood of Leigh Hunt. His first volume was published in 1817 and it almost went unnoticed in the critical circles. The Second volume of verse was published in 1818, and probably because of his link with Leigh Hunt. However, the Tory journals 'The Quarterly Review' and 'Blackwoods Magazine' made a savage attack on his poetry. We can understand how ruthless was the attack on Keats if we go by a comment on *Endymion* made

by J. G. Lockhart in ‘‘Blackwood’s Magazine’’: “it is a better and wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet; so back to the shop, Mr John, back to plasters, pills and ointment boxes.”

Spenser was an early influence on Keats and the first volume of verse, *Poems* (1817) contained explicit imitation of the Elizabethan poet. That he was captivated by some poetic mannerisms of Spenser can also be gauged in poems like “Sleep and Beauty” and “I Stood Tip-toe upon a little Hill”. The second volume called *Endymion* is a long poem of over four thousand lines. It professes to tell the story of a lovely youth who was kissed by the moon-goddess on the summit of Mount Latmos. *Endymion* has its flaws and weaknesses; it cannot be called a mature work of Keats. Yet, it marks the budding of a style, which is distinctively Keatsean. *Endymion* was the attempt to move beyond the lyric to epic and narrative. Admittedly, the poem is over-exuberant and entangled and Keats himself recognised its shortcomings. However, Keats’ improvement was rapid; his mastery of dramatic and verbal effect and of narrative shape and tension was reflected in “The Eve of St. Agnes”.

As for the famous ‘Odes’, all nearly written in 1819, they have been regarded by many in subsequent times as the poet’s best known poems. There might be contrast and variations of mood among the poems (for instance, longing for escape from the clutch of reality in “Ode to a Nightingale” to calm of fruition in “To Autumn”), but all of them reflect a quest for true beauty. Douglas Bush opines that the odes are about the belief that whereas the momentary experience of beauty is fleeting, its embodiment in art form is an imperishable source of joy. As for the form and style, “To Autumn” has an eleven-line stanza and the rest are in stanzas of ten lines made up of the Shakespearean quatrains and the Petrarchan sestet.

You should remember that like the other Romantic poets, Keats also laid great importance on the faculty of imagination. Keats, in most of his poems, expresses a passionate love for the visible and the sensible world. In one of his letters, as elsewhere, he reveals

this passion for sensation: "O for a life of sensation rather than of thought!" and it moulds his poetic style in a big way. If you look at the sensuous nature of the poetic images available in this poem, it becomes clear that everywhere there is a relish in the concrete particularities of the visible world. The air of abundance created in the beginning, as we have suggested earlier, is not an abstraction; it is built through concrete image of the fruits: 'load and bless with fruit the vines', 'bend with apples', 'swell the gourd' and so on. Sometimes, the image also carries **tactile feel** as in 'clammy cells' whereas some are associated with the **sense of taste** 'sweet kernel', or even 'clammy cells'. "To Autumn" is written in iambic pentameter (but with variations) with five stressed syllables in a line, each usually preceded by an unstressed syllable. Keats varies this form by the employment of Augustan inversion, sometimes using a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable at the beginning of a line.

Contrary to the **first stanza's** exclusive focus on the visual, the **third stanza** beautifully combines the visual with the auditory. You can make a brief comparison with a poem by Wordsworth titled "Lines Written in Early Spring" which starts like this:

"I heard a thousand blended notes
While in a grove I sat reclined
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind."

The sound the poet hears is vague, indistinguishable as suggested in 'blended notes'. Contrastingly, as is characteristic of Keats, autumnal music is not vague or indistinct; it is made up of diverse sounds of birds, animals and insects. Therefore, the humming of criteria generally set by reason and common sense. It is pertinent to mention in this context that the concept of 'negative capability' is more modernist than romantic, and it bears some resemblance with T.S. Eliot's doctrine of poetic 'impersonality'.



LET US KNOW

Negative Capability:

The poet John Keats introduced this term in a letter written in December 1817, to define a literary quality "which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability,* that is, when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Keats contrasted to this quality the writing of Coleridge, who "would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude ... from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge," and went on to express the general principle "that with a great poet the sense of beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration."

Impersonality Theory:

With the help of this theory, Eliot tried to profess that the poet engages in a "continual surrender of himself" to the vast order of tradition, and the artistic creation thus becomes the process of depersonalization. The mature poet is viewed as a medium, through which tradition is channelled and elaborated, and discussed.

Another important concept expounded by Keats in his letters is the concept of 'Negative Capability'. A poet, Keats holds, has no identifiable self; he is always assuming other objects and selves. This notion of self-effacement goes contrary to an important doctrine of romanticism that accords supremacy to the perceiver, or to the poetic self. The rationalist view of the self is grounded on an unquestionable certitude, something that Keats dismantled. Through imagination, the poet has the ability to transform himself/herself and attain a mental state where reason cannot reach. When experiences are embodied in artistic form, they transcend normal habitual taste and the result is one of the most striking of all English poetic style."

You will note that Keats has always been regarded as one of the principal figures in the Romantic Movement. Tennyson considered

him the greatest poet of the 19th century. Matthew Arnold commended his 'intellectual and spiritual passion' for beauty. In the 20th century, he has been discussed and reconsidered by critics from T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis to Trilling *(The Opposing Self,* 1955) and Christopher Ricks *(Keats and Embarrassment,* 1974). His famous "Letters", published in 1848 and 1878, today act as a valuable commentary on Romantic poetry. He wrote revealingly to Fanny Brawne, to his brothers and sister, to Shelley, Leigh Hunt, Haydon, Severn, and many others, mixing the everyday events of his own life with a lively and delicate interest in that of his correspondents, and displaying wit and high spirits as well as his profoundest thoughts on love, poetry, and the nature of man. T. S. Eliot in the 20th century described the letters as 'certainly the most notable and most important ever written by any English poet' *(The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism,* 1933). Important biographies on Keats are written by W. J. Bate (1963), R. Gittings (1968), and Andrew Motion (1997).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: As we have already found, Keats finally decided to become a poet rather than a medical surgeon. How do you see its ramifications throughout his works?

Q 2: How do you place the Odes in the entire oeuvre of Keats?

Q 3: Define 'Negative Capability' and compare it with Eliot's theory of impersonality.

Q 4: What makes John Keats distinguished as a Romantic poet?

Q 5: How does Keats view 'imagination'?

7.4 KEATS AND THE TRADITION OF ENGLISH ODES

An ode is an elaborate and elevated lyric poem addressed to a person, a thing or an abstract idea. It is a serious and dignified composition, always with rhyme. It has three identifiable characteristics—(a) it is exalted

in subject matter, (b) it is longer than a lyric proper, and (c) it is often addressed directly to a person or a thing. The ode generally has three parts: a strophe, an antistrophe and an epode. Odes are often intended to be recited or sung by two choruses (or individuals), with the first reciting the strophe, the second the antistrophe, and both together the epode. Over time, however, different forms of odes have developed with considerable variations in form and structure, but generally showing the original influence of the Greek Pindar or Roman Horace. Forms of odes appear in many of the cultures that were influenced by the Greek and Latin.

In the English poetic tradition, odes developed mainly in the Romantic period when the Romantic poets experimented on a variety of themes, and John Keats is generally regarded as one of the masters of the form. At the same time, he develops a poetic language appropriate to both the form of the ode and the nature of his themes. Keats' language experience precisely; it captures the rhythm and movement of thoughts and feelings; it registers a full range of sense impressions. Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "Ode to a Nightingale" (1820) are important examples, which focus on the images of imperfection although the real emphasis is on the fact that we live in an imperfect world. For example, in the following lines from "Ode to a Nightingale", the poet asks for a drink of cool wine:

"O, for a draught of vintage!
that hath been Cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth!"

This stanza is characterised by an example of synaesthesia–a feature that recurs frequently in Keats' poetry. Synaesthesia is the use of imagery and language choices, which describe sensory impressions in terms of other senses. In the lines above, Keats manages to appeal to sight, colour, movement, sound, and heat almost simultaneously. For example, the movement of dancing and the sound of song are described as a taste. 'Sunburnt mirth' describes the sight of sunburnt faces at the same time as we hear the same people laughing. Keats also created a rich poetic music.

An example of his control of the rhythmic movement and syntax is clearly available in the poem "To Autumn".

His continuing influence in literary domains in subsequent times is a testimony of his true poetic genius. Anyway, the importance of sensation and sensuous experience is remarkable in John Keats. Because of the overwhelming aspiration of the sensuous, Keats was an important influence on Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites. To Keats, as to Wordsworth, sensation is cognitive; sensuous experience leads to knowledge of reality. In Keats, we get the impression of tasting things by the palate and to feel their texture. To Keats, however, unlike Wordsworth, the poet's mind is not just a passive receptacle of sensation. The duty of the poet, as Keats believes, is to render it persuasively in words. As the poet grew into maturity, he could discipline the sensation into symbolic meaning, as exemplified by poems like "The Eve of St Agnes" the odes and some of the sonnets.

As for Keats's reputation as a literary figure as well as his influence in subsequent times, his speculations on poetry, art, and the role of the poet has as much a stake as his poetry. A central tenet of the romantics was the primacy of imagination in the creative process. Antithesis of imagination is reason; the regime of reason was still pervasive; the concept that imagination leads to a kind of falsity was already an established view, as Tom Paine writes in *The Age of Reason*: "I had some turn and I believe some talent for poetry. But this I rather repressed than encouraged as leading too much into the field of imagination." In stark opposition to this established view of imagination, the romantics upheld a sort of ethic of imagination and showed it link to truth. In this context, C. M. Bowra writes in *The Romantic Imagination*: "to Keats, imagination provides a clue to absolute reality but this pursuit of absolute must go through appreciation of beauty of the sensuous world." Keats himself writes in a letter: "what the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth…they are all creative of essential beauty". In the next few lines of the same letter, he compares imagination to Adam's dream: "the imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found its truth."

In 1819, Keats had attempted to write sonnets, but found that the form did not satisfy his purpose because the pattern of rhyme worked against the tone that he wished to achieve. When he turned to writing poetry in the form of the ode, he found that the standard Pindaric ode form used by poets like Dryden was inadequate for properly discussing philosophy. Therefore, Keats developed his own type of ode as reflected in poems like "Ode to Psyche", "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and other odes that he wrote in 1819. Keats established a new poetic tone that accorded with his aesthetic ideas about poetry. He further altered this new form in "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by adding a secondary voice within the ode, creating a dialogue between two subjects. The technique of the poem is ekphrasis—the poetic representation of a work of art such as painting or sculpture. Keats further deviated from the traditional use of ekphrasis that describes a design on the sides of a cup as one can find in found in Theocritus's *Idyll*. While Theocritus describes both motion found in a stationary artwork and underlying motives of characters, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" replaces actions with a series of questions and focuses only on external attributes of the characters



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: What significance do Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "Ode to a Nightingale" usually convey?

Q 7: What is meant by the term 'synaesthesia'?

7.5 RECEPTION OF KEATS AS A ROMANTIC POET

[adapted from *Gale Encyclopaedia*]

You have learnt that John Keats was a major figure of the British Romantic Movement. The immediate critical response to Keats was largely negative, as we have already mentioned, owing to his 'low' social standing. Without the privilege enjoyed by the other Romantic poets, Keats was self-trained in poetic craftsmanship. Keats' early reputation was dominated by two hostile, unsigned reviews of "Endymion"—one credited to John Gibson

Lockhart in Blackwood's *Edinburgh Magazine*, and the other, to John Wilson Croker in the *Quarterly Review*. Lockhart, a vociferous critic of what he termed "The Cockney School," named for its members' ties to London and their alleged lack of refinement, attacked not only Keats' poems, which he denigrated on artistic and moral grounds, but on what he perceived as the poet's lack of taste, education, and upbringing. While Wilson Croker was neither so vitriolic nor personally degrading as Lockhart. In fact, Wilson's essay was singled out as damaging and unjust by Keats' supporters, who tried to defend the poet.

Keats was apparently disturbed temporarily by these attacks, as these reviews made him famous. A chief perpetrator was Percy Bysshe Shelley, who composed and published his famous "Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of the Poet John Keats" shortly after Keats' death. The preface to this work implicated Croker as Keats' murderer. Shelley's poem effectively created an image of Keats as a sickly and unnaturally delicate man, so fragile that a magazine article was capable of killing him (as you know Keats died very early). Lord Byron commented wryly on this idea in a famous couplet in his poem Don Juan: "Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle/ Should let itself be snuffed out by an article."

Keats remained famous even after his death. As early as 1820, people were beginning to write of Keats' legacy. Francis Jeffrey wrote an essay in *The Edinburgh Review*, and the obituary in *The London Magazine* (April 1921), noted, "There is but a small portion of the public acquainted with the writings of this young man, yet they were full of high imagination and delicate fancy." By 1853, Matthew Arnold could speak of Keats as "in the school of Shakespeare," and, despite his weak sense of dramatic action and his overly lush imagery was "one whose exquisite genius and pathetic death render him forever interesting." Yet, it was just this quality of lush, "pictorial" imagery that the Victorians admired in Keats, as reflected in popular paintings related to his works by Pre-Raphaelites such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and poets such as Alfred Tennyson and Algernon Charles Swinburne, who wrote of ''mastery of visual detail, his instinct for the absolute expression of absolute natural beauty."



LET US KNOW

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" was not well received by contemporary critics. It was only by the mid-19th century that it began to be praised, although it is now considered one of the greatest odes in the English language. A long debate over the poem's final statement divided 20th century critics, but most agreed on the beauty of the work, despite various perceived inadequacies. The final lines of the poem declare that "beauty is truth, truth beauty–that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know", and literary critics have debated whether they increase or diminish the overall beauty of the poem. Critics have focused on other aspects of the poem, including the role of the narrator, the inspirational qualities of real-world objects, and the paradoxical relationship between the poem's world and reality.



7.6 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, you have learnt that Keats is an important poet among the second generation of Romantic poets with a brief but brilliant poetic career. Within this brief period, he was able to display an extraordinary development in his poetic talent, and to evolve a distinctive poetic style, influencing some of the Victorian poets and the Pre-Raphaelites. His personal life was troubled by family tragedy and financial hardship; his medical profession, as he felt, was a wrong choice, hindering his poetic engagements. Leigh Hunt, Charles Clarke and some others were inspirations to him. His study of classical mythology had some bearing on some of his works. As for his works, the Odes are generally regarded as the best. And the poem "To Autumn" is structurally and stylistically one of the finest of Keats' poems. It is not just a celebration of the physical beauty and grace of a season it deals with the issues of time and permanence, and by extension, reflects on certain inevitable conditionalities of life despite all its attractions. Keats' reputation rests as much on his fragmented yet

profound speculations on issues of art, and the creative process, as on his poetic works. You have learnt that his influence on modern critical sensibility was remarkable, and his concept of negative capability has some affinity with T. S. Eliot's theory of 'impersonality'.



7.7 FURTHER READING

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7.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: The outcome of such a choice was brilliant… …Keats became a major poetic voice of British romanticism… …his passion for poetry was also rooted in a deep understanding of the possibilities of imagination… …the same passion also pervade his letters.

Ans to Q No 2: The Odes are the works of the mature poet… …transcending the limitations of *Endymion* and other earlier works the odes were experiments in versification… …they exemplified Keats's attainment of formal and artistic perfection.

Ans to Q No 3: Self-effacement in the creative process… …self is in a perpetual state of 'becoming'… …Eliot's theory of 'impersonality' expounds how the poet should rise above personality… …what happens to the poetic emotion?... …is it the poet's personal emotion or a complex of emotions generated by the poem itself.

Ans to Q No 4: John Keats, within a brief time span, was able to add a rare perfection to his works, ensuring a permanent place in the English poetic tradition… …his development as a Romantic poet went in parallel with his continuous self-critical thinking and analysis, articulated in his famous letters… …he adopted the raw sensations and impulses into aesthetically heightened poetic articulation in the Romantic age.

Ans to Q No 5: "Through imagination, the poet has the ability to transform himself/herself and attain a mental state where reason cannot reach. When experiences are embodied in artistic form, they transcend normal habitual taste and the result is one of the most striking of all English poetic style."

Ans to Q No 6: Keats developed a poetic language appropriate to his odes… …his language is precise and it captures the rhythm and movement of thoughts and feelings… …it registers a full range of sense impressions… …in odes like "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "Ode to a Nightingale", Keats focus on the images of imperfection although the real emphasis is on the fact that we live in an imperfect world.

Ans to Q No 7: Synaesthesia is the use of imagery and language choices, which describe sensory impressions in terms of other senses, as is explicit in his odes.



7.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the life and works of John Keats with particular reference to his odes.

Q 2: "Keats and many other Romantics were preoccupied with perception and how an individual's view of the world alters what is seen and experienced." Elaborate.

Q 3: Trace the characteristics of Romanticism as reflected in Keats' poetry, especially in some of his odes?

Q 4: Write a note on the critical reception of John Keats as a Romantic poet.

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